

# Undrowned: Black feminist lessons from marine mammals

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Why we need to learn to listen, breathe and remember, across species, across extinctions and across harm.

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## A guide to undrowning

What is the scale of breathing?

You put your hand on your individual chest as it rises and falters all day. But is that the scale of breathing? You share air and chemical exchange with everyone you pass by today.

Is the scale of breathing within one species? All animals participate in this exchange of release for continued life. But not without the plants. The plants, in their inverse process, release what we need, take what we give without being asked. And the planet, wrapped in ocean breathing, breathing into sky.

And if the scale of breathing is collective, beyond species and sentience, so is the impact of drowning - I am thinking of the massive drowning yet unfinished where the distance of the ocean meant that people could become property, that life could be for sale. I am talking about the middle passage and everyone who drowned and everyone who continued breathing.

But I am troubling the distinction between the two. I am saying that those

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who survived in the underbellies of boats, under each other under unbreathable circumstances, are the undrowned, and their breathing is not separate from the drowning of their kin and fellow captives, their breathing is not separate from the breathing of the ocean, their breathing is not separate from the sharp exhale of hunted whales, their kindred also. Their breathing did not make them individual survivors. It made a context. The context of undrowning.

Breathing in unbreathable circumstances is what we do every day in the chokehold of racial gendered ableist capitalism. We are still undrowning. And by we, I don't only mean people like myself whose ancestors specifically survived the middle passage, because the scale of our breathing is planetary, at the very least.

These meditations are an offering towards our evolution, towards the possibility that instead of continuing the trajectory of slavery, entrapment, separation and domination, and making our atmosphere unbreathable, we might instead practise another way to breathe.<sup>1</sup> I don't know what that will look like, but I do know that our marine mammal kindred are amazing at not drowning. So I call on them as teachers, mentors, guides.

## Identifications

If you happen to be in the ocean and you see someone breathing, what do you do? If you see someone like you, a mammal, but unlike you - not bound by boats and masks and land - you might wonder who they are, what they are doing, how they do it.

And in that case you would need a guidebook. The most available guide books around right now are the *National Audubon Society Guide to Marine Mammals of the World* and the *Smithsonian Handbook: Whales, Dolphins & Porpoises*. They summarise the available scientific information on the habitats, habits and appearances of all the animals they have tracked so you can identify a mammal, and later, when you get out of the ocean, tell someone who you saw.

I identify as a mammal. I identify as a Black woman ascending with and shaped by a whole group of people who were transubstantiated into property and kidnapped across an ocean. And, like many of us, I am simply attracted to the wonder of marine life. And so I went to the aquarium and bought both of those guidebooks hoping to learn about my kin.

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What I found was languages of deviance and denigration (for example, the term ‘vagrant juveniles’, used to describe hooded seals), awkwardly binary assignments of biological sex, and a strange criminalisation of mammals that escaped the gaze of biologists - these were showing up in what would call itself the ‘neutral’ scientific language of marine guidebooks. I just wanted to know which whale was which, but I found myself confronted with the colonial, racist, sexist, hetero-patriarchalising capitalist constructs that are trying to kill me - the net I am already caught in, so to speak.

At the same time, as I learned more about marine mammals, I learned to look between the loopholes of language, using the poetic practices I have had to use to find and love myself in a world that misnames me daily. And I felt so much love and humility. I felt so much awe and possibility. I had to show you what I was learning about marine mammals, from and despite the guidebooks, through my own further research, afro-futuristic speculation, and what was happening to my heart.

Instead of simply identifying what was what, I had to go deeper. I took my cue from the many marine mammals who echolocate. I had to focus not on what I could see and discern, but instead on where I was in relation, how the sound bouncing off me in relationship to the structures and environments that surround me locates me in a constantly shifting relationship to you, whoever you are by now.

My explorations of undrowning listen to marine mammals specifically as a form of life that has much to teach us about the vulnerability, collaboration and adaptation we need in order to be with change at this time, especially since one of the major changes we are living through, causing and shaping in this climate crisis is the rising of the ocean. If there was ever a time to humbly submit to the mentorship of marine mammals it is now. I am in the midst of a process I call *Marine Mammal Apprenticeship*.

And in order to have space for the relationship to the learning and unlearning that is necessary for me in this process, I have to do some work to disrupt the violent colonising languages of almost all the texts in which I have accessed information about marine mammals and their lives, and families and super-powers and struggles.

The entries in the guidebooks mimic and perform the cadences of objectivity. Yet scientists - especially those people who have designed their entire lives around

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the hope, the possibility, that they will encounter a marine mammal, and who have taken extreme measures (like moving to Antarctica) in order to increase the likelihood that they will see some particular marine being - cannot be unmoved. They are clearly obsessed, and most likely, like me, in love. Whether they can admit it in their publications or not.<sup>2</sup>

My hope here is to move from identification - also known as that process through which we say what is what, like which dolphin is that over there and what are its properties - to *identification*, that process through which we expand our empathy, and the boundaries of who we are become more fluid, because we *identify with* the experience of someone different, maybe someone of a whole different so-called species. This is a tricky task because I'm vulnerable, not only to the messiness of my emotions, but also to the possibility of just projecting onto a whole set of beings who can't verbally protest my projections. And though the systems of oppression that harm me also harm advanced marine mammals (I am a beginner marine mammal very early in my journey), we are not having the same experience. In other words, I am not trying to garner sympathy for marine mammals because they are so much like us (though we do have things in common). Instead, the intimacy, the intentional ambiguity about who is who, speaking to whom and when, is about undoing a definition of the human, which is so tangled in separation and domination that it is consistently making our lives incompatible with the planet.

My task here, as a marine mammal apprentice, opening myself to guidance from these advanced marine mammals, is to identify *with*. To see what happens when I rethink and re-feel my own relations, possibilities and practices, inspired by the relations, possibilities and practices of advanced marine mammal life. And I can't help but notice how marine mammals are queer, fierce, protective of each other, complex, shaped by conflict, and struggling to survive the extractive and militarised context our species has imposed on the ocean and ourselves.

Instead of proposing a specific agenda or a predetermined set of instructions, these meditations open up space for wondering together and asking questions towards a depth of engagement that is still emerging.

The word 'Black' is capitalised throughout this text. Thanks to the work of Black writers and editors over decades the convention is that usually the word Black is capitalised when it refers to Black people and lower-case when it refers to Black as a colour or adjective. But Blackness is more expansive than the human. And there is

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no symbolic or descriptive reference to the term Black in this society that does not also impact Black lives. So Black is Black.

## listen

How can we listen across species, across extinction, across harm? How does echolocation, the practice many marine mammals use to navigate the world through bouncing sounds, change our understandings of 'vision' and visionary action? Is social media already a technology of bounce, of throwing something out there and seeing what comes back?

This is where we start our trans-species communion, opening a space to uplift the practice of listening even more than the practices of showing and proving and speaking up. Listening is not only about the normative ability to hear, it is a transformative and revolutionary resource that requires quieting down and tuning in.

Once upon a time there was a giant sea mammal, who weighed up to twenty-three tons, swimming in the Bering Sea. In 1741, a German naturalist 'discovered' *Hydrodamalis gigas* swimming large and luxe, at least three times bigger than the contemporary manatee. Within twenty-seven years, the entire species was extinct, killed on thousands of European voyages for fur and sealskin.

So she knows what we know. It is dangerous to be discovered.

Twenty-seven years is such a short time. How do we mourn and survive the violence of being known? How does capitalism so quickly destroy what took billions of years to evolve? What do we know about this subungulate mammal, related to elephants and aardvarks?

She had blubber and was hunted for it. They say she couldn't sing. The only sound was her breathing, but she could hear for miles and miles and miles. What a loss for listening. How can we honour it, the archive of your breathing?

Those twenty-seven years were like a gold rush, fuelled by the desires of fashionable Europeans for fur hats and coats. A fashion trend sparked by colonising North America: a supposedly endless supply of fur.

They were on their way to get sealskin and fur. They would kill you and eat you during the journey there. Your extinction - the first known extinction of a marine mammal caused by humans - was collateral in the pursuit of other deaths.

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Oh you rough mermaid, what are you teaching us about breath? Oh massive vegetarian, what do we do now that our listening is that much smaller? I think you are more than evidence of the deadliness of a world in which skin is for sale at a premium. I think you are more than another testament of the stark implications of European voyaging. More than an indictment of the rush. More than the folly of a dominant way of living that changes the planet, quickly, thoughtlessly, forever. More than the deadliness of an insatiable hunger born of chasing things other than sustenance. That hunger outlived you. I feel it chasing me too.

What can I do to honour you, now that it is too late?

I would honour you with the roughness of my skin, the thickness of my boundaries, the warmth of my own fat. I would honour you with my quiet and my breathing, my listening further and further out and in. I would honour you with the slowness of my movement, contemplative and graceful.

I would try to be like you even though they say it's out of fashion. I will remember you. Not by the name (written in the possessive) of the one they say 'discovered' you after generations of Indigenous relationship. I will say *once upon a time there was a huge and quiet swimmer, a plant-based rough-skinned listener, a fat and graceful mammal*. And then I will be quiet, so I can hear you breathing. And then I will be breathing and you'll remind me, do not rush. And the time in me will hush. And then we will be listening for real.

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In the past twenty years, bioacoustic scientists have spent a lot of time listening to different populations of Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins. These dolphins, like most dolphins, know something about intentional sound. About when to use high frequencies to find out where they are, and when to use low frequencies to reach you across this increasing ambient noise. Echolocation and communication overlap but they also diverge. Sometimes the sounds I make are about measuring my surroundings. Sometimes there is something I need to tell you. Usually it's both. Dolphins use the fat in their foreheads to modulate their biosonar listening, which sounds about as elegant as what I do with you.

Sometimes I feel like I'm communicating with you underwater. The impact of what I say outlives what I learned by saying it. And the ambient noise grows louder and the ocean is heating up and I need you to know where the bottom is, what will

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feed us, how close are the sharks. Sometimes my best guess echoes back to me like a slap in the face and I remember I know nothing. This fat forehead needs you and all your guesses too in this dynamic space.

Which is to say I am humbly listening and I am learning to take responsibility for my frequencies. I can lower them to reach you. I can reflect before I speak out. Echolocation is not the same as mind-reading. Some of this magic is just the complexity of being a mammal alive in sound. I can hear what I cannot see yet. I can make a whole world of resonance.

And live in it. Swim through it. Reflecting you. Whistle, click if you can feel that I am here.

## **breathe**

Breath is a practice of presence. One of the physical characteristics that unites us with marine mammals is that they process air in a way similar to us. Though they spend most or all of their time in water, they do not have gills. We, too, on land, are often navigating contexts that seem impossible for us to breathe in, and yet we must. The adaptations that marine mammals have made in relationship to breathing are some of the most relevant for us to observe, not only in relationship to our survival in an atmosphere we have polluted on a planet where we are causing the ocean to rise, but also in relationship to our intentional living, our mindful relation to each other.

There is more than one way to breathe in the Arctic. Ask the narwhal, beluga and bowhead whales. Beluga shapeshifts, evolved to look like ice itself, and congregates in the shallow estuaries, singing. Narwhal stays in deeper water, nearer to pack ice, grows a horn to break through, changes colour over its life. Needs no other teeth. Just the one. Bowhead says bigger is better and moves alone. Strong enough to break ice with a bare skull, old enough to remember before all of this. Never stops growing.

And you? Maybe it's time to remember that there is more than one way to breathe in icy depths or summer heat. To thank your ancestors for how you have evolved in the presence of polar bears, harpoons and other threats. To think on what you want to shift, how you want to grow, what you need to remember.

And me? It was always you I loved, not your elegant strategy. I will love you

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still, if you now outgrow it. I will love you more whether time moves forward or backwards. Whether ice melts or water freezes back. Whether your next move is protection, breakthrough, shift, or any combination. There are at least three ways to love you: as you were, as you are, as you will be. I love you. That means I choose all three.

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The baby Weddell seal has not grown into her flippers. She is awkward. She does not want to swim. She does not know she can breathe underwater. No one has told her about the great oxygenating capacity of her blood. She doesn't know that the milk her mother gives her is some of the fat-richest milk in the world. Southernmost mammal on the planet, she doesn't know the depths of which she is capable. But her mother does.

The mother Weddell seal will push her baby into the water against her will. She will force her child's head into the water while the baby coughs and sputters and struggles and squirms. She is new here. She does not know that she can breathe underwater. Until she does. And then everything changes. By the time weaning is over she will be able to dive 2,500 feet below the water. Stay there for an hour if she wants to. Find a tiny hole she made for air after swimming twelve kilometres away. Move gracefully between frozen and liquid worlds. But she doesn't know.

Am I the only one here in a lesson, a coughing sputtering thrash, a struggle to stay who I thought I was, ignorant to what evolution has already written inside me? I feel out of my depth, but really, how would I know?

The tough love of the Weddell seal mother teaches a lesson about the difference between what is cute and what is necessary. What has been and what could be. And I am grateful for all of my mothers, biological, chosen and ancestral, mammal and otherwise (like the copperhead snake who greeted me last night), who would shock me into knowing my capacity, trusting my lungs more than I thought I could. To breathe in ways I haven't breathed before. To learn my blood in ways I didn't know it.

As the Weddell seal grows she will shed her fur, become sleek. She will feel completely at home in the ocean she avoided. She will see and feel things no other mammal has felt. But right now she is coughing and spitting and clinging to what



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she has known. She feels like she is drowning, but she's just meeting herself again for the first time.

Love to all my parents and the push of the universe for laughing at me. Thank you to those of you who have pushed through portals already, even out of this life. We can move between worlds. Thank you for those of you living and evolving, the vulnerability of your newness is an example to us all. Thank you to those who hold me accountable, who expect me to be who I need to become. Thank you for ignoring the lies I tell myself about myself. Even in my resistance I am grateful for you all. For the love you are teaching me, deep, Black, and full. For the nurturance, push, and example. What you learned by facing your own death. What you learned in your drowning is my breath.<sup>3</sup>

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The second I set foot on the beach at Bridgehampton, a whale surfaced and exhaled. From where I stood, on occupied sacred Shinnecock land, I couldn't see whether it was a fin whale or a humpback whale, but in my heart I thought maybe, just maybe, it was a North Atlantic right whale. The right whale, the rarest whale in the ocean, hunted nearly into extinction to (literally) fuel the colonial project. Blubber and light. Used to be a right whale could breathe for a century. Now that never happens. They rarely live five years without scars from boat propellers, rope wounds from tangled commerce.

And it's not necessary. Boats could shift or slow their paths quite easily. You know what is necessary? Breath. Theirs more so than ours, truth be told. Yesterday I learned that the breathing of whales is as crucial to our own breathing and the carbon cycle of the planet as are the forests of the world.

Researchers say, if whales returned to their pre-commercial whaling numbers, their gigantic breathing would store as much carbon as 110,000 hectares of forest, or a forest the size of Rocky Mountain National Park.

The Shinnecock, now and since forever, including some of my ancestors, are in sacred relationship with the North Atlantic right whale. A listening that spans centuries. Once the beaching of a right whale was an offering to the whole community. Nourishment and light. Shelter and warmth.

I remember what you gave us which is everything. Light, home, and each other.

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Love, warmth, and ourselves. If I breathe, I sing your name. I can only breathe because of you. Do you have a century more of breath? And if not, what do I have?

Home is light but loss is heavy. And I cannot live without you. Why would I want to live without you? Steward of centuries, transformer of air, I ever await your message and assignment. In debt and gratitude, in trust and tide. I see you. I hear you. I know. I dedicate my breathing to the depth you taught. Are teaching.

## **remember**

What do we remember and what do we forget? How do we name and categorise what we can barely observe, for what purpose, with what results? For example, there is only one marine mammal that the dominant scientific community calls by their Indigenous name. There are supposedly impossible hybrid dolphins along the route of the triangular transatlantic traffic trail of captive human cargo that defy species.

Once upon a time, I thought the name 'Amazon' belonged to Black lesbians. Then I learned that the Amazon was a specific place storied around the world by colonisers who were afraid of the fierceness of the people who would not conform to their ideas about gender and land. I continued to rejoice. And to identify. As of this writing, the giant retailer that doesn't even have to be named may be about to win a lawsuit for the domain name 'amazon'. A lawsuit against the rainforest itself. The whole geographic region. Wasn't it only in 2018 that Colombia acknowledged that a rainforest has rights?

And guess what, the only dolphin - and, I believe, the only marine mammal at all - who has managed to keep her Indigenous given name lives in the Amazon. Tuxuci, named in the Tupi language, has kept her name through all this colonisation, while most other marine mammals are named after a coloniser at worst and hailed by a bland western description at best. It's a miracle. We say her name.

This is my prayer. May anyone who seeks to mention you be called to learn the language of those who first loved you. May you study the pink of yourself. Know yourself riverine and coast. May you taste the fresh and the saltwater of your self and know what only you can know. May you live in the mouth of the river, meeting place of the tides, may all blessings flow through you.

I love you impossible dolphin, quietest in the river, breathing close to the surface. I'm grateful for what you remember even if you never say. And I'm keeping

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your name in my mouth like a river internal, like this love ever flowing. I am keeping your name in my mouth every day. All day.<sup>4</sup>

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In 2016, reports circulated with evidence that dolphin mothers sing to their babies while they are in the womb, and for a few weeks after so they can learn their names. Not only that, but according to the report, the rest of the pod holds space for that learning, quieting their other usual sounds so this can happen.<sup>5</sup> As a person whose mother sang and talked to me before I was born, it resonates. This is something that it would feel so good to generalise. As mammals, it would satisfy a deep longing to be part of a practice of mother-child singing, community listening. Held. Named. Held.

Deep diving, as I often do, I learned that the observations leading to this insight about mother/baby womb singing were observed in a specific context. Captivity. A mother dolphin who gave birth at Six Flags Discovery Kingdom. From the pictures I would say a bottlenose dolphin, but even the website doesn't name the species. It matters to me that this practice of singing, communal listening, was observed not in the open ocean but in the confines of captive dolphin birth.

I think of Debbie Africa, who gave birth secretly in prison, how the other women prisoners used sounds to shield her birth process. They protected the two of them from guards so that she and the baby were able to share precious time together, undetected for days. I think of Assata Shakur too, impossibly conceiving and giving birth to her daughter while a political prisoner, mostly in solitary confinement. And how she listened to her angry daughter, and the dreams of her grandmother when they told her she could be free. They could be together. And a community of freedom fighters made the demand and the dream real.

I think of captive birth, which is an everyday occurrence in the United States of America. In the US, the state shackles prisoners giving birth, and takes children away from prisoners almost immediately. What do they sing in the time of the womb? I think of the children of asylum seekers separated from their parents in cages at the border. How does a chorus of grief and loss evolve to share crucial information? How are the over five million US children with parents in prison, the uncounted children in cages at the border, held? Named?

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And I think about you and what you remember. What you keep close for as long as you can. I think about repetition and code, and when we prioritise what communication and why. And how we ever learn our names in this mess. And the need that makes us generalise and identify. Become specific and vague. I think about the dolphin mother and what she needed to say. Her own name, in her own way. And what else under strict observation?

If it was me. If it was you. I would say this in the way I could say it, in the too short time, in the high-pitched emergence. Remember this feeling, there is something called love. I would say remember, there is something called freedom, even if you can't see it. There is me calling you, in a world I don't control. There is something called freedom, and you know how to call it. Even here in the holding pattern, here in the hold, remember, remember. You are. You are held. Named.

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Have you heard about Clymene - a dolphin at the forefront of the minds of marine biologists studying hybridity? Who is she? A dolphin who escaped the record, only identified as a species in 1981. Mistranscribed when Europeans first identified her in the 1800s and then dismissed as a false identification. What is her range? The shape and trajectory of the transatlantic slave trade, West Africa to the Caribbean and North and South America. Height? About the height of a stolen person. Weight? About the weight of a stolen person. The Clymene dolphin moves in revolutions like a spinner dolphin. She has a Black cape like a striped dolphin.

Where did she come from? Her origins are elusive. Genetic testing of her skin found that, depending on how they approached the research, they got different results. When they did nuclear genetic testing, it seemed the Clymene dolphin was more closely related to the spinner dolphin, but when they tested the mitochondrial DNA (tracing only the maternal line), they found Clymene was more closely related to the striped dolphin.

The theory now is that she's both. The Clymene dolphin is a hybrid of the spinner and the striped dolphin and therefore may be the most recent dolphin to evolve into existence. And while usually a hybrid form would have to be isolated from the parent species to retain its distinct features, Clymene has somehow done this while swimming all the time in pods with Striped and Spinner dolphins, but giving birth as Clymene over and over again. Her revolutions. Her Black cape.

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Sometimes you need both. Her corkscrew turns, her Black lips, spinning from West Africa to the New World, hidden in plain sight for centuries.

My grandfather once told me he identified with Atlas, son of the mythical Oceanid Clymene. Sky on his shoulders. Burdened. Strong. The other young people in Anguilla used to call him 'World', and maybe that's the riddle. If Atlas stood at the edge of the world and held up the heavens so the Earth wouldn't break, what did my grandfather find at the edge of himself that was so heavy or heavenly or starred? What did he learn from his mother, grandchild of shipwreck, about the edge of the world or the end? Here, on a particular edge of the Caribbean Sea, a curve in Anguilla they call Rendezvous Bay, ancient site of transient Arawak ceremony, stewarded this half century by my family of origin sometimes with grace, my grandfather taught me to float on my back.

He said look at the sky. This is where I still come to look for him. That sky is where I see him in my dreams. I am still learning to trust that something can hold me. My default mode is burdened strength. How strong do we have to be? Does it have to do with how traceable our origins are?

Sometimes I need both to be strong and to be held. My own mysterious strength of quantum genetics, of cape and revolution, of spin and stripe. What if it is the world being the world that makes the sky the sky? What if the sky rushed in all directions to meet us here, connect us to everywhere? What if the ocean has my back? Could I trust that?

And who are you really, transatlantic Clymene? And what did you birth at the end of the world in the tempest of slavery off the side of the boat, what is your magic of spinning and cape, your consistent unheard of revolution of genes. Your journey accompanied and cloaked.

What did you find at the edge of yourself? Oh. Yes. Now I see it. The sky.

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What struck me first was this sentence: 'Several of the captives have gained renown as quick learners and creative performers'. They were talking about the oceanarium lives of the slope headed dolphins with the ridged teeth (*Steno bredanensis*), but I thought they were talking about you. And me.

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And all of our brilliant friends who have had to learn so fast, perform so creatively here in our captivity. I kept reading. 'At Sea Life Park in Hawaii, a Rough toothed Dolphin mother and a Common Bottlenose Dolphin father produced a calf that lived for four years.' The life span of this dolphin should be thirty-two years. What happened?

I researched Sea Life Park, which celebrates its hybrids. They advertise on their website right now that you can swim with a 'wholphin'. Say they teach children about genetics with a special creature who is part bottlenose part false killer whale, or was it melon headed whale, or was it ...? 140 dolphins have died in captivity at Sea Life Park. The ones who are hybrids are marked as 'UNSPECIFIED DOLPHIN OR PORPOISE' in all capital letters like that. Also none of their causes of death are listed definitively. But I dug and I dug as if morbidly compelled and I found the hybrid calf who lived four years. And according to this death record, she had no name but 'HYBRID STENO MAMO' in all capital letters like that.

There is a 1974 article in the *Journal of Mammalogy* about this captive dolphin and her tragic story.<sup>6</sup> Her mother was born in the open ocean and captured in 1969, while pregnant. Shortly after arriving at Sea Life, newly captive, she had a miscarriage. What did they name her? Makalani, the eye of heaven. God is watching. At the time she became pregnant again, she was captive in a tank with two male bottlenose dolphins. The article does not characterise this as a breeding scheme, more like an aquatic housing crisis, but who knows. Three months before she gave birth, they placed her in a different tank with two female dolphins of her same species. If this dolphin lived, she would not only be a hybrid of two different dolphin species, but what scientists also had defined as two different dolphin families.

A big deal. A small dolphin. Female, showing signs of both species, swimming clockwise around her mother perpetually. The other female dolphins with her helped the mother release her umbilical cord. As a mother, Makalani was protective. Slapped a trainer who tried to move the young dolphin. The scientists looked on and referred to the newborn based on her talent for following her mother. They called her a 'precocious youngster'. When the scientists concluded their several months of observation they felt all signs were good. The dolphin was smart and well and protected. One day she would be a star performer at Sea Life Park. In their article, they proposed that maybe she was proof that those two

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different dolphin families weren't different families after all. What a victory for dolphin unity, conservation, education! This article is cited again and again in studies on dolphin hybridity.

But according to the death records this same precocious youngster died in 1975 at four years of age. Was Mamo her name? Her cause of death is left completely blank. The other causes of death at Sea Life are disturbing when listed: food poisoning, malnutrition, brain haemorrhages, multiple still births, killed by another dolphin. But they don't list the cause of death for this dolphin at all. What would be incriminating enough for this facility to refuse to mention? It leaves us to fabrication. The death records say Makalani died two years earlier. Was it the loss of her mother at two years old that did it? Did they separate the dolphins, try to breed the mother again? Were Makalani's actions against trainers in protection of her child too disruptive for the Sea Life way of living? Was it a housing problem, a feeding problem, an unanticipated function of being a dolphin that had never before existed in captivity?

Keiko Conservation, the organisation that re-published the death records online, says that Sea Life Park should be shut down.<sup>7</sup> The Sea Life Park website says you can swim with dolphin hybrids and eat a meal with your family at an authentic nightly luau today if you want.<sup>8</sup> They don't say anything about a once famous hybrid who lived to be only four. They don't say anything about her mother who died four years after capture. Nothing on their website either about the dozens of spinner dolphins, bottlenoses, sea lions, seals, who have died in their care over their forty-year existence. Some scientists, those who depend on dolphin and whale captivity for their research, protest the use of what they call biased terms like 'emotional', 'majestic', 'children', 'solitary confinement', in documents about marine mammals in captivity.<sup>9</sup> Because you might think of these animals as people - you know, as parents, as prisoners, as relatives, as friends.

Would that be wrong? I am related to all marine mammals. I am related to all those in captivity. I am writing this in honour of my great grandmother Edith, who was not the only woman in our lineage to die captive in an asylum. They say she died of a broken heart after the death of her young son, my great-uncle, a disabled child who I never heard of until I found his name on an old census report and asked a question. He died in captivity too, after great grandma Edith succumbed to pressure from her community and especially my great grandfather (after whom little

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John Gibbs was named) to place him in an institution. He died there. In captivity. Within the first twenty-four hours. I have not heard the cause of his death in there.

Captives learn quick, perform creatively, or else. I am writing this for great grandmother Edith. The artist. Eye of heaven. In honour of what she knew even if she couldn't act on it. I am honouring her as who she is. Creator of the universe, source of all love. Thwarted protector of a child like no one had seen before. Her love never ended. Her love lives right now. Here in my breathing. I would swim around her clockwise. I would show her how her love survived all of this time, in the quick learning creatives who scream here in captivity.

I am circling and circling her name. I am writing this for great uncle John Gibbs, the forgotten. The reclaimed. The proof that what they said family was, was not family. With a witness that it is not too late to create structures of care that honour his existence. To unlearn the hiding and the shame.

What I need to say is, you are. The walls around your life, the silence around your death, and the language, all work to erase you and remove you from me, but they are not stronger than my grief, because my grief is fuelled by love and I claim you. And I've come back for all the names I've never known since you were stolen. And I am never far away from you in fact. I am creator and creation. Right here, the source of all love ever. I strike away the lies about you with my lungs and tears, my circles and slaps. Eye of heaven. You are watching.

And I don't know everything, but yet, I know.<sup>10</sup>

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Sometimes you will see an ocean dolphin in the river. One day standing on a dock in the Combahee River, looking for Harriet Tubman on the 149th anniversary of her successful uprising, my partner Sangodare and I saw three Atlantic bottlenose dolphins. Message received. A year later, we returned as twenty-one Black feminists to honour the 150th anniversary of the Combahee River raid together, at the Mobile Homecoming project's Combahee Pilgrimage.

Decades earlier, my grandmother Lydia Gumbs got a message from some Atlantic bottlenose dolphins too, they inspired her design of the revolutionary flag, seal and insignia of Anguilla: three bottlenose dolphins swimming in a circle. She coloured the dolphins orange to represent endurance. The circle represented continuity. And



# Soundings

though the revolution was short-lived, our listening continues. My sister has this symbol as a tattoo. It lives on as the major logo and symbol of Anguilla to this day.

And that day at the Combahee River I was wearing my grandmother's turquoise necklace. The sun was setting and the dolphins did indeed look orange as they swam in a circle under the Harriet Tubman Bridge and went back out to sea.

Bottlenose message. Speaking across revolutions.

I wonder what it means for an ocean dolphin to swim up a river. The bottlenose has a range across the whole planet, the whole open ocean, and yet sometimes they will choose the boundaries and specific city of a river, brackish water, narrow shores. Why?

The message for me today is about a specific city. About choosing a lane with all my infinite potential. About how my world-travelling grandmother made a commitment to a small island. About how strong we grow sometimes, swimming upstream. About what the world can learn from the visibility of our message in a context that is specific enough to ring clear.

And to trust that all water touches all water everywhere. And for all of you, ocean dolphins, wondering 'What am I doing in this river full of mud?' Remember why Harriet Tubman went south. She didn't have to. She was skilled, untraceable. She could have been individually free. Unencumbered. But if she wanted to tell an everlasting truth about freedom that would ring across the planet, a message for the ages, she had to live free in unfree space. It was the only way to bring us all with her.

Thank you, my loves, for the bravery of your freedom in spaces of clear limitation. In spaces of muddy reality. Thank you for your decisions to do not what you could do, but what you must. Thank you for teaching the difference between privilege and courage. Escape and transcendence. Reaction and revolution. Your endurance inscribes an eternal alternative, carried by bottles and bottlenoses, blood and breath.

Message honoured. Message received.

## About Alexis Pauline Gumbs

All of my formal education and most of my mentorships have been squarely in the arena of queer Black feminism. My poetic academic works - *Spill: Scenes of Black*

# Undrowned

*Feminist Fugitivity*, *M Archive: After the End of the World*, and *Dub: Finding Ceremony* - bring the work of Black feminist theorists into the accessible (but still complicated and mysterious) realms of community memory, visionary futures and ancestral listening. My movement writing, most notably *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines* (PM Press, 2016), which I co-edited alongside Mai'a Williams and China Martens, also draws on archives of Black feminist practice to nourish the bravery we need right now. My participation in movement work is accountable to Black queer visionaries in the US South and beyond, and I am committed to creating counter-institutions that facilitate Black feminist presence across time and space. For more information see [alexispauline.com](http://alexispauline.com).

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## Notes

1. This article is an edited version of extracts from my book *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, AK Press 2021 (part of the Emergent Strategy series): <https://www.charisbooksandmore.com/book/9781849353977>.
2. I recently facilitated a writing workshop with scientists at Cal Tech, inviting them to put themselves, their passions, and their relationships back into their writing about their research topics - and I would love to do this again. Scientists, let's collaborate!
3. #docjosephriseinpower.
4. #mariellepresente.
5. See many articles, including Stephanie Pappas, 'Mama Dolphins Sing to their Babies in the Womb' in *LiveScience*, 9 August 2016: [www.livescience.com/55699-mother-dolphins-teach-babies-signature-whistle.html](http://www.livescience.com/55699-mother-dolphins-teach-babies-signature-whistle.html).
6. Thomas P. Dohl, Kenneth S. Norris and Ingrid Kang, *Journal of Mammalogy* 55, No 1, February 1974, pp217-22.
7. <https://www.keikoconservation.org/blog/kamoanas-death-marks-140-dolphins-that-have-died-in-sea-life-parks-care>.
8. <https://www.sealifeparkhawaii.com/>.
9. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/animal-emotions/201907/orcas-are-majestic-emotional-beings-who-have-children>.
10. #nomorebackrooms #disabilityjusticenow #freeallmammals #abolitionnow.