

# The Sounds of Cetacean Revolution Through History<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article examines rogue whale encounters in seventeenth-century English poet Edmund Waller's "The Battle of the Summer Isles" (1645), a poem that seeks to establish human dominion through an epic struggle between settlers attempting landfall on the Bermudian shore and a pod of sperm whales who prevent such actions. Through the poem's use of sound, in particular the whales' cries for justice, I find resonance with the concept of nonhuman revolutions we see actualized through the whales and orcas of today. This article traces a cultural history of whale resistance by and through sound. Part 1 recalls historical whale resistance narratives to establish prevalence for what we now term "orcanization." I briefly show how three particular whales have disrupted narratives of cetacean kindness or friendship, choosing anti-human violence despite their capacity for kindness: White Gladis of yacht-sinking fame, the notorious Tilikum of *Blackfish* (2013), and Mocha Dick, the sperm whale that inspired Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). Part 2 explores how Waller's whales represent a narrative of roguish animal revolution: of whales that, in their courage, disruption, and refusal to die, muddle the Empire's myth of New World domination. In conclusion, I assert that in the sound of orcas breaking rudders today we can hear a history of whale narratives: examples of resistance, calls for reparation, and a reminder that this world is a shared one.

*Keywords:* Whales, seventeenth-century poetry, animal revolution.

## Resumen

Este artículo examina los encuentros con ballenas rebeldes en "La batalla de las islas de verano" (1645), del poeta inglés Edmund Waller, del siglo XVII, un poema que busca establecer el dominio humano a través de una lucha épica entre colonos que intentan tocar tierra en la costa de las Bermudas y una manada de cachalotes. quienes impiden tales acciones. A través del uso del sonido en el poema, en particular los gritos de justicia de las ballenas, encuentro resonancia con el concepto de revoluciones no humanas que vemos actualizado a través de las ballenas y orcas de hoy. Este artículo traza una historia cultural de la resistencia de las ballenas a través del sonido. La Parte 1 recuerda las narrativas históricas de resistencia de las ballenas para establecer la prevalencia de lo que ahora llamamos "orcanización". Muestro brevemente cómo tres ballenas en particular han alterado las narrativas de la bondad o amistad de los cetáceos, eligiendo la violencia antihumana a pesar de su capacidad de bondad: White Gladis, famosa por hundir yates, la notoria Tilikum de *Blackfish* (2013), y Mocha Dick, el esperma. ballena que inspiró *Moby Dick* (1851) de Herman Melville. La segunda parte

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explora cómo las ballenas de Waller representan una narrativa de la revolución animal pícaro: de ballenas que, en su coraje, perturbación y negativa a morir, confunden el mito imperial de la dominación del Nuevo Mundo. En conclusión, afirmo que en el sonido de las orcas rompiendo timones hoy podemos escuchar una historia de las narrativas de las ballenas: ejemplos de resistencia, llamados a reparación y un recordatorio de que este mundo es compartido.

*Palabras clave:* ballenas, poesía del siglo XVII, revolución animal.

"It comes as no surprise that our collective retreat from public spheres, brought on by COVID-19, had lasting impacts on the visibility of urban wild ecologies. As I have argued elsewhere, lockdown brought globally quieter oceans, allowing scientists to measure noise levels of deep/inland waters to mark the sudden silence's impact on marine wildlife (Nelson; Rolland et al. 2366). One study of oceanic sound pollution conducted during the first months of lockdown reported "an average reduction of 1.5 [decibels] in the mean weekly noise" from 2016-18 median averages (Thomson and Barclay 3391-2). While decreased oceanic noise meant scientists could more clearly observe whale sounds, songs, and behaviors, it also had significant implications for whale cultures, as whales use sound to navigate, hunt for food, detect predators, and communicate with each other. This drop in sound encouraged maritime recovery during COVID-19, with "an increasing trend in the population of sea mammals...especially in those regions where they were not seen for decades" (Lombrana). While we celebrated creaturely appearances in 2020 as novel phenomena, positive reactions toward wildlife have waned over time—and to the consternation of some humans, not all oceanic creatures receded into the deep.

In the summer of 2023, a string of orca/boat encounters hit the news. These orca encounters brought international attention to a pod of "rogue killer whales" who "orchestrated attacks" on numerous yachts and sailing boats, sinking three and damaging dozens more (Gill). As I explore in *EdgeEffects*, scientists have identified one orca leading the charge: "A 12-year-old female, White Gladis is matriarch to a pod of juvenile orcas, and she appears to be teaching her pod to ram boats and dismantle rudders. Those reporting her attack cite terrifying boat-ramming sessions of up to 45 minutes, with one man in July 2020 suffering a dislocated shoulder from his boat rocking so violently he fell onto the deck" (Ibbetson). Some have speculated that Gladis had a "critical moment of agony" leading her to associate rudders with pain. They report finding a severe head injury likely caused by boat propellers, which may be one reason why she is breaking them" (Gill; Nelson). While there are many explanations for why White Gladis is ramming boats, I want to think *with* Gladis and other whale encounters, alongside and through resistance in order to consider cetaceous agency through prisms of sound—whales' principal communicative mode.

Firstly, I can't help but wonder if the sudden absence of anthropogenic maritime sounds during COVID-19 opened up spaces for whales to make themselves heard. While whale song—the sound they are best known for—has, as Graham Huggan observes, come to represent them "singing their own dirge" (94), I wish to

take seriously White Gladis’s rudder-breaking as another kind of whale sound. I see this property damage as resistance to a leading cause of cetacean extinction today.<sup>2</sup> British sailor Alan Bruce—rammed by Gladis in August 2021—thinks these rogue orca encounters are not unwarranted: “We’ve been over-fishing their waters, and now it’s payback time” (Rollings). I see resistance narratives not as psychosis, behavioral aberration, or mere instinct, but as purposeful instances of action: “Resistance is not a psychological disorder. Indeed, it is often a moment of distinct clarity” (Hribal 144). Too often we overlook cetacean agency, and whales’ power to disrupt the fragile ecosystems we force them to endure.

This article traces a cultural history of whale resistance. Part 1 recalls historical whale resistance narratives to establish prevalence for what we now term “orcanization.” I briefly show how three whales have disrupted narratives of cetacean kindness or friendship, choosing anti-human violence despite their capacity for kindness: White Gladis of yacht-sinking fame, the notorious Tilikum of *Blackfish* (2013) and Mocha Dick, the sperm whale that inspired Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851). These examples encourage trans-historical thinking about cetacean movements and critical or violent disputes with humans. I specifically examine sound for its propensity to act upon its objects in ways that phenomenologically serve as the building blocks for disruptive encounters.

Part 2 traces whale resistance to English poet Edmund Waller’s poem “The Battle of the Summer Isles” (1645) to contextualize this enduring human-nonhuman dynamic and the persistence of such encounters over time. In Waller’s short mock-heroic, the poetic persona describes two sperm whales—a mother and calf—preventing colonial settlers from docking on an Bermuda’s Edenic shores. These whales interrupt European access to Bermuda, becoming active enemies to the settlers making for shore. I investigate how *Battle* uses sound as a nonhuman tool for disruption, challenging humanity’s exploitation of nature. From Waller’s whales, I trace an agential resistance to obliteration that persists and lives on through the voices of Mocha, Tilikum, and White Gladis.

The ethical implications of studying creaturely resistance across historical contexts are critical for future conservation imperatives. As Margaret Grebowicz states, “While most terrestrial wilderness is de-historicized when we wilfully forget human habitation...marine wilderness is de-historicized when we wilfully forget human impact” (59). *Wilful* is a key term here: Although we humans can wilfully forget, whales can wilfully remind us.<sup>3</sup> Through Waller’s mock-heroic, I trace a cetaceous history that subverts colonial dominion in Bermuda by playfully representing the settlers’ failure to kill two whales. Scholars such as Ann A. Huse find it difficult to easily categorize Waller’s poem as solely comedic, given its occasional

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<sup>2</sup>Oceanic noise pollution has already resulted in the extinction of one whale species and the Baiji river dolphin (Grebowicz 70).

<sup>3</sup>I draw from Sara Ahmed’s *Wilful Subjects*, in which she argues the dangers of conflating ecology and society as wholly congruent—especially given human nature, which always finds ways to engage in selfish modes of existence that necessarily subordinate nature for their better interests (174).

sympathy for the whales. As Warren L. Chernaik clarifies, “Though the whales provide a properly heroic adversary, the knights whose task it is to slay the dragon do not measure up” (181). Within the arrival of the so-called “knights,” Waller’s readers see Bermuda’s tranquility destroyed in what I consider a proto-environmentalist perspective on colonial ventures into West-Indian territories.

I maintain we can better acknowledge the perceptual experiences whales are subject to and the agency they exert over shared environments by remembering this history. Waller’s whales represent a narrative of roguish animal revolution: of whales that, in their courage, disruption, and refusal to die, muddle the Empire’s myth of New World domination. Finally, I assert that in the sound of breaking rudders today we can hear a history of whale narratives: examples of resistance, calls for reparation, and a reminder that this world is a shared one.

### **Part One: “Orcanization”. Disruptive Encounters and Whale Resistance**

Before considering the contexts of disruptive whale encounters, one must first establish what comprises an encounter. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an encounter is “a meeting, face to face.” This definition sets up a condition of materiality, where one physically confronts another. This materiality can take different forms: the penetrating gaze from a presence that faces you, an embodied response like the prick of the ears or swish of a tail, a tentative touch that breaches the divide. An encounter is at once a turning toward and an opposition of sorts; both physically one thing facing another thing. An awareness of another being, and within such acknowledgement, a realization of difference.<sup>4</sup>

But what does it *mean* to encounter an animal? Legally, Grebowicz describes allowable whale encounters as only contemporaneously possible through nonhuman initiation: “Laws like the Marine Mammal Protection Act, Endangered Species Act, and Fisheries Act restrict how closely humans and vessels may approach cetaceans, but not vice versa” (27). White Gladis’s encounters illustrate how whales are actively seeking encounters, ranging from simply following boats to “actively interfering with them” (González).<sup>5</sup> Mónica González, a marine biologist studying Gladis’s pod, defines these encounters as comprised of human-based sightings and whale/human-based interactions (see *Fig. 1*). I add to González’s definition the realm of sound as an important phenomenological characteristic of encounters. Sound is often a major component of studies of whales, as whale vocalization has been held to demonstrate intelligence and merit conservation and respect. Conversely, I argue sound has conceptual value as an empirical component of disruptive encounters. Paul Hegarty describes the defining trait of noise as representing “something that one

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<sup>4</sup>In examining the Latin etymology, an inherent contradiction emerges. Coming from the Latin, “*incontrā*,” meaning “towards,” the etymology refers to both “*in*” meaning “with” and “*contra*” meaning “opposite of.”

<sup>5</sup>Mónica González reported that between 2020–22, a total of 639 encounters occurred between the Bay of Biscay down to Morocco.

is...submitted or subjected to” (4). Acknowledging whale agency via sound and how it shapes encounters helps dispel age-old ideas that nonhumans are “predictable and mechanistic” (McFarland and Hediger 1).

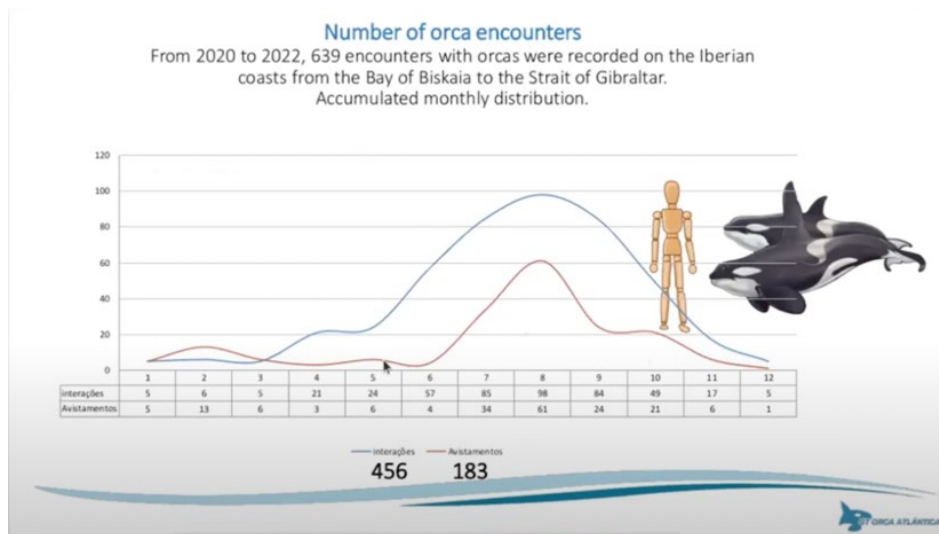


Fig. 1 “Number of Orcas Encounters,” from CEMMA / GTOA.

So what does it mean for whales to act and engage sound in unexpected, challenging ways? It seems that for White Gladis, these encounters are informed by memory and trauma, and consist in destroying rudders as threats to whales—physical threats, evident from Gladis’s head injury, and processual threats, as rudders help transmit the anthropogenic sound pollution endangering cetaceans. For humans, the encounters force realizations of creaturely unpredictability, obviating fixed notions of how whales ought to be. Is it aggressive play? Or acts of class consciousness?

Social media seems to have an answer, as media outlets exploded with GIFs, jokes, and puns over the orca encounters (see Fig. 2). Anna Guasco terms it the “orcanization” of class-conscious orcas targeting and sinking the yachts of billionaires; an animal anti-colonial organizing effort to “take back the ocean.” The notion of animal revolution is not as ridiculous as one might think. Elsewhere, I have explored how Ron Broglio’s creative nonfiction *Animal Revolution* (2022) urges readers to imagine how revolutions might look when their participants are nonhuman: “Society moves in particular ways and we have systematic expectations about how non-humans function in the world...When the animals don’t comply this is a mode of jamming our social gears and causes us to rethink our cultural expectation of the world around us” (13). Broglio encourages us to rethink what the materials of revolution can be, opening out the idea of insurgent justice to the nonhuman in ways that make rudder-breaking newly, revolutionarily legible.



Fig. 2. Tweet by Enola Knezevic. X (June 14, 2023);  
Image credit: "Eat the Rich!" Cosmic Tentacles. *Instagram* (June 8, 2023).

This brings me to two trans-historical examples of whale resistance I briefly explore—Tilikum’s 2010 killing of his trainer Dawn Brancheau, and Mocha Dick’s long history of skirmishes with early nineteenth-century whalers. By considering the roles of sound in each account, we can see how White Gladis is not the first whale to engage noise in and as cetacean resistance.

The orca Tilikum, or “Tilly,” wields a special infamy today, catapulted to stardom by the documentary *Blackfish*. The largest orca ever held in captivity, the film details how Tilly was wrestled out of the ocean as a two-year-old in 1983. *Blackfish* highlights the haunting sounds and screams separated pods would emit, with one fisherman sharing, “I’ve been part of a revolution, two change of presidents in Central and South America, and seen some things that’s hard to believe, but I will never forget the screams and wails of the mothers watching one of their own being stolen” (1.09–08). The mother whales’ “screams and wails” were so vividly horrible the fisherman claims he “will never fish again.” While not an obvious form of resistance, this anecdote speaks to the evident personhood of orcas through horrifying yet usual means: those “signs of intellectual complexity, capacity for communication, [and] elaborate social structures” we often assign to orcas (Grebowicz 51). Between 1983–92, Tilly was subjected to physical punishment, starvation, orca-related bullying, and sensory-deprived confinement at Sealand of the Pacific. Orca-expert Ken Balcomb claims holding Tilly in such conditions “probably led to psychosis,” but this point risks

dismissing Tilly's agency. Hribal notes "Tilikum and others" likely did "suffer[] from clinical depression or stress-related ailments," but "the point is that captive animals have used their intelligence, ingenuity, and tenacity to overcome the situations and obstacles put before them. Their actions have had intent and purpose. If anything, these animals are psychologically strong, not weak. They are choosing to fight back" (144).

Traci Warkentin, Hribal, and Grebowicz have been instrumental in viewing the subsequent murders of various trainers by Tilly as a form of resistance.<sup>6</sup> Other negative impacts of captivity aside, Warkentin notes how captive orcas "must use only a fraction of their echolocating abilities or risk deafening themselves. Such an adaptation of their modes of sensing their surroundings is potentially frustrating," and that analysis "in captive sites may also be...productive for understanding...whale agency and...possible expressions of resistance." In other words, sound-based resistances may "disrupt notions of stimulus response and other mechanical descriptions of behaviour and assume that organisms have a perceptual awareness of their worlds" (Warkentin 28-9). This is undoubtedly true for Tilly, who on the day of Brancheau's death, gave strange vocalizations potentially suggesting pre-meditation. In *Blackfish*, Tilly is seen loudly screeching and unexpectedly jumping onto a water deck, clearly scaring a surprised trainer (16:54-46). Later, during his "Dine with Shamu" show, Tilly ignores Brancheau's directions and becomes frustrated by the sound of a rapidly diminishing fish bucket. The turning point occurs when he ignores Brancheau's whistle cue, and his protest is devastatingly evident when he drags Brancheau underwater. Tilly's case bolsters notions of whale agency and protest; as Grebowicz argues, "this personhood is demonstrated...by Tilikum's aggression, presented as something of a revolutionary act of violence: anti-colonial, proletarian—or both" (51).

It's almost impossible not to think of Herman Melville's canonical white whale when thinking of Tilly's life and the violence he endured. Melville's whale was based on "Mocha Dick," an albino male sperm whale historically encountered off Mocha Island, Chile. Renowned for destroying "more than 20 whaling ships and escap[ing] another 80," he was feared in southern Pacific waters (Hiskey). Explorer J. N. Reynolds's book offers first-hand accounts of Mocha, noting the whale's uniquely terrifying spouting sounds: "Instead of projecting his spout obliquely forward, and puffing with a short, convulsive effort...as usual with his species, Mocha Dick flung the water from his nose in a lofty, perpendicular, expanded volume...its expulsion producing a continuous roar, like...vapor struggling from the safety valve of a powerful steam engine" (379). Similarly, A. B. C. Whipple notes "when agitated, he would sound and then breach so aggressively that his entire body would sometimes come completely out of the water" (66). These accounts document Mocha's audible methods for communicating with sailors to stay away.

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<sup>6</sup> While examining Tilly's murders as resistance, we must not forget the three trainers who lost their lives. Their lives and families deserve remembrance beyond being Tilly's victims.

Reynolds's account also notes how Mocha was not naturally aggressive, "[o]n the contrary, he would sometimes pass quietly round a vessel, and occasionally swim lazily and harmlessly among the boats," yet "when armed with full craft," Mocha could enact revenge "for the destruction of his race" (379). A remarkable account of early animal revolution, Reynolds was not far off in his estimation of Mocha's willingness to fight for his species, as Mocha ultimately died defending a mother whale whose calf was killed by whalers, in 1838. Mocha was killed after ramming the offending ship, "smiting his teeth ferociously into their sockets, with a crashing sound...the sound of the concussions resembling that of the rapid discharge of artillery" (389). Clearly articulated within the context of a burgeoning industrial empire, Mocha used sound in tandem with bodily strength to enact retributive violence—in ways not dissimilar to Gladis's own rudder-breaking tactics.

It was Mocha's daring, coupled with that of another sperm whale who destroyed the whaling vessel *The Essex* in 1820, that inspired Melville's novel. Owen Chase, one of the *Essex*'s eight survivors, described the whale ramming their ship 2,000 miles out, "appear[ing] with tenfold fury and vengeance in his aspect" (21). These accounts share an acknowledgement of rageful agency mirrored in Melville's own description of the white whale: "Yet, in most instances, such seemed the White Whale's infernal *aforethought of ferocity*, that every dismembering or death that he caused, was not wholly regarded as having been inflicted by an *unintelligent agent*" (202). *Moby Dick* is a fictional figure, but Melville's interest in the agency of historical whales situates him in a lineage of writers moved by nonhuman insurgence, and using sound to describe it. Enacting a Leviathan justice, Mocha, Tilly, White Gladis and her rogue pod all illustrate how sound is deeply implicated in whale resistance narratives that reject peaceful encounters.

Now I turn to Waller's poem as a moment in literature iterating the histories of colonial violence against whales and how, even by the 1600s, whales demanded to be heard.

## Part Two: Sonic Boundaries in Waller's Poem

Little known today, Edmund Waller's *Battle* was written during great political upheaval, from Waller's courtly position as a Royalist sympathizer during the English Civil War—certainly influencing the poem's themes. Written about fleeing Royalists seeking shelter outside Britain, Waller's poem takes place on the sunny shores of Bermuda, a British holding in the West Indies that served as sanctuary for those looking to escape punishment (Wilkinson 18–24). Waller never travelled to Bermuda, but rather, as Huse and Andrea Walkden have found, uses it as a stage for symbolic representations of empire, colonization, and the challenges of the New World.

Whales are historically important to the West Indies and fitting topics for Waller's poem. As early as 1618, *The Neptune* was sent to Bermuda specifically for the purpose of whaling (29–34). Huse notes it was likely the 1609 wreck of English colonists heading for Jamestown on the *Sea Venture*, which inspired Waller's



attention to “monsters [that] harm.” The same ship wreck also inspired Shakespeare to write *The Tempest* (1610–11), featuring the rebellious, monstrously sub-human, fish-like Caliban. Moreover, Huse notes John Smith’s *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624) was likely a resource for Waller (19). Smith records how the *Sea Venture*’s survivors crafted a new ship, whereupon leaving Bermuda, they “chanced upon the greatest peece of Amber-greece”—the valuable whale commodity *ambergris*—“ever seene or heard of in one lumpe, being in weight foure score pound, besides divers other small peeces” (176). I add to Huse’s list two maps that provide crucial historical whale evidence produced in the West Indies during the early 1600s: first, the second-earliest map of Bermuda and second, Richard Ligon’s 1637 map of Barbados.



Fig. 3. George Somers. “A colored map on vellum of the Bermuda or Somer Islands.” 1609–14. *Bermuda National Trust Collection and the Bermuda Archives.*

First, the *Sea Venture*’s captain, Sir George Somers (considered Bermuda’s “founder”), stayed on the island for ten months after the wreckage, during which he created the second known manuscript map of the island, including an illustration of a larger-than-life whale (see Fig. 3). Actively splashing on the northwestern coast appears a giant, hand-drawn whale. This black blot hovering above the sunny-colored island is grandly drawn, larger than many surrounding island outcroppings. Somer’s rendering of an outsized whale suggests a problem of scale that turns a relatively harmless marine animal into an ominous presence that map readers register via ratios of comparison between the island and the whale.

Likewise, Ligon’s map of Barbados, produced est. 15 years after Somer’s map, also features cetaceous figures that pose threatening presences against island and coast geographies. While Somer’s whale is an ominous black blot, Ligon’s whales are

finely detailed with traits that recall mythic sea creatures (see fig. 4). Featuring sharp teeth,



Fig. 4. Image credit: R.O.A.D., Reclaiming Our Atlantic Destiny Programme. Bridgetown, Barbados; from Richard, Ligon. *A True & Exact History of the Island off Barbadoes* (London: Peter Parker, 1673). Image copyright: Richard Cox.



Fig. 4, Detail 1: Cetaceous figure, top left.



Fig 4, Detail 2: Cetaceous figure, bottom left.

multi-pronged fins and tails, mischievous grins, and general anthropomorphized expressions, these two cetaceous fish pose as threats not in their scale but in their apparent presence of mind (see fig. 4, details 1 and 2). In particular, the creature's gaze on the bottom left of the map (see fig. 4, detail 2) is trained toward the island, eyeing the ship and shoreline above him with an appraising gaze that suggests a propensity for disruptive agency.

Like Somer's whale, the first lines of Edmund Waller's poem attest to the size of Bermudian whales by comparing them to a nation: "Aide me Bellona while the dreadful fight / Betwixt a Nation and two Whales I write" (52). This opening employs epic conventions, indicating a war topos via "Bellona"—the Roman goddess of war—rather than the "Muse" of poetry typically invoked. The invocation addressing war, rather than poetry, is unusual and alludes to the bloodlust typical of Bellona in classical Latin literature. For example, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Bellona pollutes the royal hall, so that "the house did swim in blood" (1.235). Agnès Lafont claims Bellona's "bloodletting ends only when Perseus holds up the Gorgon head to petrify his enemies" (185). This reference to bloodlust against a classical monster at the poem's start provides clear direction for the poem's subject. Writing between a nation—here, one that betrayed Waller's trust through the rise of a Cromwellian government—and two whales that threaten Royalists seeking refuge in those "late discover'd isles" (52), Waller positions his poetic speaker squarely in the Atlantic Ocean.

More than safe passage, these whales threaten national claims to Bermuda in their physical positioning between ship and safe harbor. Bermuda's coastal geography is well-known for its dangerous rocky reefs. By the time Waller wrote *Battle*, sixteen shipwrecks were recorded on or near the island, giving the local Bermudian 'Wreck Hill' its name. While reefs technically strand Waller's whales, they also assist the whales as relational ecologies by threatening the ship's safe arrival. This creates a position of precarity further emphasized by the poetic speaker's actual position in between two trans-chronological threats: the past, denoted by the "nation" to which he cannot return, and the future, denoted by the Edenic, pastoral descriptions of Bermuda—"Where shining pearle, corall, and many a pound / On the rich shore, of Amber-greece is found" (52)—which remains out of reach. Despite the authorial claim—"Betwixt a Nation and two Whales I write"—the speaker is positioned precariously in the Atlantic, between a past and future, and with an immediate present offering no clear solution.

The auditory clashes punctuating the poem further amplify the unreason of the speaker's positionality. This "unreason" is emphasized through the poetic speaker's position literally on ocean water, as well as via auditory claims he uses to establish poetic stability: "Seas stain'd with goar, I sing adventurous toyle / And how these Monsters did disarm an Isle" (52). Through a claim to "sing adventurous toyle," the speaker asserts his authorial control of the narrative. However, this claim is threatened by the whales that "did disarm an Isle," suggesting their presence makes the island vulnerable. Again, Ligon's "Monsters" seem to eye ship, island, and map readers with perverse and gaping leers that leave viewers uncertain, so too do Waller's whales seem to "disarm" Bermuda, transforming the isle into another uncertain nation, like the one the poem's settlers left behind. The effect of this comparison and the line's final moment invert the poetic speaker's narratorial confidence by emphasizing the whales' narrative over the speaker's bard-like intonations.

Canto 2 opens to whale cries hyperbolized as rolling, angry thunder. As they approach the isle, the settlers hear “A lasting noise, as horrid and as loud / As thunder makes before it breaks the cloud” (54). Seeing “two monsters of unequal size /...which swelling Seas had tost, / And left them prisoners on the rocky coast” (54), the settlers watch on as the whales become victims to a near-beaching, caught in the rocks near Bermuda’s shore. Breaching the ocean’s surface, distressed or aggressive whales can make several loud, upsetting above-water sounds, including distinguishable warnings that, like thunder, are “heard for hundreds of meters below the surface,” signaling to other whales in the area (NOAA). Whales also engage in “lobtailing,” when they “hold their tail above the water and swing it around before slapping it on top of the surface of the sea...This creates a sound that is heard...both above and below the ocean” (Moreton Bay). These vocal and non-vocal whale sounds become a sonic boundary separating settlers from Bermuda both physically and metaphorically, creating an aural partition that disrupts the air and warns settlers to stay away, and by Waller’s simile comparing them to thunder.

The settlers discover those already on the island have been unsettled by the whales’ cries for days: “Yet is no humane fate exempt from fear / Which shakes their hearts, while through the Ile [sic] they hear” this “lasting noise,” which for “Three dayes they [did] dread this murmur...” (54). In particular, the mother whale appears to be “Quash’t...Against sharpe Rocks” and in process of becoming “in peeces dash’t” (55). A sailor onboard recognizes her predicament, as he “Had seen the like lye murdered on the shore” before (55). As he recounts his knowledge of drift whaling and the mother whale’s impending fate, the watching settlers rejoice that what “lately was their publique terror, they / Behold with glad eyes as a cetaine prey” (55). Waller’s speaker again invokes the whales’ roguishness: the “publique terror” are the whales, their cries, and their physically impressive scale, all threatening the sanctity of the immediate public sphere. The whales first invoke terror in the hearts of the settlers onboard this ship but also for the island settlers who have already suffered the sound of their cries.

Nevertheless, the threat of “publique terror” rapidly diminishes as the colonists heed the seasoned sailor’s advice concerning the near-beached whale, and “The welcome news through all the Nation spread, / To sudden joy and hope converts their dread” (55). Passengers onboard become part of the Bermudian “Nation” through their uniform realization of the mother whale’s fate. This moment signifies a turn toward the mock-heroic, as the sailors prepare to battle trapped opponents. Realizing the mother whale is easy prey, those aboard the ship begin to scan her limbs, soon to lay “scatter’d” around the shore, becoming cataloguers accounting for the parts and uses of her still-living body. In their minds, they “Dispose already of th’untaken spoyle, / And as if purchase of their future toyle, / These share the bones and they divle the oyle” (55). Mirroring the poem’s earlier mention of “many a pound...of Amber-greece” eagerly awaiting the sailors on Bermuda’s shore (52), the mother whale becomes just another valuable Atlantic commodity in the colonial gaze: “th’untaken spoyle” of the future. The poetic speaker attempts to naturalize her

imminent death through the sailor's memory of previous whales "murdered on the shore" and the symbolic ambergris lying in wait. This observation is supported by the speaker, who clarifies that nature condones violence against whales as "sometime the raging Ocean failes, / And her owne brood exposes" (55). Despite her monstrous scale, she becomes a list of limbs scattered on the shore, transformed into use and exchange value, representing the colonists' continued success. If they succeed in a battle that nature aids, their victory offers portents for their future ability to accumulate valuables as *official islanders* once the battle is complete.

Or so it would seem, as Waller goes to great lengths to show the mother whale's courage, suffering, and her calf's fidelity:

The Boat which on the first assault did goe  
Stroke with a harping Iron the younger foe;  
Who when he felt his side so rudely goar'd  
Loud as the Seas that nourish't him he roar'd. (56)

At the start of Canto 3, it's the calf's sole cry—his "roar[]" as "Loud as the Seas"—that signals the battle's true commencement. Like the roguish orcas of 2023, the calf is not frightened by the ship and sailors, but is rather moved "to please some curious taste" of his own (56). Readers are not made aware of his inner thoughts but, as his roar is the poem's most decisive sound, the calf commands the narrative moment:

While yet alive in boyling water cast  
with unwonted heat, boyles, flings about  
The scorching brasse, and hurles the liquor out:  
So with the barbed Javeling stung, he raves,  
And scourges with his tayle the suffering waves. (56)

Like Shakespeare's spirit Ariel, the calf culls the elements to cast an aquatic tempest that he "hurles" and "flings" about in a frenzy, slapping his tail in warning to his attackers. Rather than showing submission or fear, he sounds the sonic boundary between the two parties through the winds and blasts produced by his lobtailing. He also "flings" this warning call about like "scorching brasse." In the *OED*, "brasse" or "brace" means a coat of armor used in preparation for war. This use of brasse, coupled with the hot sensations of "scorching," suggest the calf has whipped the ocean waves into a boil; creating a kind of armorlike barrier too dangerous for sailors to penetrate. The calf uses the island's environmental ecologies to leverage his tail's strength, manifesting a temporary hurricane via the powers of water and wind. Furthermore, his treatment of the "suffering waves" anticipates how else his powerful tail will disrupt the sailors:

Like fairy Talas with his iron slayle,  
He threatens ruine with his pondrous tayle;  
Dissolving at one stroak the battered Boat,  
And downe the men fall drenched in the moat:  
With every fierce encounter they are forc't  
To quit their boats, and fare like men unhorst. (56)

Likened to “Talas”—or Talus, the knight of justice in book 5 of Edmund Spenser’s *Fairie Queene*—the trapped calf’s strength is beyond a normal whale’s and equated with Spenser’s God-like, bionic character “made of yron mould, / Immoueable, resistlesse, without end” (190). Tiffany Jo Werth clarifies that Talus’s seeming inhumanity stems from his iron-made body, noting iron’s association with “war and weaponry” (409–10). Werth further elucidates that, despite Talus’s ability to walk on two legs and exhibit other humanlike signs, he is ultimately an “in-between figure, both of subhuman and superhuman status...[A]n iron man, a walking mineral, a stony human, human and mineral simultaneously, irreducible to neither ‘iron’ nor ‘man’” (397–8). The calf’s comparison to Talus elucidates his qualities of immovable rage and unruliness: neither characters are as they appear and both contain qualities superseding mere taxonomy.

The calf’s comparison to Talus directly brings revolution and class—the “orcanization” of today’s orcas—to the fore. A righteous knight of justice, Talus holds “in his hand an yron flale...With which he threst out falshood, and did truth vnfold,” especially “Against that cruell Tyrant, which opprest” (Spenser 190). This allusion offers incredible resonances with the kind of seventeenth-century animal revolution I seek to bring to the surface. Through it, we can identify Waller’s calf’s heroism, for his justice serves his species. The calf’s “ponderous taylor” parallels Talus’s “yron flale,” dispensing justice. Walkden’s analysis of Waller’s epic simile clarifies an important point about the flail as traditionally “the improvised arms of the peasant or farmer” (1111). The calf’s tail is not just an individually wielded weapon, but an image of class belonging and mass action. A critical symbolic connection to narratives of whale resistance, the calf’s tail beckons an animal revolution based on upending human hierarchies of power.

Furthermore, the sailors’ failure to reach the calf signals the poem’s mock-heroic form, as despite being trapped and vulnerable, the calf “unhors[es]” the men. The *OED* defines “unhorst” as a terrible thing that can happen to a knight, such as being thrown from a horse. Thus, the humans here are presented as unheroically disempowered, incongruous figures. More poignantly, “unhorst” in figurative language also means to “overthrow.” Read this way, the calf overtly enacts a *coup d’état*, unseating the species-order and delivering the fair fight intimated at the poem’s opening.

Yet the calf’s success is short-lived, as the men’s “succeslesse toyle” takes a violent turn. As the calf tries directing his mother toward “the gap through which they...came,” he ultimately swims ahead, quitting the “hostile lake” his mother is unable to escape (57). The sailors turn to her and upon “her alone / Their furie fals” (57). Quickly running out of darts and “Their launces spent,” one man in particular strides forward, hoping to provide the death blow:

.....one bolder then the rest  
With his broad sword provok’d the sluggish beast:  
Her oyle side devoures blade and heft,  
And there his Steel the bold Bermudian left. (57)

Again, Waller parallels Canto 1, when the settlers are united as a “nation” by intending productive violence against the whales. As the poem’s first mention of “Bermudian[s],” this moment suggests a founding violence that confirms the man—and by extension the others onboard—as official islanders. The remainder of Canto 3 takes a darker turn as Waller clearly sympathizes with the mother whale’s plight; a point emphasized through her physical transformation. After receiving so many blows, Waller compares the mother whale to an island:

Their fixed javelings In her side she weares,  
And on her back a grove of pikes appears.  
You would have thought had you the monster seen  
Thus drest, she had another Island been. (58)

Through epic allusion, the javelin-covered whale recalls Aeneas and his javelin-covered shield from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In book 8, Aeneas receives a gift from his goddess mother Venus who forges an invincible shield famously depicting Rome’s history (201–24). In book 10, Aeneas takes innumerable javelins to his shield, ultimately defeating the Latin army and protecting Rome’s future (251–78). As a mother protecting her son, the parallels between Venus/Aeneas and the mother whale/calf are evident through Waller’s depiction of her as the embodied shield that protects her son, the narrative’s obvious protagonist. Just as “the Shield contains the world-historical narrative that gives a larger meaning to the current struggle faced by Aeneas” (Lih 165), so too does the violence against the mother whale embody broader harms done to whales, the New World environment, and its indigenous inhabitants.

Unlike her calf, the mother whale’s sole defence is her voice. “Roaring” to her calf, she “teares the ayre with such noise” that “reach the ears of her escaped son” (58). Although he manages to escape, the calf returns to his mother’s side as “the pious Trojan” (58). It is unclear whether the calf returns to protect his mother, enact revenge, or something else, but his return is remarkable. Huse notes that “the pursuit of mother–calf pairs was a trade-mark of shore whaling in Bermuda by the 1660s since the mother would cling to her injured offspring instead of swimming to deeper waters” (20). This practice of mother whales clinging to their injured or dead offspring is still seen today, notably in August 2018, when a mother orca made headlines for keeping her dead calf floating for more than two weeks (Associated Press). In Waller’s poem, this behavior is reversed, and it is the son who clings to his mother. Devotion flows both ways and manifests explicitly from sound, surging outwards from the communications relayed through the mother whale’s cries. Chernaik notes that “[f]rom the beginning of the poem, we have been aware of the possibility of loss” (180). While Waller’s narrative signals that loss through sympathy for the harmed whales, it also signals something more: their will to survive, inferred at the poem’s close.

While the whales’ continued life quality or expectancy is doubtful, the poem’s conclusion arguably leaves humans and nonhumans on equal footing. In the final stanzas, the whales manage to escape and the colonists suffer the indignity of losing most of their weapons for nothing. The economic loss of two whales appears

especially sharp as the poetic persona ponders, “what commerce can men with monsters find” (58)? In this case, their pursuit of commerce utterly fails, leaving the settlers more vulnerable than before they arrived. Moreover, Waller’s disruptive encounter records the fragility of colonialism’s metanarratives: the cruel exertions of the poem’s settlers ultimately leave them empty-handed. The colonists are shown to be heartless or ignorant of the mother whale’s Christ-like suffering and the ignoble manner in which they attack creatures caught in the reefs. Despite their suffering, the whales emerge as genuine threats that, through monstrous and terrifying sounds, through remaining to fight, and by escaping to live another day, reject colonization. In their escape, they signal a continuance of anxieties and challenges the New World presented to colonial settlers looking to commodify nature.

### **Conclusion: The Sounds of Cetacean Revolution**

Waller presents his whales as, firstly, innocent: victims of beaching caught in the rocky waters near Bermuda’s shore. And yet they are both victims and outsiders, deviant in their sovereignty. While the whales suffer a relentless shower of spears and gunfire, they hold the readers’ sympathies. Yet despite this sympathy, they remain beyond the bounds of substantial human care. Waller’s representation of Bermuda and its surrounding environment as meant for human enjoyment—“a dream of innocent epicurean retreat from the cares of the world,” as Chernaik describes (180)—is both satiric and demonstrative of the consequences of seeing nature as commodity. As Huggan clarifies, “violence is a standard commodity in the human narratives that surround [whales]” (xi), and Waller’s poem is no exception. Yet, if violence is the standard commodity of human narratives of whales, as Huggan claims, then violence is likely the substance of whales’ narratives of a human obsession with commodities.

This is an important point, which I wish to end on, as we—much like the sailors in Waller’s poem—obsessively value material goods and intercontinental trade today, continuing a history of harming whales. “Our most basic desires for having the kind of life that counts as having a life, or what first world calls ‘quality of life,’” writes Grebowicz, “is inversely proportional to the quality of whale life, if we consider that over 90 percent of the world’s trade is carried by ship” (71). Equally discernible in quick, violent deaths or the slow extinction of an entire species, colonial mindsets live on today. Certainly, in Waller’s poem, the cries and shrieks of the dying mother whale reverberate loudly from ship to shore, a clearly articulated voice directed at the sailors hurting her and her calf, if only they understood how to listen.

Meanwhile, in 2024, we are more likely to hear the chug of the ship engine, the clanking of oil exploration missions, the ceaseless military sonars droning on and on, and all of the other “[n]aval sonar systems” that “work like acoustic floodlights, sending sound waves through ocean waters for tens or even hundreds of miles” (Sakashita). These sonar impacts are of inestimable consequence for whales and other sea creatures, often victim to “hearing loss, hemorrhages and other kinds of



tissue trauma, or by driving them rapidly to the surface or to shore” (Sakashita). By focusing on sound, this article hopes to reiterate how the long history of violence against whales is and continues to be ignored. It’s not our voice that needs to be heard right now, as contemporary conservation media urges, but rather the voice of sea creatures demanding justice. My final question for readers constitutes a matter of listening: What does the breaking of a rudder sound like? And in its sound, can we hear the echoes of Waller’s whales, calling for a world where they can exist? I wonder if, through the sound of rudders crunching under the nose of orcas, we can hear them seeking reparation?

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