Speaking through Water

Voices at the Threshold

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As Elizabeth Miller points out, shorelines have long been sites of exchange, transition, and shifting boundaries. Fifty million years ago, in the briny estuaries of what is now northern Pakistan, Pakicetus, the ancestor of whales, slipped the shackles of earth, returning to the waters which birthed terrestrial life. For millions of years, Pakicetus' phylogenetic family (Pakicetidae) lived between water and air. Slowly forelegs became flippers; hind legs disappeared; tails grew strong and sinuous. Morphology morphed. Creatures of air became creatures of the sea. And they developed new voices.

In communication theory, as well as in popular culture, voice is a prevailing metaphor for consciousness and agency. Western thought, since at least the times of Aristotle, has distinguished humans as "the 'speaking' animal" (Peters 1999, 1). Our fleshing out of this concept—the vocal cords strung across the larynx, the "breath support" that acoustic communication specialist Truax invokes to describe "Voice and the Whole Person" (34-5)—is implicitly supported by the medium of air, which has shaped us physiologically. Truax notes that the very quality of our voices fluctuates with our intake of air: tremulous and thin when physiological or psychological stress makes our breathing shallow, resonant when supported by the full force of healthy lungs. In modernity, not only our voice but our texts, television transmissions, radio programs, and written communications travel over the airwaves and via satellite. Signalling waves stream towards cell phone towers and satellite dishes, GPS systems and car radios. Such architectures of transmission and reception are ubiquitous in the modern landscape. The structuring bias of our communication is set not only in space and time, but within the medium of air.

How do we find communication, communion, and community with ocean creatures whose voices lie beyond this threshold of air? How can they enter the distribution of the sensible in which Rancière claims all politics take place? While the ocean circulates oxygen, nutrients, and currents of cold and heat, and is thus intimately bound up with terrestrial water cycles, climate, and exchanges that bloom life from the inorganic, the great gap in medium between air and ocean dwelling obscures such interrelations. New technologies, from hydrophones to seismic arrays, scuba gear and underwater cameras, have begun to reveal an ocean of diverse topographies (shallow sandbanks, underwater mountain ranges, deep ocean trenches), dense and dancing water columns (moving and mixing heat, dissolved oxygen, and plankton and other marine microorganisms), and pulsing currents. Yet such aquatic perceptions are troublingly mediated: the intensive militarization and industrialization of ocean spaces is both precursor and determinant of how we have come to quite literally "sense" these

spaces through military sonar and the shock waves of seismic arrays. Rather than amplify the crackling of barnacles, the feedings of fish, or the calls of whales to their kin, sonic sensing technologies quite literally drown out these sounds.1 Chartings that situate rock and chasm, fault and beachhead, as theatres for exercises of war, and as grounds for mineral extraction "fix" the architecture of ocean spaces such that the flow of life and waters form barely a ripple.

It is therefore remarkable how, soon after hydrophone technologies were declassified, the cries of whales erupted as a potent political force. The widespread popular circulation of Songs of Humpback Whales, released by National Geographic in 1970, began a tide of whale-themed songs, books, and other popular culture production that successfully bolstered the campaign which ended industrial whaling by the early 1980s (Roman 2006, 160; Roburn 2013, 117-18). In the decades since, cetacean "songs" and our understanding of them, have challenged humans to reimagine seas as sonic spaces, prompting a "re-mediation" of our obligations to protect critical habitat. The reconsideration of marine regulation within an acoustic register is an ongoing project: militaries have been compelled to limit their use of sonar (Horowitz 2015); offshore oil companies to cease seismic testing in biologically rich waters (Tasker 2017); and ships to slow their speeds and shift routes to respect endangered whale populations (Sevunts 2017).

References

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Endnotes

1 Improperly regulated, the use of these technologies can cause severe ear and brain damage and even death in marine mammals (Horowitz 2015).