The Environmental Whale Sublime in Doreen Cunningham's *Soundings* and Rebecca Giggs's *Fathoms*[1]

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Abstract

This paper explores the environmental whale sublime as shaped through the representations of whales and narratives of whale encounters in Doreen Cunningham's *Soundings: Journeys in the Company of Whales* and Rebecca Giggs's *Fathoms: The World in the Whale* from two perspectives: feminine sensibility and nonhuman spatio-temporalities. It illustrates how conceiving the sublimity of whales within a relational and ecological framework can help transcend the subject/object duality in the traditional sublime. These works exemplify contemporary whale writings that articulate the environmental whale sublime through the writers' nuanced feminine perspectives and epistemological inquiries, drawing attention to cetaceans' ecological roles within the web of life rather than reinforcing their cultural elevation. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is considered the seminal work establishing classical conceptions of the whale sublime, reflecting how sublimity was shaped by the socio-economic conditions of nineteenth-century capitalist modernity. Such representations can be critically examined through a gender lens that recognizes the masculine and dualistic hierarchies in human-nature relationships, implicit in the subject/object binary that underpinned classical sublime discourses. Despite advancements in whale knowledge during Melville's era, his understanding was limited by the epistemological frameworks of his time. By drawing on David Nye's notion of the environmental sublime, which emphasizes "patient immersion" and the significance of symbiosis as understood from the spatial and temporal experiences of nonhuman beings, this paper argues for a re-examination of the whale sublime. This investigation highlights non-confrontational, immersive, and entangled human-nature relationships as depicted in Cunningham's and Giggs's works. The primary texts present two comparable yet distinct contemporary cetacean narratives that offer an ecological and relational understanding of nature's otherness and sublime experiences with whales, particularly through the authors' encounters with these animals and their portrayals of whale-fall ecologies and cetacean parasitology.

Keywords: Sublime, Anthropocene, whale nonfiction, entanglement, literary animal studies.

Resumen

Este artículo explora lo sublime ambiental de las ballenas, tal como se moldea a través de las representaciones de las ballenas y las narrativas de encuentros con ballenas en *Soundings: Journeys in the Company of Whales* de Doreen Cunningham y *Fathoms: The World in the Whale* de Rebecca Giggs, desde dos perspectivas: la sensibilidad femenina y las espacio-temporalidades no humanas. Se ilustra cómo concebir la sublimidad de las ballenas dentro de un marco relacional y ecológico puede ayudar a trascender la dualidad sujeto/objeto en lo sublime tradicional. Estas obras ejemplifican la escritura contemporánea sobre ballenas que articula lo sublime ambiental de las ballenas a través de las perspectivas femeninas matizadas de las escritoras y sus indagaciones epistemológicas, llamando la atención sobre los roles ecológicos de los cetáceos dentro de la red de la vida, en lugar de reforzar su elevación cultural. *Moby-Dick* de Herman Melville se considera la obra fundacional que establece las concepciones clásicas de lo sublime de la ballena, reflejando cómo lo sublime fue moldeado por las

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condiciones socioeconómicas de la modernidad capitalista del siglo XIX. Tales representaciones pueden ser examinadas críticamente a través de un enfoque de género que reconoce las jerarquías masculinas y dualistas en las relaciones humano-naturaleza, implícitas en el binomio sujeto/objeto que sustentaba los discursos clásicos sobre lo sublime. A pesar de los avances en el conocimiento sobre ballenas durante la era de Melville, su comprensión estaba limitada por los marcos epistemológicos de su tiempo. Basándome en la noción de lo sublime ambiental de David Nye, que enfatiza la "inmersión paciente" y la importancia de la simbiosis tal como se entiende desde las experiencias espaciales y temporales de los seres no humanos, propongo reexaminar lo sublime de la ballena. Esta investigación destaca las relaciones humano-naturaleza inmersivas, entrelazadas y no confrontacionales, tal como se representan en las obras de Cunningham y Giggs. Los textos primarios presentan dos narrativas cetáceas contemporáneas comparables, pero distintas, que ofrecen una comprensión ecológica y relacional de la otredad de la naturaleza y las experiencias sublimes con las ballenas, particularmente a través de los encuentros de las autoras con estos animales y sus descripciones de ecologías de caída de ballenas y parasitología cetácea.

Palabras clave: Sublime, Antropoceno, no ficción sobre ballenas, entrelazamiento, estudios literarios de animales.

The aesthetic of sublimity in relation to whales, which I will refer to as "the whale sublime," in contemporary nature writings is figured variously with an environmental and ecological consciousness that departs significantly from that in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, a text that has arguably initiated modern critiques of human-nature conflicts through literary explorations of whales and the industry of whaling. The sublimity of whales, invoked through both the sperm whale and the experience of the sublime in human-whale encounters, was featured prominently in *Moby-Dick*. Explicit references to the sublime in contemporary cetacean texts, for their part, are less frequent, even though whales, like many keystone species that have taken up central roles in extinction and conservation narratives, continue to induce a deep sense of fascination toward the non-human realm and nature itself. Does this phenomenon suggest the obsolescence of the sublime as an aesthetic category for articulating human perception of nature within the context of today's disenchanted modernity? Referencing William Cronon's "The Trouble with Wilderness," Christopher Hitt illustrates how "the sublime tradition" has faced ideological scrutiny for promoting an idealized and ahistorical view of wild nature (603). In response to the critique of the sublime and its absence in major ecocritical works of the 1990s, Hitt argues that it can be meaningfully re-examined by addressing its ideological objectification of nature while preserving its ecocentric implications (604–607). He contends that an ecological sublime can evoke an awareness that nature "will always be […] impenetrable," and that it is necessary for us "to be confronted with the wild otherness of nature and to be astonished, enchanted, humbled by it" (620). The aim of this paper is not only to assert the relevance of the sublime but also to demonstrate the significance of understanding the otherness of nature inherent in the sublime from a relational rather than dualistic framework, which Hitt identifies as the "dogged resistance" in Western civilization (611). With reference to David Nye's notion of the environmental sublime, I will demonstrate how the whale sublime takes on

environmental significance in two contemporary cetacean writings—Doreen Cunningham's *Soundings: Journeys in the Company of Whales* and Rebecca Giggs's *Fathoms: The World in the Whale*. The environmental whale sublime reflects an appreciation of nature's alterity in non-confrontational, immersive, and relational ways, which will be analyzed through a reading of these two works from two interconnected perspectives: feminine sensibility and contemplations on nonhuman spatio-temporalities. I consider these two perspectives to be constitutive of the environmental whale sublime in *Soundings* and *Fathoms*, as they encapsulate the complexity of whale representations from the vantage point of the Anthropocene[2]—a contested yet culturally significant epoch marked by anthropogenic environmental crises, exposing the unstable planetary conditions that threaten the survival of both nonhuman and human lives and urging a reconsideration of human superiority and an acknowledgment of the ontological entanglement of all beings. In addition, I will examine how the environmental whale sublime does not merely reinstate human or whale-privileged speciesism, but instead offers visions of multispecies dependencies through cetacean ecologies.

The whale sublime established in *Moby-Dick* can serve as a literary reference point for tracing the influence of classical notions of sublimity on the representations of whales. The sublimity of the sperm whale is mediated through Melville's compelling language, which ranges from the "imposing physiognomical view" of the sperm whale (262) to its movements: the spout that conveys "the great inherent dignity and sublimity" (280) and the whale's breach, described as "the grandest sight to be seen in all animated nature" (282). Barbara Glenn analyzes Melville's whale with reference to Burke's definition of sublimity: "Moby Dick himself is, of course, the epitome of the sublime leviathan. Melville's depiction of the great white whale turns exactly on the 'heightened circumstances' which Burke found in Job's leviathan […] In all his appearances, he is sublime in the highest degree, a monarch and a god, powerful and terrible in his 'unexampled intelligent malignity'" (169). The sublimity of Moby Dick is in the terror that it invokes due to its elusive and perplexing presence in the unfathomable depths of the sea. Hub Zwart offers a Kantian reading of the sublime in *Moby-Dick*. While Ishmael's descriptions, such as "the largest inhabitant of the globe" and "unimaginable sublimity," reflect Kant's concept of the mathematically sublime as "immeasurable and great 'beyond comparison,'" Zwart also notes that for Kant, true sublimity arises from humanity's ability to conquer and subdue these overwhelming natural forces (93).

The multifaceted representations of the sublime in whales within *Moby-Dick* cannot be fully grasped without considering the historical context of the nineteenth-century interest in whales and the prosperity of commercial whaling, as Melville's literary imagination of the sublime stemmed from philosophical and ethical

[2] Although the Anthropocene was rejected in an official vote by the International Commission on Stratigraphy on 26 March 2024, as announced by the Working Group on the Anthropocene, scholars and commentators continue to assert the importance of naming it to reflect clear evidence of human impact on the planet and to foster responsibility and efforts toward environmental protection.

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reflections on the complex and often exploitative relationships between humans and nature in capitalist modernity. Reading *Moby-Dick* within the historical background of American industrialization, the development of evolutionary thinking, and the whaling industry crisis, Philip Armstrong observes that the novel oscillates "vigorously between apparently opposed attitudes to the whale: wonder and contempt, mundane nonchalance and transcendent awe, humanized fellow-feeling and the calculus of market value and profit" (100). The tension between wonder and exploitation that Armstrong identifies in the novel's portrayal of whales is largely gendered. Armstrong's close reading of Melville's depictions of sperm whales' social organization and behaviors reveals how Melville maps human gender roles from the separate spheres of American industrial society onto whales, featuring aggressive, active male whales and nurturing, passive female whales. Melville's narration reveals the nineteenth-century worldview that "an entire sociology and psychology of gender, class, educational and social development—perfectly evolved to suit the economics of industrial capitalism—is being advanced by means of its interfusion with cetacean ethology" (131). In other words, cetacean knowledge in *Moby-Dick* was culturally conditioned and the whale sublime was also enmeshed in the hierarchical structures of domination that govern both gender and human-nature relationships. The history of the discourse on the sublime has been predominantly masculinist, as Barbara Freeman points out, revealing a latent tendency in traditional sublime aesthetics to "master, appropriate, or colonize the other" (11). Patrick Murphy also recognizes a "patriarchal rhetoric" in qualifying nature in terms of the sublime and explores how the concept can undergo "an ecological feminist revisioning" in the context of ecocriticism (80). Although the classical sublime is entrenched in anthropocentric and patriarchal ideological influences, the mode of the sublime can still be a useful lens for conceiving the greatness of nature and its relationship with humanity, as seen in Melville's unsettling portrayal of the sublimity of both human achievement and nature through a powerful whale narrative.

Cunningham's *Soundings: Journeys in the Company of Whales* and Giggs's *Fathoms: the World in the Whale* are two recent works of creative nonfiction that tell human-whale stories from the standpoint of the Anthropocene, both written with an environmental consciousness that addresses the far-reaching effects of pollution, climate change, and ecological disasters on the ocean, whales, and marginalized communities dependent on marine ecosystems. Although these works belong to different genres of nature writing, they represent a literary lineage of cetacean texts that combine personal narratives, biological and ecological knowledge, and natural and cultural histories. Through rich, evocative language and a blend of scientific inquiry and individual contemplation, they illuminate the manifold relationships between humans and whales in a rapidly changing world affected by environmental disturbances and catastrophes. I consider *Soundings* and *Fathoms* whale writings or cetacean texts belonging to the growing body of popular animal writing that forms a recognizable category within nature-themed creative nonfiction, which Simone Schröder refers to as the nature essay. Schröder argues that the nature essay, marked

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by its "open and digressive form," aligns well with the complexities of the Anthropocene, as it fosters a sense of exploration and experimentation in understanding both human and nonhuman agencies, offering space for "imagining boundaries" to contest and destabilize nature alterity and human subjectivity (2). *Soundings* and *Fathoms* are chosen for this paper not only for their contrasting narrative and stylistic approaches but also for the coincidental echoes and convergences in their representations of whales.

Works of whale writing abound in the recent development of animal nonfiction, notable examples include Philip Hoare's prize-winning *Leviathan, or the Whale* and Kathleen Jamie's *Sightlines*, each offering unique environmental visions of nature in distinctive ways. *Leviathan* is considered a transatlantic eco-narrative that expresses a vision of fluid identities, highlighting how "the porous boundary between humans and other animals challenges normative conceptions of space and place" (Huggan and Marland 25). Philip Hoare engages in an intertextual dialogue with *Moby-Dick* throughout *Leviathan*, which serves as both a cultural and natural history informed by Melville's work and a narrative of Hoare's own personal experiences of whales. He explores the nineteenth-century society's passion for whales through their commodification and exhibition, while also highlighting how both Thomas Beale's whale study—an academic interest stemming from a lack of knowledge about them—and Turner's paintings of sublime nature inspired Melville's *Moby-Dick* (Hoare 244–52). Huggan and Marland examine how Hoare's oceanic eco-narratives, including *Leviathan*, depict the sea as a "queer space" (24) and illustrate cetacean sexuality or eroticism that contributes to a "queer environmentality" (40). In contrast, *Sightlines* represents an ethos of British new nature writing through Jamie's reflection on redefining nature and her understanding of nature as "a web of interdependencies" (Lilley 17–18). Jamie's question of what nature is prompts her to visit a pathologist's laboratory, where she observes the examination of human bodies for disease, revealing our interconnectedness with the broader natural world, particularly through the presence of bacteria in the human body. The encounter is framed using pastoral imagery, as Jamie and the pathologist describe the microscopic bodily landscapes they explore, likening them to pastoral scenes that evoke a sense of beauty and harmony within the unseen aspects of life (Lilley 21). Hoare's *Leviathan* and Jamie's *Sightlines* exemplify how contemporary whale writings attempt to open up new avenues to enrich environmental narratives by provoking critical reflections that explore fluid identities and unconventional perspectives to challenge normative conceptions of nature.

Different from Hoare's rereading of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which recognizes occasional odd and surprising "queer" moments of cetacean eroticism, reflecting his own understanding of the queerness of nature, my discussion of *Soundings* and *Fathoms* attempts to explore the whale sublime through the authors' inquisitive, feminine sensibility. This sensibility emphasizes wonder, resilience, and relationality, showing how the representation of the whale can also be approached through a gendered lens that diverges from Hoare's queer perspective. The whale sublime lies

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not merely in perceptions of the massive physicality of whales and their movements, but also in how their enigmatic behaviors, life cycles, consciousness, and intelligence suggest an independent nonhuman agency, as well as the *umwelt* of different whales, which exists beyond human comprehension. This challenges our understanding of sentience and subjectivity, prompting us to consider the expansive realms of nonhuman experience that can never be fully accessible to us. Within the contexts of *Soundings* and *Fathoms*, the shaping of the environmental whale sublime is necessarily conditioned by contemporary scientific and technological progress, which contributes to better knowledge of the biology and cultures of whales, but also poses significant threats to their survivals, ways of lives, and habitats. Both *Soundings* and *Fathoms* portray cetacean habitats not as pristine marine wilderness but as anthropogenically altered seascapes. I propose to reframe the traditional and masculinist conception of the whale sublime that is perceptible in *Moby-Dick* by examining how the two contemporary female writers represent their whale experiences in moments of heightened emotion. These moments engender a range of emotional responses, including fear, wonder, awe, and humility, which are sometimes mingled and not clearly distinguished, to qualify and navigate interspecies relationships.

Furthermore, the sublime experience in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* is also related to nonhuman spatio-temporalities, a notion that is suggested in Jamie's view of seeing a connection of human beings to nature through the human body as a landscape for bacterial ecologies. This dimension of whale existence is implicated in the titles of the two works: "soundings" and "fathoms." Literally, "sounding" refers to whale vocalizations for communications and navigations in the sea and "fathom" means a unit of length used for measuring the depth of bodies of water. The two terms conjure up associations of different spatio-temporalities in nonhuman lives due to diverse biological and social factors, including physiological structures, sensorial abilities, communicative patterns, social configurations, living habitats, and roles in the webs of ecosystems—what is particularly interesting in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* is how whales' ecological significance extends beyond the species themselves to the often neglected worlds of microorganisms and parasites. In the two whale writings, the whale sublime constitutes one crucial aspect of the authors' experiences with whales that serves to recognize nature's more-than-human status.

The traditional conceptions of the sublime articulated by Burke and Kant reflect anthropocentric humanism and masculine privilege, as their formulations prioritize the human subject in sublime experience with patriarchal undertones. According to Burke, the passions belonging to self-preservation "turn on pain and danger" when facing threats, but if we merely have an idea of pain and danger without being in those circumstances, it produces a distinct type of delight that Burke calls the sublime (43). While the sublime arises from the "delightful horror" experienced by the human mind when it confronts the vastness, powerfulness, or infinity of things that exceed its comprehension, Burke's emphasis on human imagination as the locus of the sublime underscores its capacity to appreciate and grapple with the infinite.

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Chris Washington points out that, "Burke's sublime therefore wishes to safeguard the human species from its extinctual fears and the pleasure it takes in them; it proves to be another example of anthropocentric politics and extinctualism in that the infinity it finally contemplates is human infinity" (16). Anne Mellor analyzes how "the sublime is associated with an experience of masculine empowerment; its contrasting term, the beautiful, is associated with an experience of feminine nurturance, love and sensuous relaxation" by examining the distinction that Burke makes in his *Philosophical Inquiry* (85). The distinction is essentially gendered since the sublime, which is linked to the strongest passions of self-preservation, is often associated with masculine ideals of power, while the beautiful, associated with the passion of love, affection, and tenderness, reflects more supposedly feminine attributes of emotional connection (Burke 44).

Kant's idealist configuration of the sublime is different from Burke's empirical perspective, but the underlying concern is still human-centered and masculine. Kate Rigby observes that in the Kantian sublime, the primary concern is the human cognitive faculties, rendering Kant's theory of the sublime "supremely anthropocentric," serving to reinforce the rigid separation between humanity and nature, as well as the division between mind and body (79). In Kant's conception, the sublime is not inherent to the object itself, but rather arises from the mind's contemplation of that object:

> The *quality* of the feeling of the sublime consists in its being, in respect of the faculty of aesthetic judging, a feeling of displeasure at an object, which yet, at the same time, is represented as purposive—a representation which derives its possibility from the fact that the subject's very incapacity betrays the consciousness of an unlimited capacity of the same subject, and that the mind can aesthetically judge the latter only through the former. (89)

Kant posits that the feeling of the sublime consists of a "displeasure at an object," which paradoxically represents an "unlimited capacity" within the subject (89). It is the mind's very awareness of its own incapacity to fully comprehend the object that betrays an underlying consciousness of a greater, boundless faculty within the self. This valorization of the sublime also reveals the gender bias in Kantian idealism, as Anne Mellor points out, he "implicitly gendered the sublime as an experience of masculine struggle and empowerment," perpetuating masculine ideals through its emphasis on intellectual mastery and transcendental contemplation (87).

Although the term "sublime" is not a central keyword used to portray whales or the authors' experience with whales in either *Soundings* or *Fathoms*, the emotions that can be associated with sublimity evoked by the presence of these cetaceans, such as fear, awe, wonder, and humility, are palpable in the two works. The whale experiences in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* are diverse and dynamic, and the whale sublime contributes to the authors' holistic encounters with whales in complex ways that go beyond mere elevation. The whale sublime is manifested through narrations that show a sense of feminine sensibility. My discussion will be informed by the concept of the feminine sublime proposed by Barbara Freeman, which she describes as "a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into

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relation with an otherness—social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic—that is excessive and unrepresentable." The feminine sublime is a site of "women's affective experiences" (2). I will analyse how the whale sublime is embodied in moments of whale encounters where the authors react with strong emotions as they face the "excessive and unrepresentable" aspects of whales. Cunningham's *Soundings* tells the story of her journey of tracing the migration route of gray whales from their breeding grounds in Baja California, Mexico to their feeding areas in Alaska with her two-year-old son Max. The book is an encircled narrative—the apparent main storyline follows Cunningham and her son as they journey along the whales' migratory path, but this is interwoven with Cunningham's past experience of investigating climate change and whale hunting in Alaska as a journalist (on sabbatical with a bursary from BBC) through living with an Iñupiaq family, a journey that she now circles back to in order to fulfil her earlier promise of returning. The traditionally masculine and individualistic quest motif, emblematized by Ahab's journey of revenge on Moby Dick in Melville's novel, is refashioned into a whale-watching journey highlighting maternal and communal bonds, where a mother and child follow the migratory paths of whale pods prominently featuring mother-calf pairs.

However, gray whales are not the only species of ceteceans that Cunningham depicts. Cunningham and her son Max have an up-close encounter with humpback whales and killer whales in their natural habitat after they reach Juneau, Alaska. Cunningham's narration reveals the whale sublime through enacting the interplay of fear and the inaccessible nonhuman intention of an adult orca who suddenly approaches the boat. As the orca draws closer, she describes it as "a messenger from the void, ready to devour," evoking a profound sense of dread that makes her "freeze in primeval horror," to the extent that she is thrown into a near-death experience: "I have a sensation of being above the boat, looking down on myself as the predator approaches" (238). Contrasting her own paralysis, Cunningham recalls the instinctual response of gray whale mothers who "don't freeze when those toothed torpedoes bear down on their calves" (238). This recognition of maternal protective instinct allows her to reconnect with her own body and reach out to Max. The emotion of fear portrayed here departs markedly from the "delightful horror" in the Burkean sublime and takes on a distinctly maternal significance. In this critical moment, the orca's intent remains ambiguous; it could be a predatory threat or a playful encounter: "Is it going to ram us? […] Was it playing? Perhaps the orcas enjoy frightening tourists. The alien intelligence glides away, hardly disturbing the surface. I swing my arms, box the air, jump up and down, wave off the orca. Max laughs and copies me" (238). The real intention of the orca is not discernible to Cunningham or the reader, but the narration effectively creates an emotional excess—the intense fear experienced by Cunningham—and the excess of the ferocity and unknowability of the orca. While the question of whether the situation involves real danger remains indeterminate, this sublime experience arises precisely from the inaccessibility of the orca's nonhuman intention, as well as from the instinctual fear humans feel when confronted with the power of nature.

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A similar account of fear arising from the approach of a whale can be found in *Fathoms*. Giggs tells her encounter with a humpback whale in a trip of whale-watching in Eden of New South Wales near Mount Imlay that evokes a sense of fear and awe, illustrating the emotional excess associated with the sublime. Within the distance of "no more than a tennis court," Giggs witnesses an adult humpback whale and her calf as they gradually swim beneath their boat, seeing the movements of the mother whale in the water:

> Tamped power resonates within her, a reserve of ferocity, a fastness in both senses: something internally secured, something quick; spring-loaded. Standing only yards above this mature humpback, my impression of a whale as blubbery is lost. The sheer *isness* of the humpback whale. I am awake. I am slammed into a state of readiness. At that moment, however alive I am, how much *more* alive is she! Blood thudding into every corner of her titanic body. The flex of her peduncle, the base of her tail, is a twitch of the largest muscle on the planet […]. (87)

As the whale approaches the bottom of the boat, Giggs is overwhelmed by a "dreadful apprehension" that she might capsize, capturing the intense emotion of fear that envelops her as she experiences "the holy shiver of prey sensing a predator's gaze" (87). In contemplating the whale's motivations, "was this humpback guided by fear, affinity, curiosity, or aggression?" Giggs acknowledges the limitations of her imagination: "all this was impossible to imagine" (88). This recognition underscores the significance of nonhuman subjectivity, as the whale's interiority and intentions remain elusive. Giggs's narration reflects a shift from centering on the perceiving mind, typically the locus of the classical sublime where the human subject experiences sublimity through aesthetic feeling and the intellectual faculty, to a more instinctual resonance between the whale and "the human body, that animal you own unpacified" (89). The sense of "awe" and the fear of "mortality" in Giggs's rendering connect humans with other living beings rooted in the bio-ontological relationality within the greater natural order.

Another emotion that can be meaningful for interpreting the feminine aspect of the whale sublime in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* is wonder. Some critics have argued for the necessity of separating the sublime from wonder. Louise Economides, for instance, criticizes the conceptual conflation of wonder with sublimity and the dominance of discourses of the sublime, claiming that the sublime, because of its logic of mastery, is an aesthetic that "supports a distinctly masculinist and humanist agenda that is critical to the project of modernity" (19). Genevieve Lloyd, for her part, discusses how wonder is associated with both intellectual discontent and purposeful desire, but has historically been replaced by the sublime, losing its connection to intellectual inquiry as it was understood in antiquity (9). I concur with Mollie Murphy's formulation of "sublime wonder," which reframes the sublime by highlighting its connection to wonder, offering a more feminine interpretation of sublimity that can address Economides's concern of the latent masculine bias in traditional sublime (2). As the traditional concept of the sublime is rooted in a masculine mentality, it fails to represent a universal experience. For this reason, embracing sublime wonder can resist this totalizing notion and more effectively

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reflect the heterogeneous nature of these experiences. Murphy explains that "*sublime wonder reclaims the domestic as compatible with the sublime and thus affirms the connection between humans and nature*," noting that the "profound excess of the sublime" can also be experienced through accessible wonders such as the sky above and migratory birds (2–3). Murphy defines "sublime wonder" as "a practice in engaging with the more-than-human world in such a way that raises awareness of our inability to fully comprehend it" (3). Sublime wonder is "an orientation toward the more-than-human world that resists dichotomizing (feminine) beauty and (masculine) sublimity as well as wild nature and domestic culture" (3). Through a reading of Rachel Carson's *The Sense of Wonder*, Murphy demonstrates how sublime wonder offers an ecological approach to connect to and appreciate the infinity of the natural world with an inquisitive attitude that is embodied by Carson herself. As such, sublime wonder retains the implication of intellectual curiosity that the notion of wonder has historically connoted.

In *Soundings* and *Fathoms*, wonder is frequently elicited as both an emotion and a cognitive engagement, serving as a reaction to and a mediation of the authors' relationships with whales and the natural world. Cunningham's journey into whale-watching is inspired by her casual viewing of a David Attenborough clip about gray whales migrating from warm Mexican birthing lagoons to the northern coast. She learns that every year the whales travel more than ten thousand miles and "the mothers fought off predators, parented, and breastfed, while swimming halfway across the planet" as "[t]hey were endurance incarnate" (7). She wants to bring Max with her, believing she "could share the inspiration [she] found in the wonders of undersea life" (7). This marks the first use of the word "wonder" in Cunningham's narrative, establishing a motif of maternal bond and caregiving that links her identity as a mother to that of the whales. This connection suggests that the wonders of whales can facilitate a recognition of sameness, prompting her desire to reconnect with the resilient striving power of nature and characterizing the experience as a form of sublime wonder.

The process of Cunningham's pursuit of the gray whales is not entirely successful, as they often miss the whales when they move from one place to another, unable to catch up with their movements, underscoring the inherent challenges of aligning one's journey by human means of transportation with the rhythms of the natural world. This frustration serves as a poignant reminder of the estrangement between humans and nature, encapsulated in her sentiment: "I wanted to show Max our connection to the grays, but there's no connection, just a badly planned trip" (256–57). It is precisely during these moments of disconnection that the agency of the whales is foregrounded. The interplay between the human intention to connect and the whales' autonomous movements highlights the limitations of human capacity in the face of nature's inaccessibility. While Cunningham seeks empowerment through her identification with the whales and yearns to reconnect with the natural world via a projection of the maternal image, the experience of missing the whales exposes the wishful thinking and self-absorption inherent in her pursuit.

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However, the frustration and disappointment of missing the whales do not undermine the human-nonhuman entanglement depicted in Cunningham's narrative; rather, they add complexity to it. This interplay of longing and setbacks enhances the emotional impact when they finally encounter the whales, reaffirming the experience of sublime wonder that arises from their connection to the natural world. Marco Caracciolo's argument on how the sublime can enlighten our reflection on "an expansion of our affective engagement with the nonhuman" provides a relevant and useful viewpoint for enriching our understanding of the sublime wonder represented in Cunningham's encounter with the gray whale mothers and calves. Caracciolo analyzes how the experience of "being moved" is a "kinaesthetic resonance linking human subjects to nonhuman realities," suggesting that the sublime can be a relevant part of our emotional repertoire in the Anthropocene when "it is complicated by feelings that point to constitutive human-nonhuman entanglement and highlight our moral responsibilities vis-à-vis the natural world" (299). In the Gulf of Alaska on Kodiak Island, joining a fishing boat trip with a local family, Cunningham and Max are finally able to see the gray whales again in their feeding grounds:

> Signature heart-shaped blows, mottled gray-and-white humps are suddenly everywhere. They have made it. They are here. They have come all the way from Mexico, like us [. ...] I can't believe they've done it, we've done it. This is a wonder of the world, a migration like no other. I can't feel my body, can't speak. Every surge of water, every pair of rolling backs splitting the waves, every breath fracturing the air with spray, sings of life and survival through unimaginable distances and challenges. This is what the ocean should be like everywhere, what it once was. Populated, a home to wild and teeming communities, to the most incredible of lives, journeys, and ecologies. (266–67)

This is an exemplary moment of how the sublime is experienced through "being moved," a touching emotional response that emerges after an arduous journey of thousands of miles, for both the gray whales and Cunningham and Max. The vivid description of the whales suddenly appearing all around them evokes a sense of awe and wonder at witnessing this "migration like no other"—a natural spectacle that is truly a "wonder of the world."

The passage powerfully conveys the emotional impact of this reunion through Cunningham's speechless yet impassioned reaction. In the absence of language, there is an almost transcendent response that embodies the sublime experience of witnessing the whales' remarkable journey and their resilience. The notion of "*agencement*," as proposed by Vinciane Despret, offers a nuanced understanding of the significance of Cunningham and Max's pursuit of gray whales in the context of human-nonhuman entanglement. She describes *agencement* as "a rapport of forces that makes some beings capable of making other beings capable, in a plurivocal manner, in such a way that the *agencement* resists being dismembered, resists clear-cut distribution" (38). Unlike the traditional subject-object relationship in discourses of the sublime, where the human observer is positioned as the perceiving subject and nature as the passive object, *agencement* suggests a more dynamic interplay in which the human individuals are deeply involved in the sublime experience. While there is an element of self-regard as Cunningham seeks empowerment and healing through

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the whales, the whale agency stays intact and expresses itself prominently in the "rapport of forces" in the journey/migration. The passage also imbues this moment with deep environmental significance, as Cunningham reflects on how "this is what the ocean should be like everywhere," being a "home to wild and teeming communities." This observation affirms the importance of the delicate balance between human activities and the natural world, and how the whales' epic migration symbolizes endurance and striving for life of all earthly organisms.

However, Cunningham's exhilarating narrative of the experience of the whale sublime masks an unsettling reality about the nature of whale-watching activities, begging the question of whether ecotourism can truly fulfill its environmental goals. The romanticizing effect of the rhetoric surrounding the whale sublime obscures the potential negative impacts of human interaction with marine ecosystems and overlooks how human means of transportation have directly or indirectly affected whale movements and their living environments in a broader context. In this regard, I propose to examine the nuances of Cunningham's whale stories by exploring the whale sublime in relation to nonhuman spatio-temporalities, a perspective that can be understood through David Nye's notion of the environmental sublime that "retains the humility of the natural sublime but replaces the Kantian apotheosis of Reason with *patient immersion*" (116; emphasis added). The environmental sublime highlights the creative potential of the sublime to appeal to lived symbiotic experiences and consciously address the influences and interactions of human activities with the nonhuman realm on spatio-temporal scales beyond those of humanity. He asserts that, "[the] environmental sublime expresses awareness of the consequences of human action [. …] In the Anthropocene, human beings need to move beyond celebrating the technological sublime, beyond the pretense that they are not part of nature, and beyond the melancholy contemplation of apocalypse, into a creative engagement with the environment" (14). The environmental sublime attends to the diverse spatio-temporalities of nonhuman entities, demanding an understanding of the multiple rhythms and scales within ecosystems. As Nye explains, "the environmental sublime requires an understanding of the multiple temporal rhythms of plants, insects, birds, animals, and the weather as they interact," so "[s]eeing landscapes in terms of the environmental sublime demands attention to both the *microscopic* and the *panoramic* view" (132; emphasis added). In this context, the whale sublime takes on environmental significance through the ways it embodies the spatio-temporalities of not only the whales but the marine ecosystems that encompass other oceanic organisms, micro-organisms, and parasites.

In *Soundings*, Cunningham depicts the sight of the bones of a deceased whale in Scammon's Lagoon in Mexico, supposedly the skeletal remains of a gray whale that has been assembled and put on display. This skeleton prompts a reflection on whale spatio-temporalities, transporting her thoughts to the whale's previous life, which culminates in an experience of the whale sublime: "Standing where the whale's heart would have been, I imagine it pumping, once every six seconds [. …] I wonder when this whale lived, how it died. I imagine it moving through the water [. …] There's

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pressure on my head, on my chest. I can't feel my feet. I stick my arms out to steady myself against the ribs. Cold skeleton, sit down abruptly on the roadside grass" (95–96). The whale sublime encapsulates the imposing astonishment brought about by the whale's impressive physicality, as well as the excess of emotions induced by the thought of mortality—the vanquishing of a magnificent creature and the fright of entering the realm of death. While the whale fall itself is sublime: "the sand opens in a haze of slow awe as the body settles in the abyssal zone," it also evokes a vivid envisioning of the subsequent decomposition process, where the giant whale becomes a vital part of the entangled marine ecosystem. The dead body, instead of being a mere end, enters a cycle of life that supports a myriad of organisms: "Predators work faster, higher temperatures help the decay. Down where it's colder, where the water pressure is greater, a community gathers. A hagfish uncurls, a wrinkled sleeve of slime. It hasn't eaten for months […]. This is an island of food in an impoverished region" (96). This transition from the whale's life to its death encapsulates multiple nonhuman spatio-temporalities. The whale does not only represent its own existence; it embodies the interconnectedness of the giant whale and the numerous microscopic lives dependent on it, demonstrating how the whale sublime is related to a broader ecological process as the whale "expands life in every dimension" (96).

Rebecca Giggs's exposition of "Whalefall" in *Fathoms*, where the whale sublime is expressed through the impressive death of a whale, can illustrate the microscopic and panoramic view of nonhuman spatio-temporalities in the environmental sublime and how the spatio-temporality of human beings cannot stand alone from that of nature. The prologue of *Fathoms* narrates Giggs's unsuccessful experience of trying to help push a beached humpback whale back into the ocean, an episode that serves as a starting point for Giggs to explore past incidents of whale beaching and surmise on the various reasons why whales may strand themselves. Rather than accepting the official explanation that the whale is merely malnourished, the crowd attempts to explain its beaching through mystical explanations, which seems fitting for the enigmatic quality of sublime animals such as whales (Giggs 9). However, this mystified perspective is immediately refuted when Giggs confronts the readers with the stark realities of the anthropogenic threats impacting whale populations. Through her research on the causes of whale stranding, Giggs sheds light on how different forms of pollution are conducive to the unfortunate events of beaching. These include the accidental ingestion of human trash, not just abandoned fishing gear like nets, fish traps, and oyster racks, but also terrestrial objects such as parts of mattresses, dishwasher plastic pots, and ice-cream tubs. Additionally, the whale's blubber attracts molecular heavy metals and inorganic compounds from pesticides, fertilizers, and other pollutants that are washed into the sea. As surface breathers, whales also inhale airborne carcinogens emitted by refineries and chrome-plating factories (10–11). Giggs laments how even animals of such immense physicality as whales cannot be spared from the negative influences of human activities and environmental degradation, implying the widespread scale of pollution and toxic waste.

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The sublime experience induced by the whale fall is complicated by the fact that the whale's body has become a site of contamination, intertwining the whale sublime with the toxic sublime—a convergence that suggests how the whale body is not only a site of the life and death of an individual whale but also a place where anthropogenic activities inscribe their detrimental effects on the ecosystem. Jennifer Peeples observes that contemporary landscape photography's depictions of contaminated landscapes paradoxically induce a sense of sublimity, resulting in tensions that "*arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe*" (375). In Giggs's narrative, this duality is embodied in the pervasive pollution and vast amounts of waste that have entered the ocean, ultimately finding their way into the whale's body. Through the intersection of the two kinds of sublime—toxic and whale—the whale's body embodies both human and nonhuman spatio-temporalities in an unexpected and astonishing way, as Giggs writes,

> this whale's body serves as an accounting of the legacies of industry and culture that have not only escaped the limits of our control but now lie outside the range of our sensory perception […]. We struggle to understand the sprawl of our impact, but there it is, within one cavernous stomach: pollution, climate, animal welfare, wildness, commerce, the future, and the past. Inside the whale, the world. (18)

Being confronted by the whale sublime through the whale fall caused by contamination and toxicity, the materialization of the vast scope of anthropogenic pollution compels us to reflect on human environmental impact and our complicity in it, while the sense of sublimity incites an awareness of the interconnectedness of life and the urgent need for ecological responsibility.

Furthermore, Giggs's narrative depicts how cetacean parasitology and the ecological biology of the whale fall reveal the complex relationships of life, dependency, and decay—much like how the whale's body serves as a reflection of the vast scope of pollution. Giggs describes how the story of the whale fall would "transfix" her, emphasizing that it is "emotional," calling it "a great, pluripotent detonation of life striking from a whale's demise" (21). The emotional excess captured in the narration reflects a sublime experience with picturing the whale fall, where the awe of life emerging from death evokes a deep sense of wonder and humility: "In the flatlining of a whale, in the falling apart of its colossal body, this story seeded the rise of organisms more spellbinding and weirder than any I had ever heard of, or dimly pictured before. How little is yet known about the wildness that attends the whale, I realized, and how well the world is built to work without us" (Giggs 21). In a manner comparable to Cunningham, Giggs represents the sublime whale fall through the ecological significance of the body's breakdown, illustrating how this process not only sustains diverse marine life but also challenges our anthropocentric perceptions of existence. Giggs's detailed narration tells the story of how a whale's carcass, after sinking, transforms into an ecosystem itself, supporting a myriad of organisms—from opportunistic scavengers, epipelagic foragers, jawless hagfish, to specialized "fugitive species" that thrive exclusively on the remains of cetaceans. This vast and intricate

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web of life reveals how the decomposition of a single whale fosters biodiversity and stimulates genetic exchange among species that might otherwise remain isolated:

> A whale body is, to this glitter splash of biology, a godsend, and an occasion for gene exchange. To think such extremophiles[3] indestructible—too ancient, or too deep to be affected by the impoverishment of the sea above—is to disregard their interaction with the corpse whales, which function as engines of evolution, and stepping-stones for their migration between stringent, oxygen-poor biomes. Without whales, many kinds of detritivores fail to colonize new habitats. (20).

Such a portrayal transports the reader to the strange worlds of nonhuman spatio-temporalities, where the decomposition of a whale body becomes a catalyst for evolution and a vital pathway for the migration of the "fugitive species" that are in focus here. The whale serves not only as a temporary habitat but also as a crucial resource that enables organisms to colonize new habitats. The whale fall is described as the "springtime—a fountain of life" of the seasonless undersea, a metaphor that captures the paradoxical but profound reality of how death is also life in the more-than-human dynamics of the natural world (20–21).

Moreover, Giggs's presentation of conceiving whales as hosts to numerous parasites, ranging from whale lice to whale worms, also invites contemplation of nonhuman spatio-temporalities, particularly through the microscopic view of parasites that inhabit the massive creature: "[i]n contemplating this kingdom of dependent organisms, I have found myself stepping away from my own senses to some zone of thought eerily outside of the human scale on which I experience the world" (262). The mind-expanding perspective of exploring the symbiosis between whales and their parasites challenges our understanding of life itself, prompting a recognition of the diverse, often unseen dimensions of existence that coexist within and around whales, whose living bodies serve as "their birthplace, habitat, and the genesis of their labor" (259). While the imagination of this relationship is aesthetically repugnant and often evokes discomfort, and many people care little for these eerie creatures, their existence and ways of life expand our understanding of the multiplicity of the nonhuman realms. Although parasites are not typically objects of the sublime, the way they render the whale body "a zoo" creates a "magical" complexity that can evoke sublime wonder (262–63). The whale sublime, in this sense, creates a tension between the often-overlooked, even abhorrent existence of parasites and the charisma we frequently attribute to whales. While the sublime risks manifesting our anthropocentric tendency of speciesism, prioritizing whales over parasites, Giggs's narration argues that recognizing this intricate relationship can deepen our appreciation for all forms of life:

> If we could learn from the parasites that everything is *not* quite itself, and that it never was—that there is deathliness and irascible vigour, and plurality and plunder, pushing and pulsing within each creature—then we might undo the charms of charisma and expand the boundaries

[3] An extremophile is a type of organism that flourishes in harsh and extreme environmental conditions (NOAA).

> of our care. We might embrace responsibility for even those things that lie now under our perception, and beyond our control. (262–63)

Giggs aims to foster a more inclusive sense of responsibility for the nonhuman entities that share our world, acknowledging their vital roles in the ecological tapestry of "multispecies worlding," to use the term of Donna Haraway (10). The environmental whale sublime, viewed from this perspective, mediates the "response-ability" and "responsibility" that Haraway calls for in her theorization of entanglement (12–13). Ultimately, such awareness compels us to confront our biases and expand our ethical considerations to encompass the full spectrum of life, including those often deemed unworthy of attention.

Reading the representations of whales in Cunningham's *Soundings* and Giggs's *Fathoms* through the lens of the environmental whale sublime illuminates the ecological interconnectedness that characterizes more-than-human relationality, enthralling us with the unfathomable extent of the wonders of natural lives. However, attributing sublimity to one particular species might reinstate an anthropocentric bias that elevates human preferences and cultural valorization, posing a potential problem for the theorization of the whale sublime and the effectiveness of the concept to be truly environmental for addressing multispecies justice. Ursula Heise observes that our environmental culture operates under a "proxy logic of narratives about endangered species and conservation," where "select species assume a central role in narratives" that highlight the loss of biodiversity and illustrate how "a particular community has been changed through modernization, colonization, or a combination of both" (2). This framing underscores the complexity of conservation narratives and invites a critical examination of the implications of prioritizing certain species over others. In both *Soundings* and *Fathoms*, the authors demonstrate an awareness of the significant role that whales play in extinction storytelling within contemporary environmental culture, making references to the "Save the Whales" movement in different ways in their reflections on whale conservation. Giggs's narrative critiques the popular notion of whales as "charismatic" megafauna, a concept she consistently questions throughout *Fathoms*. She examines how this idea establishes a hierarchy in conservation efforts, as "charisma" influences which species are deemed worthy of protection, prioritizing certain species as "mascots" and leading to the anthropomorphism of charismatic animals and their objectification as "logos and playthings" (128–29). Although the two narratives that I examine in this discussion sometimes exhibit characteristics that may fall into the cultural pitfalls described by Heise, it is crucial to recognize that these cetacean texts also demonstrate how creative nonfiction engages with scientific knowledge in ways that go beyond individual species and entities of whales. This engagement encompasses a broader understanding of interdependent ecological systems and multispecies relationships.

The representations of whale falls in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* have shed light on the knowledge of whale carcasses as vital ecosystems, implying that the death of whales is inextricably entangled with the survival and perpetuation of species other

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than whales. Michelle Bastian argues that "these ecosystems have been the site of the first anthropogenic extinction" in the ocean "due to the loss of habitat caused by significantly reduced numbers of 'falling' whales" (456). This recognition is illuminating in understanding "the deep-sea consequences of industrial whaling," causing the loss of "unrecorded," "unmissed," and "unrecognisable" species that are often overlooked in discussions of biodiversity (456). By shifting narrative attention to the ecological significance of whale falls, *Soundings* and *Fathoms* exemplify how environmental whale narratives transcend the proxy logic of conservation narratives. Heise argues that biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction are fundamentally cultural issues—centered on values and narratives—rather than purely scientific ones. This perspective suggests that endeavors to integrate humanities approaches into the scientific conservation framework are misguided, as anthropogenic biodiversity loss is inherently a human and social issue that requires a rethinking of natural sciences within the context of multispecies justice (7–8). In this light, the depictions of the whale sublime in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* are shaped by a method combining science with literary language since the whale narratives are amply informed by biological knowledge of cetology and marine ecology. The approach serves not only to highlight ecological realities but also to critique conventional conceptions of the nonhuman realm, enriching our cultural narratives about conservation. Therefore, the environmental whale sublime in *Soundings* and *Fathoms* manifests in how the authors have embraced the epistemological and ideological advancements of the twenty-first century, which have greatly improved upon the ideas from the era in which Melville lived. Meanwhile, the feminine sensibility exhibited by the writers also underpins the environmental significance of their engagements with and contemplations on whales, as well as the broader worlds of multispecies entanglement that they belong to.

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