

This essay appears in *Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene in Nineteenth Century Art and Visual Culture*, edited by Maura Coughlin and Emily Gephart. (Routledge 2019).

Looking at Leviathan: The First Live Cetaceans in Britain

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“...on making an incision into the lung, out came the truth—cause of death palpable—
plastic grey pneumonia.”
(*The Fishing Gazette*, 1877, p. 9)

“Park officials suspect the three-month-old calf died from pneumonia,
the same infection that killed the infamous captive whale *Tillikum*.”
(Sarah Gibbens, “SeaWorld’s Last Captive-Born Baby Orca Dies,”
National Geographic, 2017)

One hundred forty years after the death of the first whale to be exhibited live in Britain, American aquarium chain SeaWorld announced an end to their captive orca breeding program, but not before their youngest whale suffered the same fatal illness as the very first whale exhibited in London in 1877. In the intervening decades the display of live cetaceans reached its zenith, but gradually the tide has begun to turn (hastened by the 2013 documentary *Blackfish*) toward recognizing the cruelty of keeping such intelligent creatures captive. Though the emotional and intellectual sensitivities of whales are no longer in question, we still wrestle with some of the fundamental issues of treating a sentient creature as visual culture. What does it mean to look at a captive whale, and to see her look back us? How do we conceive of nature and culture when nature *becomes* culture? (Or, perhaps *natureculture*?) And how is the visual culture of captivity unique for creatures of the sea?

This chapter seeks to expand the ecocritical study of Victorian visual and material culture by considering the live, intact, material bodies of whales as visual culture. While much excellent scholarly attention has been paid to pictorial representations of whales—and to the decorative and practical items their bodies yielded such as scrimshaw and corset stays—Britons of 1877 onward also experienced the whale *as* whale in several highly publicized live whale exhibitions. Regarding the whale as imbricated in visual culture also speaks to the fundamental anxiety of the island nation: Britannia rules the waves, but whales (and what else?) rule the depths.

Claude Levi-Strauss, redirecting the notion that animals are “good to eat,” asserts in *Totemism* that animals are “good to think [with]” (Levi-Strauss, 1964). Ann Colley, Harriet Ritvo, Mary Midgely, and Donna Haraway have shown in the past twenty years, as Sarah Amato puts it, “how human relationships to and understanding of animals are historically and culturally contingent” (Amato, 2015, p. 12). Haraway’s concept of *natureculture* has particularly emphasized the semiotic inextricability of nature and culture, and John Berger’s seminar *Ways of Looking* adds the specter of capitalism which has

uneasily accompanied science since the earliest commodification of animals, reminding us that “the nineteenth century, in western Europe and north America, saw the beginning of a process, today being completed by twentieth century corporate capitalism, by which every tradition which was previously mediated between man and nature was broken” (Berger, 1977, p. 2). Ecocriticism often attends to the tension between the pastoral and the wilderness, the latter being a point of overlap for ecocriticism and animal studies because an inescapable component of wilderness is the potential beasts therein. Greg Garrard reminds us that “wilderness” comes from the Anglo-Saxon *wilddeoren*, where “*deoren*” (beasts) “existed beyond the boundaries of cultivation” (Garrard, 2011, pp. 66-67). Humanistic studies of the sea and its creatures is a prime field for interrogating beasts beyond the cultivation, control, understanding, and comfort of man after—as Byron famously writes—“our control / Stops at the shore” (Byron, 2008, CLXXIX).

In 2015 Jesse Oak Taylor remarked that the “striking thing about Victorian ecocriticism is that there is so little of it” (Taylor, 2015, p. 877). There is especially not yet a Victorian *oceanic* ecocriticism dedicated to the unique questions and problems posed by the sea and its creatures in this period. Daniel Brayton and Steve Mentz have pointed out the “terrestrial bias” in the environmental humanities, calling for a “blue” turn in green studies (Mentz 2009). Victorian studies has long embraced material approaches to this intensely visual, “stuff”-centered period and has recently enjoyed its “animal turn” as well. A “blue,” or oceanic ecomaterialism in Victorian studies informed by the ways in which Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman have framed ecological thought may also help to decentralize the human and instead privilege the agency of “storied matter” (Iovino and Opperman, 2011, p. 1). Iovino and Opperman conceive of the “world’s material phenomena [as] knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be ‘read’ and interpreted as forming narrative, stories” (Ibid). Thus, “*material* ecocriticism examines matter both *in* texts and *as* a text, trying to shed light on the way bodily nature and discursive forces *express* their interaction whether in representations or in their concrete reality” (Ibid, p. 2). Building upon Haraway’s *naturecultures*, Iovino and Opperman position bodies in particular as “living texts that recount *naturalcultural* stories” (Ibid, p. 6). For Tim Morton, *nature* is generally a “transcendental term in a material mask,” and the “question of animals... radically disrupts any idea of a single, independent, solid environment” (Morton, 2007, pp. 14 and 99).¹ The sea is a prime location for this encounter between the theoretical and the material in the nineteenth century because of the myriad ways in which public and private actors used bodies and *things* to try to domesticate the unfathomable sea, exemplified by traveling whale carcasses, marine fossils, sea shore collecting, and the Victorian aquarium craze.

The stakes of “blue” ecocriticism are especially high in the Victorian period, as the *eco* of ecology is of course rooted in the Greek *oikos*: home. The tiny Atlantic island taking over the world desperately needed the sea environment to be part of its imperial, cultural, and scientific ecosystem—its *home-system*. However, as Morton writes in *Ecology Without Nature*, “the idea of ‘our’ environment becomes especially tricky when it starts to slither, swim, and lurch toward us.” In 1877, the first whale was transported to London, and she began to swim toward us in ways that forever altered human-cetacean relations.

Though so much of daily life in Britain depended on whales—they both literally and figuratively illuminated and lubricated the Industrial Revolution—it was rare for someone other than a whaler, fisherman, or sailor to see a live whale. This changed in September 1877 with the arrival of the first “white whale” at the Royal Aquarium in Westminster, just blocks from the Houses of Parliament. The proprietor of the Royal

¹ “Sometimes I wonder whether [the question of animals] is *the* question,” Morton writes, alluding to Cary Wolfe’s *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minnesota UP, 2003).

Aquarium was William Leonard Hunt, an American showman and promoter better known as “The Great Farini” for his early career as a daredevil which included a trip over Niagara Falls in a barrel. Marine life was just one facet of the Royal Aquarium; Farini (as he was known in London) envisioned it as a complex for various arts and entertainments. The aquarium theatre put on productions of “School for Scandal” and W.S. Gilbert’s adaptation of *Great Expectations* in addition to sideshow-style acts like Zazel the Human Cannonball and a young girl called Krao covered in hair whom Farini promoted as the “Missing Link.” In 1877 he announced the arrival of his most anticipated exhibit yet: a live “white whale” from Labrador.

The “white whale” obviously alluded to *Moby-Dick*, though Melville’s outsize villain was a sperm whale, and Farini’s specimen was a nine-foot long beluga whale—a species known for its charming song and playful nature. The life of the first Westminster Whale was short and cruel, but *seeing* her, in the middle of London, catalyzed a discussion about the nature of animal captivity. What does she still have to tell us about the visual cultures of nature in Victorian Britain, and how can she help us think about similar issues of cetacean captivity today? When Philip Armstrong considers the literal and literary “rendering” of whales in the nineteenth century he focuses on *Moby-Dick*, yet his central question (which he positions as the central question of Melville’s novel)—“What do whales mean?”—rings true. He answers: “Critical replies to this have mostly concentrated upon reading cetaceans as a screen for the projection of human meanings, but attended only incidentally to what else they might mean, or how they might mean otherwise—that is, the ways in which whales trouble or escape human representation” (Armstrong, 2005, p. 101). The captive whale can no longer “escape human representation” but she certainly “trouble[s]” it. And her arrival at the Royal Aquarium on September 27 troubles this representation as poignantly today as in 1877.

The *Fishing Gazette* reported on September 28, 1877: “THE LIVE WHALE has arrived at Westminster. She is apparently in good health, and feeds well upon live eels. A full account of her Whaleship will appear in our next Number, with a page of Illustrations.” Her Whaleship had been captured in a seine net off the coast of Labrador by Zach Coup, who had procured P.T. Barnum’s belugas, one of whom “became so tame it would allow itself to be harnessed to a car in which it pulls a young lady round the tank” (Lee, 1878, pp. 8-9). (Farini no doubt had similar hopes for his.) From Labrador the whale was transported by steamer to Montreal then by train to New York, where she was kept in a reservoir at Coney Island before being loaded onto the German Lloyd’s steamer *Oder* for passage across the Atlantic. Off the coast she was transferred to a tender which brought her to the Southampton Docks where she was loaded into the South-Western Railway bound for London. The zoologist Henry Lee writes of her arrival at the aquarium: “About noon, a large wooden box, twelve feet in length, was lifted out of a van and placed at the side of the tank by a score or so of laborers. Within it lay the whale, half embedded in sea-weed—which smelt of anything but ozone—and breathing at intervals of about twenty-three seconds” (Ibid, p. 2). The narrative and representation of her transportation is a crucial part of her imagery. Amato reminds us that “Victorians used new consumer amenities to complete transactions involving animals, including new railway systems, which revolutionized possibilities of domestic transport, travel, and retail within Britain, allowing for everyone and everything to be put in motion” (Amato, 2015, p. 11). The whale travelled by carriage, ship (sail *and* steam), on the shoulder of men in a box, and locomotive.² Her successful capture and swift carriage could not have been

² Ann Colley reminds us in *Wild Animal Skins in Nineteenth Century Britain* that: “If the specimens survived the journey across a foreign land and reached the ship returning to England, there was the probability that they would not survive the voyage. Shipwrecks and fires on board destroyed

possible even ten years earlier. She is also, then, a testament to new technology, an organic attestation to industry, an avatar and an advertisement.

Though the 45,000-gallon tank, set into the concrete floor of the aquarium, was the largest ever constructed in England it was still painfully small for her at just forty feet in length by twenty feet wide and six feet deep. Lee marvels at the engineering: “The weight of the iron plates alone is thirty tons. Thirty thousand holes had to be drilled in them to receive the 15,000 rivets, and yet this immense receptacle was commenced and finished within eleven days” (Lee, 1878, p. 1). The basement was fitted as a sort of arena: “Tiers of raised seats were erected at each end of the tank, from which visitors could look down upon the whale” (Ibid, p. 2). Between her various modes of transportation and the feat-of-Victorian-engineering tank which would hold her, the visual of the whale is inseparable from industrial technology. Once removed from the sea she will always be contained in something made by humans. She has become *natureculture*: a semiotic entanglement of industry and environment. Any viewer’s first sight of the whale will not be the whale but her constraints: the net, the box, the tank. The visual culture of the whale in Victorian Britain is impossible to disentangle from the visual culture of her captivity—created by humans.

Once subsumed into the Victorian visual culture of display she is no longer an agent unto herself, she is inextricable from her manufactured context. Yet, unexpectedly, she does retain an ecological agency. According to David Abram, the material beings which comprise *naturecultures* “have the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings” (Abram, 2010). When she was finally lowered into the tank,

all eyes were agog to see what kind of creature, what animal in the animal series—“a fish-like mammal” could be; and the first impression was at once favorable. The outline of this whale... is undoubtedly graceful in its curves, while the color is something between that of the purer kinds of vulcanized indiarubber such as is used for children’s dolls, and a white horse—a creamy white, with a dash of grey in it. Its motions were as graceful as its body, as it glided round the tank, apparently with an enquiring eye as to the extent and depth of its new domain. (*Fishing Gazette*, 5 October 1877)

Though the initial perspective is human —“all eyes were agog”—and the correspondent describes her as a sort of hybrid of wilderness and domesticity (an *assemblage*, perhaps, in Jane Bennett’s terminology in *Vibrant Matter*), the ultimate perspective is that of the whale: her “enquiring eye” inspects the tank even as she is being inspected. When the human stares “agog” at the whale, the whale stares back, mammal to mammal, forever altering the visual culture of the watery abyss when, to borrow from Nietzsche, “the abyss stares back at you” (Nietzsche, 2003) with a sentience as yet unavailable in Britain. Though the London Zoological Society and various London menageries had granted access to land mammals, the particular oceanic and imaginative “abyss” in which the whale resided added an extra layer of obscurity. In John Berger’s particular “way of looking”: “the animal scrutinizes [the viewer] across a narrow abyss of noncomprehension” (Berger, 1977, p. 5). The print media surrounding the whale narrowed this abyss of noncomprehension even further with notes on her similitude. The *Lichfield Mercury* remarked that the whale is “said to be very fond of shrimps, and in this respect resemble[s] the Londoners themselves” (5 October 1877) and the *Liverpool Mail* notes that

collections... High winds pitched crates into the sea; unruly animals on board were tossed into the ocean; and live specimens died as a result of close confinement on board, improper diets, trauma, injury, illness, and cannibalism” (Colley, 2014, p.18).

she “flounders about, and ‘spouts’ with as much vigor as the most loquacious politician” (29 September 1877).

And though she appeared healthy upon her arrival on Wednesday, Westminster’s first whale died on Saturday morning after just four days on display at the Aquarium. Her residence in Britain was so short-lived that in some rural newspaper the notices of her arrival and her death were printed in the same issue. The aquarium issued an official announcement of her death in the London *Daily News* on October 1: “It is with regret the announcement is made that the Whale died THIS MORNING.” She was, of course, exhibited anyway. According to Lee: “During the day some sixteen hundred visitors, who had come to see the live whale, inspected it as it lay dead, and they saw a ‘show’ which I, as a naturalist, may perhaps be thought to over-value, but was one to see which I would have travelled a long distance, if necessary” (Lee, 1878, p. 5). Despite Lee’s protest that the main objective of the whale’s presence is scientific, even he reduces her to a “show.” The *Fishing Gazette* quantifies it thus: “On Saturday, some hundreds paid 6d each in addition to the 1s admission to the Aquarium, to inspect the dead body of this whale” (5 October 1877).

The eminent “Fish Culturist to the Queen” Frank Buckland was immediately recalled from Scotland while his secretary made a plaster cast of the animal to be painted by the renowned “fish artist” H.L. Rolfe (Lee, 1878, p. 5). The following morning Lee assisted with the necropsy, noting “we had been requested to avoid injuring the skin or skeleton in any way which would prevent the one being stuffed and the other articulated for future exhibition” (Ibid). The cause of death was found to be pneumonia, likely contracted during the transatlantic passage in which she was regularly sluiced with sea water in freezing temperatures on deck. Her 63-ounce brain went to the Hunterian at the Royal College of Surgeons, her cast to Buckland, and her skeleton and skin to Farini.³ Though the visual display of live animals is finite (especially in a period in which veterinary care was so rudimentary), the animal’s post-mortem career was permanent and three-fold: the skeleton was articulated, the skin preserved for stuffing, and the cast painted to look like the live, healthy specimen. The act of looking at the live whale, then, is also informed by the knowledge that one’s children will potentially see the same whale after its death, stuffed and/or articulated. These second “lives” provide a sort of insurance and return on investment in a business in which the star employee will likely expire, but they also endow the creature with an agency that will outlive even its captors.⁴

³ The brain is still at the Hunterian: Ref. no. RCSHM/D521, Brain of *Delphinapterus leucas*, 1877 (1,791 grammes). This was a way for Farini to recoup some of his investment, as although she was also the first whale to be insured, her policy only lasted until she arrived at the aquarium. As the *Fishing Gazette* put it: “The Insurance for £500 was effected from the time it was lifted on board the *Oder*, to the moment of its being deposited in the tank at Westminster. Had it died one minute sooner, the loss would have fallen on the Paris Marine Insurance Company, one minute later—or as now, upon the Messrs Morris, Farini, and Robertson.” The *London Illustrated News* reports that the live whale was worth upwards of £1000 (as opposed to the £20-30 she would fetch for her blubber in Labrador).

⁴ A well-known British example is Guy the Western Lowland gorilla, who lived at the London Zoo from 1947 until his death in 1978. After his death his skin was donated to the Natural History Museum, where he was kept in cold storage until being stuffed and briefly displayed in 1982. His display struck too morbid a chord with many (The Viscount Anthony Chaplin, Honorary Secretary of the Zoological Society of London asked, “Are all future Hon. Secs, Presidents, etc. of the society to be stuffed and exhibited in a museum?”), and Guy was removed to Scientific Collections until his 2012 return to permanent display in the museum’s new Cadogan Treasures Gallery. When I visited Guy just after his installation a man looking at the gorilla with his young son remarked to me that as a child his father had taken him to see Guy at the zoo.

The print culture that sensationalized the first Westminster whale's demise reinforced her position in relation to humans. The illustration from the October 5 issue of the *Fishing Gazette* detailing the necropsy places the whale in the context of whaling, with the inclusion of decorative harpoons (Figure 1). The five-panel illustration shows (1) a beached beluga whale in its Arctic habitations; (2) a right whale and a sperm whale, respectively, also in the Arctic; (3) the beluga in her tank at the Royal Aquarium surrounded by patrons; (4) the beluga being introduced to her tank; (5) and the skeleton of a right whale. The main panel, showing the captive beluga at the aquarium, is flanked by two bracketing vignettes of the implements of the whale hunt: harpoons, lances, and rope. To place the captive live beluga in the context of the industry around cetacean killing creates a sort of invisible tank as well, presenting even the wild whale as contained within reach of men.

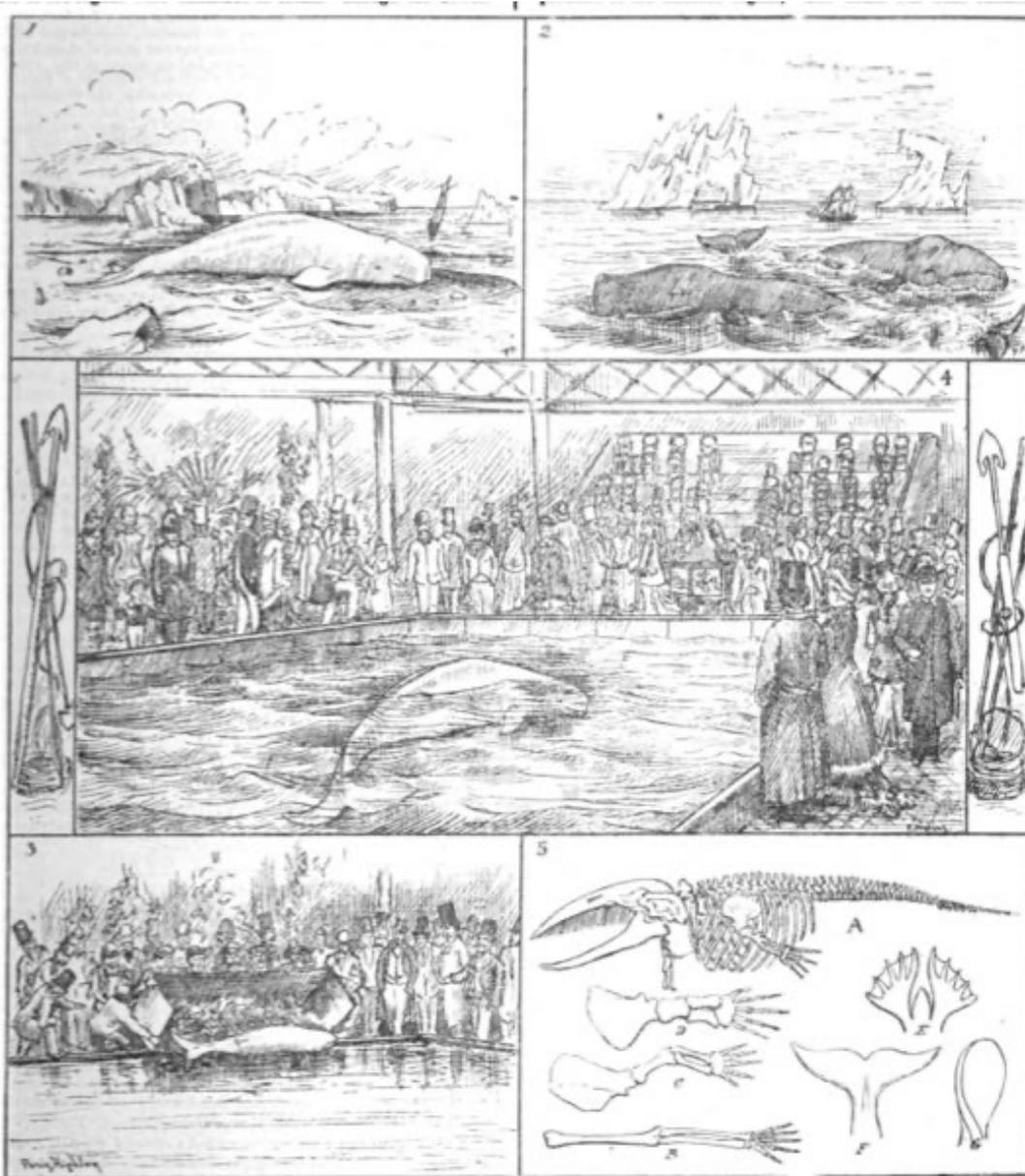


Fig. 1. *The Fishing Gazette*, 5 October 1877, p. 9.

The visual culture of any captive whale so long as the whale hunt continued was (and remains) a visual culture of death, and the first Westminster whale's death was in many ways even more of a spectacle than its arrival. George Reeve Smith, proprietor of the Brighton Aquarium, "was so sorry when he heard that the Westminster whale was dead that he shed floods of tears (of course, salt ones)" and ordered the flag at the Brighton Aquarium to be flown at half-mast (*Illustrated London News*, 6 October 1877). The *Illustrated London News* commentator "G.A.S." summarized her life as such:

For some days the "wooden walls of old England" (I mean the ubiquitous Mr. Willing's hoardings) have been covered with proclamations—"The Live Whale is Coming!" He came—a poor little white fellow, not much more important in size than a large porpoise—to the Westminster Aquarium. They put him into a tank, and gave him eels to eat; but there was something the matter with the whale, or the tank, or the water; and the poor lilliputian leviathan died. And then the eels tastened [sic] on the fins of the deceased and began to eat *him!* Which is the way of the world. (Ibid)

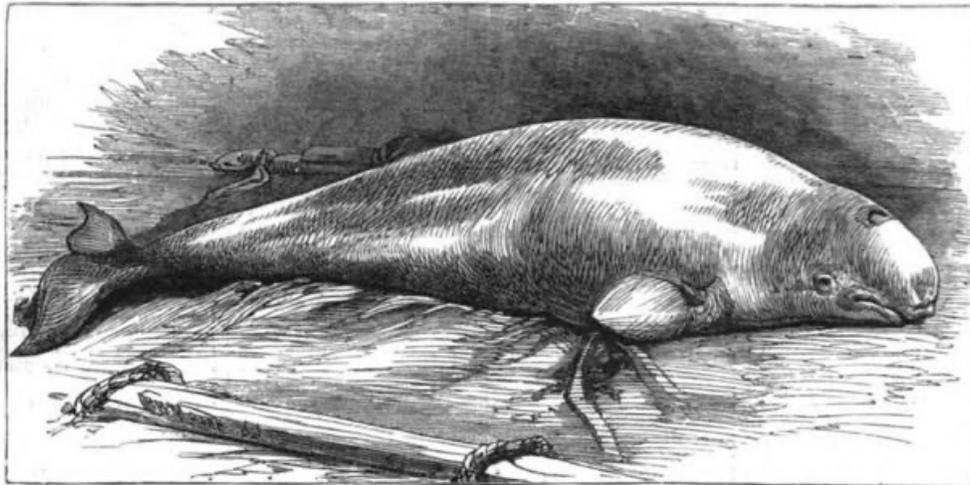
The invocation of the "wooden walls of old England" as hoardings pasted with advertisements both reinforces and rewrites the centrality of the sea in British life, setting the context for Farini's beluga. ("Mr. Willing" refers to Willing and Co., a London advertising firm whose images often covered the wooden hoardings and walls throughout London). The "wooden walls of old England" were first conceived as Royal Navy warships in Henry Green's 1773 naval ode:

Thine Oaks descending to the main,
 With floating forts shall stem the tides,
 Asserting Britain's wat'ry reign
 Where'er her thundering Navy rides:
 Nor less to peaceful arts inclin'd,
 Where Commerce opens all her stores,
 In social bands will league mankind,
 And join the sea-divided shores:
 Spread then thy sails where Naval Glory calls:
 Britain's best bulwarks are her WOODEN WALLS. (Green, 1773)

The transformation of Britain's "wooden walls" from warship to billboard cuts to the heart of the ecological and imperial relationship with the sea in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The Royal Navy fleet, built of British oak, creates the visual metaphor that it is Britain's *nature* which will protect her *culture* from invasion (and vice versa). The epithet remained in use through the nineteenth century. There are a number of paintings entitled "The Wooden Walls of Old England"—the most famous by George Clarkson Stanfield depicts a British Man of War next to a fishing boat and rowboats, and a fisherman on shore gazing out at sea (thus reinforcing the importance of all of Britain's maritime industries). The *naval* wooden walls of old England protect the island nation from invasion. In 1877, however, well into the *Pax Britannica* the term has been humorously coopted to depict the ubiquity of London construction ("Where Commerce opens all her stores") as physical substrate for visual culture advertising the whale—a domestication of the wild sea. These new commercial "wooden walls" also invoke the whale's containment within the aquarium walls. Each versions of the "wooden walls of old England" (warship, construction hoarding advertising the captive whale, and aquarium walls, respectively) thus assert the same thing: *Britannia rules the waves*.

The whale, however, did not ultimately submit to this domestication, and her death occasioned commentary from across London. Animal advocates accused Farini of

ill treatment, but Henry Lee deemed these “inaccurate and unwise suggestions,” assuring readers “As a looker-on of some experience, I am satisfied that in the treatment of this Westminster Whale everything was done that foresight could dictate in the *existing state of knowledge and skill* in the carriage of living animals” (Lee, 1878, p. 9, emphasis mine). The *Times* confirms: “When once the animal was safely deposited in the tank its surroundings were fully as favourable as those of most other creatures when deprived of their natural liberty. The supposed marks of ill-usage on the dead body were the consequences of the eels in the tank having after its death nibbled the edges of its fins” (*The Times*, 3 October 1877).



THE DEAD WHALE AT THE ROYAL AQUARIUM.

Fig. 2. *Illustrated London News*, 6 October 1877.

Others called into question whether such a creature should be held captive in the first place (either until more could be learned about how to care for a captive whale, or at all). Francis Francis, of the Brighton Aquarium, wrote to the *Brighton and Sussex Daily Post*: “When we can get a good open pond, in a nice breezy spot, and from 150 to 200 feet long, 50 or 60 feet wide, and a dozen feet deep, with a constant stream of salt water flowing in and out, then I will confidently undertake the introduction of whales with a full expectation of keeping them alive” (*Illustrated London News*, 1877). This debate over tank size that began in the Victorian era continues to be of paramount concern today in the conversation on captive whales: before SeaWorld announced the phasing out of live cetacean shows, park administration attempted to appease critics by making plans for expansions of its cetacean tanks, and animal welfare groups have suggested that all cetaceans currently in captivity who cannot be released should live out the rest of their lives in expansive coastal sanctuaries.

For other critics, however, it was not a question of *when* or *how* a whale should be kept, but *if*. The well-known Bishop of St. Albans, Piers Claughton, wrote to the *Times* to express his concern, citing that the whale, “the creature of which the Psalmist speaks,” is “placed in its element [the sea] by the Great Creator.” He calls out the hubris of men who would remove such a creature to a subterranean “suffocating tank” not even deep enough for it to dive. He reframed the debate, for the first time as a “question of morality.” The *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* took Claughton’s side, lamenting “The unlucky little whale is dead at last. It could not possibly have lived more than a few

months, and it is a very great question whether the attempts to exhibit the whale in an aquarium at all does not amount to something very like cruelty” (*Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, 6 October 1877). The article goes on to call the whale’s tank “nothing more than a cistern” and her captivity “a species of Barnumism... little allied to true science.” *ILN*’s G.A.S. agreed, invoking both Keats and Spenser to drive home the cruelty of the whale’s captivity:

For my part, I am of good Bishop Piers Claughton’s opinion... and would let Leviathan alone. John Keats used to revel in that magnificent Spenserian epithet, “the sea-shouldering whale.” What would the author of “Endymion” have thought of a “tank-shouldering whale?”

If what delighted the aging Romantic Keats was the scale associated with the whale’s element, then he would not likely have been impressed by the tank. As Wordsworth cautioned “Sweet is the lore which Nature brings; / Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:— / We murder to dissect.” Though Romanticism theoretically resisted the containment of nature by culture, Morton reminds us that environmentalism is, at its heart, consumerism, and that Romantic consumerism “produced subjective states that eventually became technically reproducible commodities” (Morton, 2007, p. 94). After all, “*Ecology* derived from the Enlightenment view of the *economy of nature*” (Ibid, p. 80).

And though Farini and his aquarium staff did not physically “murder to dissect” that first beluga they dissected it nonetheless, and the uneasy bond of Victorian science and capitalism forged in the tank indeed brought harm to individual creatures in the name of science and often under the guise of public education. When Lee eulogizes the Westminster whale, he mourns both the “plucky” plans made by its industrious proprietors (“I cordially sympathized with its owners and the authorities of the Aquarium in their loss”), but for the educational potential:

The public, too, were deprived of a great sight, from an educational point of view. Thousands of persons who had opportunities of seeing the porpoises in the Brighton Aquarium arena then for the first time to appreciate the fact that the cetacea are no fishes. They read with their own eye from Nature’s own book, far better than any printed page could teach them, that the whales breathe by lungs and not by gills; that they propel themselves by vertical movements of the tail and not by their pectoral fins; that they never spout water from their spiracle; and many other details of their movements, habits, and mode of life. And as they looked and learned, their interest increased with their understanding of the subject, they were taught that they have before them a warm-blooded animal that suckles its young, and one of high intelligence, almost, if not quite, equal in brain power to the seals. And if this whale had lived, thousands more who never went to the Brighton, and whose means or duties would not, perhaps, permit them to do so, would have learned similar lessons. Popular fallacies would have been dissipated, and popular knowledge increased. (Lee, 1878, p. 4)

Lee’s argument is still common from proponents of captive cetaceans: when ordinary people can learn about the animals by seeing or interacting with them (to “read with their own eye from Nature’s own book”) they become stakeholders in saving them.

This model of environmental education, in which keeper and spectator willingly implicate themselves in the captivity of the animal (as an individual) they are supposedly engaged in liberating (as a species), thus has its roots in these early aquaria in which unabashed capitalism (Farini) was underwritten by well-meaning naturalism (Victorian scientists like Lee). Sarah Amato considers this transformation of the animal to

commodity: “As living beings, animals were animate possessions and unique commodities. Unlike other consumer goods, they were not produced by human craftsmanship, but they were subject to various manipulations. Like other goods, animals could take on and express social and cultural meaning through acquisition, use, and other consumer processes. In the Victorian period they became commodities and possessions at a particularly significant moment in the development of consumer society” (Amato, 2015, p. 9). She tells us that this relationship was especially fraught during this period: “For Victorians, the materiality of living animals was a matter of common sense and sometimes problematic. Their relationships to pets and zoo animals were tangible, smelly, messy, disconcerting, comforting, and sometimes tasty; representations could be equally troubling” (Ibid, p. 15). This relationship is *especially* “disconcerting” for sea animals, whose wild lives are even further removed from human view, and whose captive lives must be mediated twice: through the surface of the enclosure *and* through the surface of the water.

The commodification of the Westminster Whale’s death confirmed for Farini the profitability of live cetaceans, and “no sooner was the breath out of [the whale’s] body than [Farini] exclaimed, ‘If I live till next year I will bring a dozen White Whales here if I want them’” (Lee, 1978, p. 9). On May 18, 1878 four whales left America on the Allan Line Steamer *Circassian* and arrived at Liverpool on May 27. One suffocated en route when it turned over in its crate in rough weather, and of the three who survived one was sent to Blackpool, one to Pomona Gardens in Manchester, and the third to the empty tank at the Royal Aquarium in Westminster.⁵

⁵ In the event of the death of the second round of whales, Lee writes in 1878: “I am informed that Mr. Farini’s agents have six more of these whales alive in a sea-pond on the coast of Labrador. They can be sent to him at short notice.” (Lee, p. 10). “If the whale should die before reaching England, Barnum declares he will ship half a dozen at one time next summer, hoping that one or two may survive.” (*Illustrating Sporting and Dramatic News* 15 September 1877)

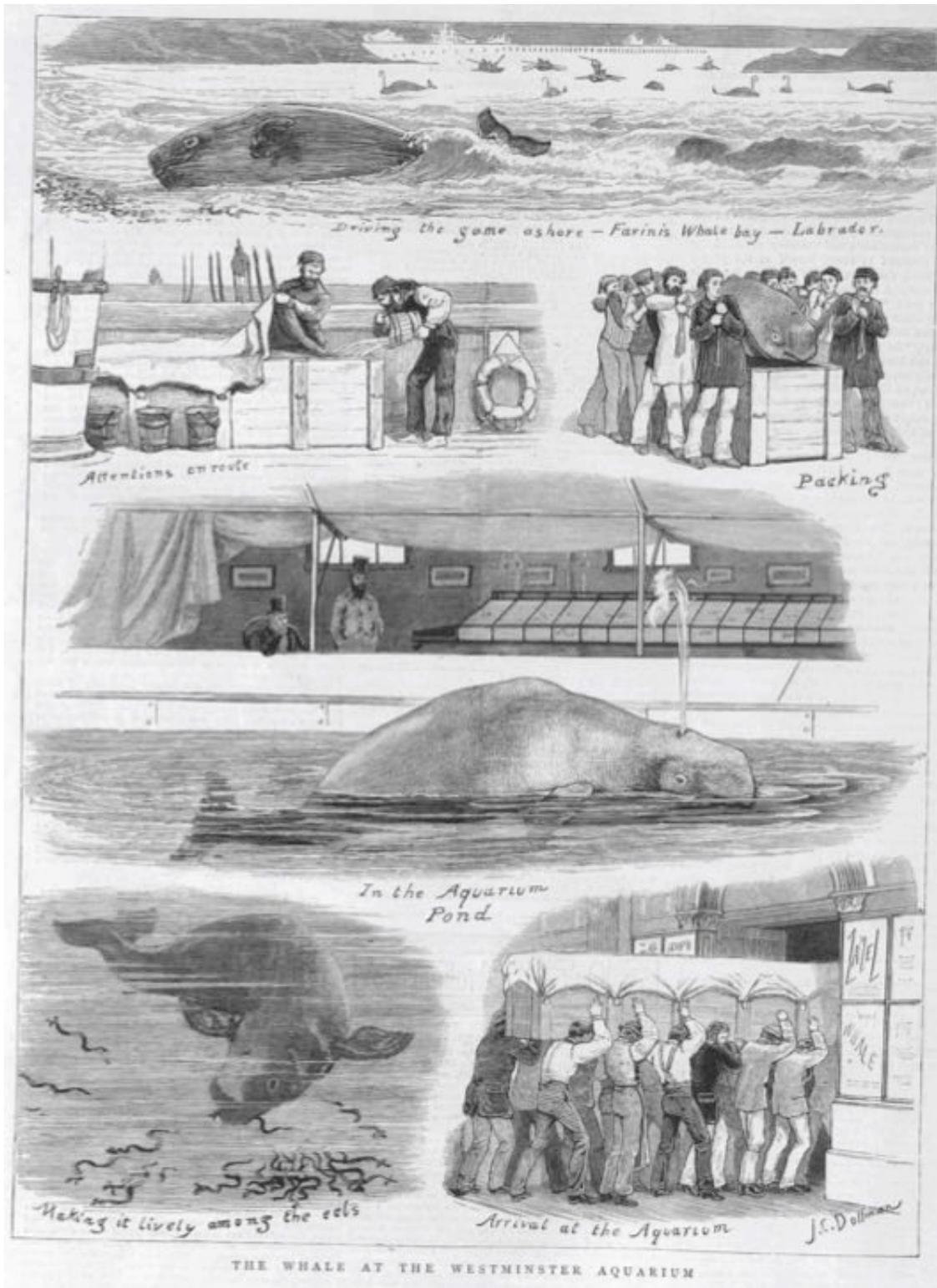


Fig. 3. *The Graphic*, June 8, 1878.

The Whitsuntide holiday of 1878 was particularly busy for the second whale. Remarked the *Times*:

The Royal Aquarium was one of the few places of indoor amusement that did not suffer by the fine weather, and this success must be largely attributed to the attractions of the whale. It was long since discovered that nothing is so fascinating to an English crowd as a sea-monster... The whale was visited by 36,000 people last week, and by great numbers yesterday. (*The Times*, 11 June 1878, p. 8)

Cashing in the fact that “nothing is so fascinating as a sea monster” (especially a sea monster like the whale, with whom visitors know they share a certain mammalian kinship), Farini and his underwriters more than recouped their investment with their second whale. But just ten days after the second whale’s banner holiday weekend, it died too. Fearing more bad publicity, Farini and his fellow proprietors denied that the whale had died and quickly sent for a replacement from Blackpool which they unsuccessfully attempted to pass off as the same whale (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 20 June 1878). The third Westminster Whale did not live long either. The Royal Aquarium’s days were numbered too, and by 1890 the exhibits had largely shifted to seedier attractions such as tattooed American women illumined after dark by the light of the tanks which remained full of water but devoid of fish (Sands, 2011).⁶ The Royal Aquarium was demolished in 1903 and is now the site of the London Methodist Central Hall.

The Westminster whales bring the ethical concerns of the present to bear upon studies of Victorian visual culture and vice versa. These creatures constituted an early anxious alliance between those who would profit purely monetarily from exhibiting live cetaceans, and those whose research would profit and who would educate the public by way of live whale. “As animals were subject to different managements, manipulations, and interpretations” in the Victorian era, writes Amato, “they took on different social roles, and this irrevocably changed the lives of both animals and humans” (Amato, 2015, p. 6). In terms of the whale’s agentic lived experience, where once her worst fate might have been at the end of a harpoon, in the new Victorian economy of live cetacean display she could be harpooned but not killed, and as that wound healed she might be subject to a slow death at the hands of inexperienced caretakers who would confine her first to a coffin-sized box in transit across the very ocean from which she was removed and then to a pool no deeper than she is long. Iovino and Opperman posit that “what lies behind the nodes of the ecological crisis—pollutions, mass extinction, poverty, enslavement of humans and animals, and many other forms of oppression—are tangles of natures and cultures that can be unraveled only by interpreting them as narratives about the way humans and their agentic partners intersect in the making of the world” (Iovino and Opperman, 2011, p. 6). The ecological and humanitarian crisis of containing large intelligent mammals like cetaceans has its roots in the nineteenth-century aquarium (a very different cultural construction in Britain than in America), and can be “untangled” only through an interdisciplinary understanding which also involves the “narratives” Iovino and Opperman propose.

These narratives indeed “[make] the world,” and I have attempted to bring the narrative of the first Westminster whale to bear upon our contemporary relationship to its figurative descendants in captivity today. Though there were once as many as thirty six dolphinarium and live cetacean shows in the United Kingdom the last closed in 1993 after

⁶ Writes Erroll Sherson in *London’s Lost Theatres of the Nineteenth Century*: “The Royal Aquarium, in short, was intended to be a sort of Crystal Palace in London within easy reach of Charing Cross, a covered-in promenade for the wet weather, with the glass cases of live fish thrown in. In truth, the attractions of the place soon began to be very ‘fishy’ indeed.”

new legislation which did not ban cetacean captivity but required prohibitively expensive expansions to existing tanks.⁷ There are currently, in 2018, over three thousand whales and dolphins in captivity worldwide. In March 2016, under mounting pressure from animal welfare groups, SeaWorld agreed to phase out its orca shows (San Diego in 2017, Orlando and San Antonio in 2019). The Georgia Aquarium has agreed not to remove any more whales or dolphins from the wild (after an unsuccessful legal challenge to import eighteen belugas from Russia), though it has no plans to end captive breeding. The Vancouver Aquarium has announced that it will no longer display captive cetaceans, though the recent death of its two beluga whales has left the aquarium with just one white-sided dolphin called Helen. SeaWorld's last captive orca birth—a calf called Kyara—was born at the San Antonio park in April 2017, but died of pneumonia in July, just like the first beluga at Westminster (and the infamous Tillikum, who killed trainer Dawn Brancheau in 2010). And though SeaWorld has ceased its captive breeding orcas, the parks will continue breeding belugas and dolphins; a baby beluga (the same species as the Westminster whales) born July 2017 at SeaWorld Orland died just moments after birth. We have perhaps learned less than we thought in the hundred and forty years since The Great Farini engaged his first “liliputian leviathan.”

⁷ See *Dolphinaria: Report of the Steering Committee*, prepared for the Department of the Environment (now DEFRA), Crown copyright (1988), which is based on Klinowiska and Brown's “A Review of Dolphinaria” (1985). The Department of Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs's stance was confirmed in a 2007 House of Commons debate by the DEFRA Secretary: “It is not illegal to keep cetaceans in this country, the Zoo Licensing Act 1981 (as amended) aims to ensure that, should cetaceans be kept at an establishment for exhibition to the public, the establishment is licensed and the animals kept in accordance with strict standards relating to their health and welfare requirements.” (“Cetaceans.” Unpublished debates, House of Commons, 8 May 2007, Column 31W-21W.)

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