



Salt of My Eyes by Kati Roover

IN 2019 I HAD A DREAM ABOUT A WHALE. Or I thought it was a whale. It was someone ancient who slowly faded into the blue darkness. I realized how little I know about whale species and still I could not imagine my life without them existing, somewhere in the deep blue oceans. I started to learn more about cetacean species and their culture. Also about the human history with whales. I found myself searching for a place where to go to and meet them. I found myself asking, is the whale a real being to me, or does it represent part of my internal psyche? Soon I found myself in Iceland walking in the shorelines of the North Atlantic Ocean, looking for them in the horizon.

In Norse mythology, humans are intertwined with other species and forces, and these perceptions are still alive to some extent within the cosmology of present-day Iceland. Oral traditions and storytelling that connect humans to landscapes and other species continue to thrive. Icelanders also practice whaling despite a global ban. I have always been interested in the complex and mostly violent interaction that humans have toward other species, and there are plenty of these stories about the giants of the Oceans. Hunting the great Leviathan, the monster of the Oceans.

Maybe it is our yearning to connect and communicate with other species? Slowly forgetting how to empathetically communicate with other species. Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* describes:

“Philosophers call this state of isolation and disconnection “ a species loneliness”— a deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship. As our human dominance of the world has grown, we have become more isolated, more lonely when we can no longer call out to our neighbors.” (Kimmerer, 2013)

“Our control and domination over the natural world is part of a delusional and alienated stance, preventing us from recognizing other species’ sentience, agency, intelligence, emotional and communicative capacities. But we are sharing so much with other species. The same basics of life, similarity of our body parts, fluids and emotions.

Fish, amphibian, and reptile, warmblooded bird and mammal—each of us carries in our veins a salty stream in which the elements sodium, potassium, and calcium are combined in almost the same proportions as in sea water. This is our inheritance from the day, untold millions of years ago, when a remote ancestor, having progressed from the one-celled to the many-celled stage, first developed a circulatory system in which the fluid was merely the water of the sea.” (Carson, 2011)

In my previous project *Coexistence*, a video piece about Amazon rainforests, I was already interested how languages are forming our knowledge about the

environments. How we perceive the world around us and how language affects our perception. The power and lack of words closing our world from otherness and other way around.

Melody Jue writes in *Wild Blue Media*: "To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life. Human languages have taken form within a range of terrestrial and coastal environments, all share the experience of gravity and horizontal, rather than volumetric movement. The oceanic languages must be different in so many ways, and our understanding must be limited. Our sensory attunements are very narrow band through which parts of the world might be perceived. The milieu of the ocean offers an epistemological check on human knowledge formation, presenting entirely different condition of perception, sensation and life than terrestrial environments." There are so much we can learn from Cetacean watery cultures.

By the words of Sharon Ryals Tamm in her article *How Forests Think Reveals The Need For Nonhuman Personhood*: "When the songs of humpback whales were released to the public domain in 1970 it was another kind of stunning encounter—not one that was terrifying (though it may also have been so) but rather, inspiring. That they sang—something humans hold dear, one of our deepest, broadest, most complex, yet most common arts of self-expression—forced us to confront consciousness beyond the human. That humpbacks singing changed everything." (Tamm, 2016)

Sound is not something self-sufficient and isolated within nature. It cannot be for itself. So regardless of whether it is audible or not, it is always coupled with a listening. Someone is always listening. Our conceptions of possible communications across species are limited by the positivist approach of western science. Imagine if the humpback whale songs are performed to wide range of species audiences.

After I finished my video I had a thought that have not yet left me. Maybe certain dreams of animals, communicate across the perceived lack of a common language between species. These dreams we humans have had alter our ways of thinking, conducting research, relating to more-than-humans, and extend arenas for communicative avenues across species.

Are these dreaming and waking interactions valuable to us as modes of communication across species and reveal possibilities for relations with the more-than-human world that reflect greater commonalities than we acknowledge?

Certain cultures provide a framework for understanding and valuing these experiences as aspects of communication and relationships that other cultures deny.

Lacking the perception of common languages with animals, Westerners tend to draw sharp perimeters on possible messages and shared meanings with other species. This perception is, to a large extent, culturally-constructed, such that direct experiences, communications across species, bonds, and knowing the other in an equalized manner are hard to access. Cultural historian Morris Berman calls this cultural lens a "unitive trance" of our times, in contrast to states of immanence described by anthropologists in indigenous cultures that offer more direct experience and communication with other animals, plants and natural systems. Indigenous people tend to view landscapes, other species and even aspects of the landscape as possessing sentience, mind, agency, and abilities to communicate.

"Grief takes many forms and differs greatly between individuals and cultures. Although grief is well understood in relation to human losses, 'to grieve' is rarely considered something that we do in relation to losses in the natural world. Although this type of grief is already being experienced, it often lacks an appropriate avenue for expression or for healing. Indeed, not only do we lack the rituals and practices to help address feelings of ecological grief, until recently we did not even have the language to give such feelings voice." (Cunsolo, Ellis, 2018)

Just as grief over the loss of a loved person puts into perspective what matters in our lives, collective experiences of ecological grief may coalesce into a strengthened sense of love and commitment to the places, ecosystems and species that inspire, nurture and sustain us. There is much grief work to be done, and much of it will be hard. However, being open to the pain of ecological loss may be what is needed to prevent such losses from occurring in the first place.

My meetings with whale species were special. They approached, circled, watched, and looked at us sitting in the boat. They perceive and are curious about us. They see and remember us. Indeed, in this scene of high-intensity whale watching, some whale species are often said to watch or seek out humans.

During the process of making the work, the most important question eventually became how to restore something that has already been lost. Communication and connection between species. When I first met the whale, I experienced that curiosity was a mutual attempt to communicate and reach out to each other.

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