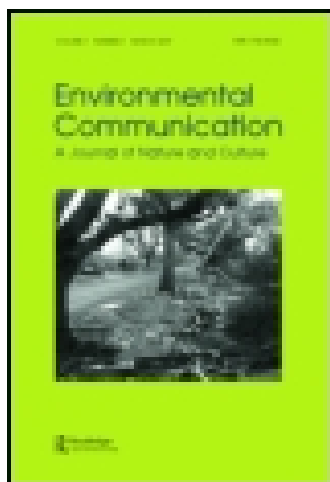


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Environmental Communication

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/renc20>

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Published online: 04 Mar 2015.



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**To cite this article:** Tema Milstein (2015): The Performer Metaphor: “Mother Nature Never Gives Us the Same Show Twice”, Environmental Communication

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2015.1018295>

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# The Performer Metaphor: “Mother Nature Never Gives Us the Same Show Twice”

Tema Milstein

*This study ethnographically identifies and examines a common-sense performer metaphor entangled within deep-rooted Western ecocultural conceptions, in which humans are perceived as separate from and audience to a spectacular nature. I illustrate the cultural cohesiveness of the performer metaphor in a Western nature tourism setting to draw attention to the term’s pervasiveness, its network of metaphoric entailments, and its generally unreflected upon meaning and reverberations. I examine struggles in using alternative metaphors and demonstrate ways the performer metaphor mediates processes of involvement with/in nature.*

**Keywords:** *ecoculture; discourse; performance; tourism; wildlife; SeaWorld*

“Wow, that cactus is really showing off,” my father says as we walk by a brightly flowering cholla in the Southwest USA. In Seattle, Washington, people gather at a hilltop park to watch a famed comet fly overhead, exclaiming, “What a show!” At a North American zoo, a woman describes sea lions sliding their bodies across underwater windows in front of our faces. “It’s like they could see us. They were performing. Giving us a show. They were saying, ‘Look at those two-legged creatures. Let’s make them giggle.’”

The present study illuminates a core Western common-sense performer metaphor and examines ways the metaphor shapes and obscures perceptions and experiences with/in the more than human world. As expressions, metaphors do not literally denote that to which they refer; instead they call to mind a significant likeness. In this way, to convey meaning, metaphorical structures must be coherent with deep-rooted

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concepts in a culture. I argue the performer metaphor is in line with such ingrained Western ecocultural conceptions, in which humans are perceived as not merely separate from, but also audience to, nature.

The metaphor's profound cultural coherence can lead to its symbolic nature, and complexities, being overlooked. I draw attention to the performer metaphor's currency as a culturally available symbol for encounters with/in nature, its network of metaphoric entailments, and its generally unreflected and unremarked upon meaning. Here, I focus on Western use of the metaphor within an ethnographic case study—the highest concentration of whale tourism in the world, a transnational Western site largely revolving around endangered orcas.

In this site, the metaphor provided lexical mediation of the transensual and transpecies. In the space's dynamic materiality—ocean splashing, cetaceans exhaling, humans gasping—the metaphor became an aperture, a lens, through which material experience and processes of involvement were filtered. Though the performer metaphor (as with other forms of ecocultural discourse) may be just at an edge of experience, the metaphor and its entailments took a central role in mediating humanature<sup>1</sup> interaction, at once both connecting and separating in particular ways.

This analysis does not intend to deny a broad or profound range of lived meanings from Western speakers using the metaphor. Rather, the study allows for close examination of ways a prime ecoculturally coherent symbol is wrapped within unsustainable histories, ideologies, and economies that can mask such meanings. The examination also provides insight into ways the living world can unmask. In what follows, I contextualize the case study in environmental communication, ecolinguistic, and interdisciplinary theory and in methodological approach. I illustrate a range of performer metaphor uses, interpretations, and metaphoric entailments. I also examine struggles in using alternative metaphors for re-encountering anew. My hope is this case incites further study of the performer metaphor and its transfixing force in Western globalizing ecoculture.

### **The Performer Framework**

In arguing “our symbolic mediations are interested,” Cox (2007) claims representations of nature reflect a political economy of interests. How we name things is not only “a mode by which we socially construct and know the natural world, it indicates ‘an orientation’ and thus ‘influences our interaction with it’” (p. 13). Language is “interested” in that it not only represents a particular ideology but, in its dominant use, is in itself an ideology. Following this argument, the performer metaphor prefers certain ways of understanding immersive humanature moments, making it difficult to perceive or describe such moments differently.

Cox argues environmental communication as a discipline has an ethical premise, and its scholars a duty, to identify distortions or corruptions and recommend alternatives. This premise reflects the ecolinguistics field's mission to expose and question stories that underpin an unsustainable civilization and find stories that work better (Stibbe, 2013). “These are not stories in the traditional sense of a narrative,

however, but rather discourses, frames, metaphors and, in general, clusters of linguistic features that come together to convey particular worldviews” (p. 117). Ethnographic methodology allows for close grounded grapplings with discourses in everyday experience. Ethnographic case studies, Carbaugh (1996) argues, unravel ecocultural webs we weave by paying close attention to “highly particular, socially situated, symbolically constructed images in place” (p. 54). This study employs this ethically premised framework to investigate a “conventional metaphor” (Goatly, 2007), indicating a particular conformity in vocabulary and revealing a prevailing cultural paradigm.

Whereas this case study examines the performer metaphor in wild nature, ever present in framing of contemporary Western experience of the wild is the captive and fabricated. This is perhaps especially poignant with wild orcas. Davis (1997) and Desmond (1999) examine captive orcas’ central roles in SeaWorld performances, demonstrating how marine parks construct human–orca relations largely in nonfearful anthropomorphic ways. Davis specifically highlights ways marine parks characterize captive orcas both as a free and powerful wild that humans long to connect to and as a trademarked and fetishized commodity. Orca researcher Alexandra Morton (2002) identifies a transference of SeaWorld-style framings to wild orcas: “Years of Shamu shows have conditioned the public to think of killer whales as pool toys” (p. 190).

Desmond notes how many marine park trainer cues to orcas are nearly invisible, which enhances the appearance of a “playful relational discourse.” Instead of appearing command-based, coordinated actions, such as when a trainer stands on or dives from an orca, appear “to be the result of intuitive understanding” and represent an idealized “relationship of equals where the lines of power and their communication are washed over in the continuous aqueous flow of partnering” (p. 229). Spectacular acts are paired with trainers telling audiences, “Get your cameras ready!”

The cultural resonance of profitable exploitive efforts to “simultaneously sacralize and trivialize” captive cetaceans (Davis, 1997, p. 223) undulates through wild oceans. In their study of New Zealand cetacean tourism, Cloke and Perkins (2005) note a subjugation wherein wild whales and dolphins become blank figures whose “relational and performative capacities can become divorced from the specific agencies which they bring” (p. 920). Relatedly, in Australian cetacean tourism, Muhlhausler and Peace (2001) argue the industry employs a frame of pure entertainment and underlying metaphor of “the circus” that situates wild cetaceans as star performer and tour operators as ringmaster with phrases such as “just before your eyes,” “thrill,” “amazing spectacle,” and “breathtaking action” (p. 373). While the authors do not identify participants’ using the term “circus,” they describe the metaphor’s entailments, observing staff positioning tourists as audience through statements such as cetaceans “do not mind performing in front of you.” The present study, with its long-term ethnographic approach in a transnational US-Canada setting, helps pinpoint and richly interpret the normalizing potency of the Western performer metaphor, inclusive of “circus.” In doing so, I pay careful attention to ways

the metaphor scripts permission to bodies in humanature spaces to be and relate in specific ways (e.g., Waitt & Cook, 2007).

To better interpret the metaphor's connotative force, I also access frameworks of star studies, performance studies, and new materialism. Star studies (see Shingler, 2012) helps focus on the star role within the performer metaphor, drawing attention to star making fetishism, industry commercial star production, fan identification, and escapism and consumption practices. In addition, the field helps illustrate ways stars—in this case, nonhuman stars—can serve as “embodiments of ideological contradiction, through which social conflicts and crises are negotiated and resolved at a symbolic level” (p. 20).

In performance studies, Gray (2007) describes ways scholars and artists emphasize performance as “a cultural tool for intervening in sedimented conceptions of nature” (p. 250) by featuring process and dynamism over facts and objects. Conquergood (1995), viewing performance as a transgressive force, reviews notions of performance as action: “from [Victor] Turner's emphatic view of performance as making, not faking, we move to Bhabha's politically urgent view of performance as breaking and remaking” (p. 138). In contrast to artistic or scholarly performance processes, which require “a welcoming of adaptation and mutual change in relation to the natural world, and an openness to the emotive, sensual, and perceptual dimensions of natural-social relations” (Szerszanski et al., 2003, p. 11 quoted in Gray, 2007), pervasive everyday use of the performer metaphor may do very different work.

Looking at performing cultural memory in the Americas, Taylor (2003), writes of a shift during Spanish conquest, which took power previously given to embodied knowledge (repertoire) and consolidated it in written language (archive). This coerced transformation to archive worked to ensure power could be developed and enforced without input of the majority indigenous population and invalidated the repertoire's nonverbal performance practices (such as gesture, movement, dance, ritual) that had long served to preserve senses of communal knowledge, identity, and memory. With this change, events only became real in ways archived in hegemonic language structures, ways that obscured other possibilities. Phelan (2003) describes the ephemeral and present liveness of performance as antithetical to preserving, disciplining impulses of the archive. Though live performance and performance studies may revive the repertoire, everyday uses of the performer metaphor in Western talk may do work of the archive, sedimenting conceptions of nature and erecting hurdles to intervening or reimagining.

Barad's (2007a) new materialist approach is useful here to account “for the boundary-making practices by which ‘human’ and its others are differentially delineated and defined” (p. 136). Similar to ways environmental communication scholars have argued matter and meaning imbricate one another (Carbaugh, 2007; Cox, 2007; Milstein, 2008; Rogers, 1998), new materialism turns conventional communication research on its head by foregrounding corporeality and matter and questioning ways Westerners valorize what is viewed as immaterial and only in the

human domain, such as language, emotion, meaning, and values (Coole & Frost, 2010).

In calling for more attention to materiality, Barad understands Earthly performativity as iterative intra-activity, in which material-discursive practices are agentic and produce different configurations of the world. In this way, practices of knowing can be understood as emerging from differentiation among all aspects of nature and the “entanglements that the lifeblood of the world runs through” (p. 396). Relatedly, philosopher David Abram (1997) argues, though contemporary Western language and culture mentally absent humanity from an abstracted, immobilized nature through symbol use and forgetting or repressing sensuous involvement, within immediate experience, one senses reciprocity: “of tension, communication, and commingling. From within the depths of this encounter, we know the thing or phenomenon only as our interlocutor—as a dynamic presence that confronts us and draws us into relation” (p. 56). There is a raw vulnerability that arises in acknowledging corporeal openness to and interdependence with/in the living world. Alaimo (2009) has argued such transcorporeality could serve to foster a new environmental ethic.

### **Case Study: Nature Tourism**

Nature-based tourism, with its skyrocketing global popularity, is a key mediator of contemporary human relations with/in nature. With/in the ocean, this role is especially pronounced. Unlike terrestrial habitat, oceans offer no firm footing and require guides to venture forth. Humans are a transformative force here, even at a chemical compositional scale, but the fantasy continues of oceans as unaffected by us. In this shifting expanse, marine tourists, encapsulated on liminal boats and shores, actively seek out and attempt to make sense of relations with/in and as nature. Tourism provides infrastructure and translation for this sense-making, embedded in wider cultural framings and rendered in visceral human–nonhuman intersections that at times are “beyond words” (Milstein, 2008; Milstein & Kroløkke, 2012).

The present study centers upon ethnographic fieldwork along the Canada–US Pacific Coast during 2005 to 2014 whale tourism seasons. As a participant observer in the Salish Sea, my research platforms are tour boats, public shorelines, and a nonprofit tourism monitoring boat. Study participants are adults, largely European North Americans, in roles of tourists, tour operators, tour naturalists, marine monitors, whale researchers, policy-makers, whale advocates, and locals. Participant identifying features are minimized or changed to block identity. In addition to fieldnotes, analyzed texts include interviews, tourism marketing, and public educational texts.

Many species of fauna and flora enliven these waters. The big tourism draw, however, is an endangered group of three matriarchal pods of orcas called the Southern Resident Killer Whales (SRKW).<sup>2</sup> In the past 70 years, the SRKW have significantly transformed in Western consciousness from 1940s villainous blackfish shot at by commercial fishermen and used for target practice by the Royal Canadian Air Force, to 1960s and 1970s commodities captured to supply a succession of

SeaWorld's first "Shamus,"<sup>3</sup> to today's nature tourism icon and pulse of oceanic health as top oceanic predators.<sup>4</sup>

Canadian and US governments attribute SRKW endangered status<sup>5</sup> to three anthropogenic systemic risks that debilitate the population already sapped by earlier captures and killings: (1) human destruction of salmon (from overfishing, development, damming, and destruction of spawning rivers) creates dangerous scarcity of SRKW's main prey; (2) human point and nonpoint pollution bioaccumulates to deadly toxic waste levels (nursing mothers release pollutants to first-borns, who often die; with no pollutant release, male orcas often do not live past puberty, further obstructing reproductivity); and (3) increased human vessels (including container vessels, oil tankers, cruise ships, tour boats, private boats, small airplanes) stress orcas and amplify the other risks, making salmon hunting difficult and, in turn, increasing absorption of pollutants accumulated in blubber orcas must turn to for nutrients.<sup>6</sup>

Along the border, SRKW iconic status and tendency to swim close to shore supports a multi-million dollar tourism industry. Area tours began in the late 1970s, but boomed after the 1993 release of the movie *Free Willy*. By 1997, tour sales approached \$5.7 million, with 81 US and Canadian commercial boats carrying more than 250,000 passengers (Osborne, 1999). Since, tourist numbers have more than doubled. More than 500,000 people each year board approximately 100 tour boats in search of SRKW (Koski & Osborne, 2005). As with much nature tourism, the regional industry justifies existence with the tenet that exposing visitors to wild orcas and ecosystems creates an ever increasing concerned citizenry (Milstein, 2008) and best practice<sup>7</sup> tours strive to convey a holistic ecological understanding of the region.

### The Performer Metaphor

It is within these ecocultural contexts the persistent Western use of the performer metaphor entered my observations. Initially, I questioned whether the tour boat platform created a particular context of sought-after star performers pursued by ticket-paying audiences that a free-of-charge, land-based experience might not. I had my answer when I took a visiting friend to Whale Watch Park<sup>8</sup> and SRKW swam particularly close by—one nudged through seaweed just a few meters from our rock seat, shiny seaweed sliding over her dorsal fin. About 60 people, mostly tourists, were strung along the shore. Many exclaimed, "What an amazing show!" and "God, what a show!" Afterward, a man holding camera by telephoto lens said, "That was a great show. It feels like walking away from the fireworks finale on Fourth of July." A picnicking family said, "We got entertainment with our lunch."

Not only had orcas been extremely close, but, as they departed, three sprang from the water in a synchronized triple breach. The experience was nothing short of thrilling. Yet, though the performer metaphor represented an intense human-whale association, it simultaneously constituted anthropocentric detachment. An ecocentric orientation might have focused on reasons orcas came close to shore (salmon hide among shoreline kelp as they swim back to spawning rivers) or a familiar orientation



might have focused on SRKW traveling in a superpod that day (all three pods together), an occurrence associated with touching and breaching.

When I told my friend what I had been hearing, she answered, “OK, right, we see it as a performance for us. I get it. But it is entertaining. And people come here to see them; so, when they do, they feel entertained.” The performer metaphor was common sense and common sense is “inextricably intertwined within human symbolic practices” (Carbaugh, 1996, p. 40). As fieldwork progressed, I noted a wide range of people using the performer metaphor; not only tourists, who lacked bioregional knowledge, but a spectrum of insiders<sup>9</sup> devoted to transforming perceptions of orcas from cuddly, captive performers to complex, ecologically interdependent beings. One public television film regularly on loop at the Whale Museum,<sup>10</sup> featured a segment titled “A Whale of a Show” with footage of boats motoring toward orcas and language highlighting orcas as both mega stars and objects on display.

Narrator: Each year, as summer approaches, the Whale Museum prepares to welcome half a million people for a blockbuster special exhibit: the return of the resident orcas.

### Roles in the Performance

*Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of show as “The action or an act of exhibiting to view or notice” mirrors participant uses. However, in situating the transpecies event, tourists did not emphasize it was by intentional human act they were viewing wild animals. Rather, “show” situated wild nature as intentionally exhibiting for humans. Speakers characterized wild animals as deliberate, eager performers for human spectators. For instance, after an orca swam upside down near a boat, a tourist said: “That was fun. ... It's like the manatees by the windows in Florida—they knew, and were doing belly rolls and swimming upside down.” These statements about intentional showmanship construct an interspecies coordination that avoids decentering humans. Further, through qualifier terms, tourists differentiated intentionality and purpose between wild animal actions perceived as intended for other wild animals and those intended for humans:

Tourist 1: One of them did three slaps with her tail. It was like precautionary. Like she was telling the others to not do something.

Versus

Tourist 2: This one whale breached and then swam under the water, belly up.

Tourist 3: You could see the white under the water. He was really putting on a show.

Tourist 2: They've gotta know. I mean we're all just sitting up there.

Intentionality and knowingness in cetacean-cetacean interactive claims, as illustrated here, were qualified, whereas wild animal knowing desire to perform for humans was regularly unqualified and dialogically asserted.

In contrast, tourism industry talk often positioned tour staff in active roles in the performance. Marine radio talk positioned ocean as stage (e.g., Tour operator 1: “Good show today, eh?” Operator 2: “Yeah, the ocean lulled just on time”) and

operators as stage managers (“Good luck with your grand finale here”) and promoters (“We had an amazing show today. I’m thinking about paying myself for this”), associating economic value with notable performances.

Tourist talk, on the other hand, largely positioned themselves as removed audience. Tourists often likened their own synchronized reactions to orcas surfacing to breathe to audiences responding to fireworks (“It reminds me of the Fourth of July!”). Insiders humorously described these synchronized responses differently, as “orcagasms” (Milstein & Kroløkke, 2012). This transensual term constituted an embodied, contentive orientation (Behnke, 1999) rather than a removed, frontal audience orientation.

At other times, naturalists positioned tourists as talent scouts (“So, if you see something, like a seal or a harbor porpoise, let us know”). Repeat tourists often positioned themselves as fans, describing close transpecies experiences as akin to momentarily crossing a great distance between devotee and star. For instance, a woman who came for 10 summers to see SRKW spoke of a memorable time on shore, echoing the stardom paradox of special from afar but more ordinary in daily life:

“We climbed down on the rocks when they came by and what a show! Oh my god. Ruffles<sup>11</sup> came just four feet away. We just screamed and screamed and all these researchers were laughing. You know, it’s an everyday thing for them.”

These constructed performance roles highlighted certain ways of perceiving and experiencing and obfuscated others. Put differently, metaphor use was interested in its co-mingling with a tourism edutainment format that can avoid implicating or depressing and obscure ecocentric discourse. At the same time, endangered whales experience performance pressures as the metaphor activates tourist roles as expectant audience and operator roles as pressured stage manager. Tourists referred to other boats getting a better “show” based on being closer (Tourist 1: “That boat must be in heaven.” Tourist 2: “What a show they’re getting”) and monitors described operators who ignored safety guidelines and parked in whales’ paths as trying to get a “show,” even though, as one monitor volunteer said, “They can get enough of a show following the guidelines.”

### **Being “Chosen”**

Accounts of being chosen by whales further complicates the performer metaphor. Such accounts come closest to Barad’s (2007a) performativity as iterative intra-activity, in which knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself knowable to another. In “chosen” talk, speakers expressed notions of mutual awareness and of whales intentionally showing to them in particular. I observed “chosen” talk only with insiders or longtime locals, indicating elements of contextualized familiarity. One local said:

The first time I saw a whale, I was awe struck. ... I was truly humbled. You know, these whales really choose you; that’s what they do. You can tell. I was out with some friends this one time, and there were other boats. We turned off our engines and just sat there quietly, not trying to pursue them or anything. The whales

turned, ignored the other boats, and came to us. A mother and baby came right for us and they came so close to our boat we thought they'd almost hit it. They dove under the boat. Then, a big male breached just right off the bow. He had this huge smile on his face. Everyone on the boat is screaming of course. He left this large footprint, and all we could do was just applaud.

Orcas here are characterized as dimensional beings (relational, sexed, expressive, decisive), the experience as intra-active (humans not pursuing, but screaming and applauding, feeling awed and “humbled;” orcas as coming “right for us”). The speaker characterizes applause as the only available response.

One monitor told me he often heard such talk and was concerned by this claim, which he characterized as another way for humans to feel “special,” leading them to ignore whale needs and disregard; they were just one of millions of humans who day after day intrude upon whales. Instead of decentering humans and leading to more respectful relations, the monitor watched “chosen” individuals seek out this special feeling again and again, jeopardizing whales.

In another example, an operator relayed his experience to a monitor boat minutes after a humpback whale repeatedly spyhopped next to his boat:

I don't know why he chose us. He chose me. I've been on eleven hundred trips and I've never experienced anything like this. He came up and spyhopped close enough for me to touch.... I could see the barnacles and sea stuff on his throat. It's like he was wanting to show off—he was showing off.

Though cetacean insiders use the term “friendlies” to describe human-interactive cetaceans, providing a companionable rather than performance lens, the operator, venturing to explain such a transensual transpecies moment *in the moment*, fastens on “showing off.” Another operator then archived the friendly humpback experience over the marine radio for all area boats: “What a show!”

### **Performer Metaphor Entailments**

As tourism mediates certain relations with/in nature, wider ecocultural paradigms mediate tourism practice. Performer metaphor cultural coherence is embedded and constituted in a broader network of maintenance and tensions. Huspek (1993) points to structurally generated terms getting meaning by virtue of systematic relatedness to other terms. Metaphoric entailments comprised webbed clusters of related discourses regarding popculture, cameras, ocularcentrism and frontal orientation, and desires for a predictable and spectacular wild.

#### *Popculture*

Popculture provided context for tourists who otherwise lacked bioregional reference points, serving as meaningful touchstone or cognitive shortcut for lived interactions. For many nature tourists, not just orcas but most wild nature experiences have been delivered largely via popular performances, ranging from film and TV to zoos and

amusement parks. Tourists used such touchstones to explain whales (e.g., “He’s like a Disney ride when he comes up”). Some naturalists connected popculture knowledge to star-caliber importance (e.g., “Here is our most famous whale, Taku. He’s in all the *Free Willy* movies as a wild whale”). Popculture also served to initially interest some insiders, who evoked fandom discourses to describe decisions to focus lives on cetaceans, including becoming “hooked” or “obsessed” after seeing *Flipper* as children.

Popculture as entailment discursively fused wild whales with popular representations. Such melding was seen in *Free Willy* marketing of a minority of tour companies and in one common on-board cetacean identification chart: Davis Company’s “Quick reference sightings at Sea,” which identified cetaceans by image and scientific name and gave only bottlenose dolphin and orca popculture names in quotes: “Flipper” and “Willy.” Tourists voiced marine park-shaped expectations, including wanting to feed orcas dead fish in exchange for “tricks.” Within such blurred territory, tourists at times called out “Shamu!” or “Willy!” often when pointing out wild orcas to small children. This mass mediated framing evokes other tourism studies, such as Neumann’s (1999) Grand Canyon study, in which fiction frames reality.<sup>12</sup>

Neumann’s study looked at the collective imaginary, or popular memory, that maps a nature tourism physical site. In the present study, this imaginary plots living beings as fictional entertainers and shapes expectations. Tourists expected predictable spectacular performances (e.g., “How often do they jump up, you know, do their jump up thing?”) and trained actions (e.g., “I wish one would come up and kiss me on the face”). Within this popculture framework, many tourists applauded after wild orca activity that resembled marine park actions, such as breaching.

In contrast, some insiders opposed popculture residue in a wild setting. A monitor characterized applause as “weird,” in that it implied orcas “did it for them, like a show. It’s like SeaWorld.” When tourists persistently asked whether orcas would “jump,” some naturalists would respond wryly, “Like at SeaWorld?” Best practice naturalists provided contrasting meanings for breaching (“It appears to be an expression of hijinx. You know, high energy”). A number of naturalists spoke explicitly against marine parks. One gave tourists details about marine park captures and later characterized whale watch tourism as resistive, telling me it was important tourists understood orcas “are not put here to perform for us. They are not circus clowns. They’re wild animals. It’s important for people to know why we’re out here.” In contrast to Muhlhausler and Peace’s (2001) findings, in this case study, the term “circus” only was used critically (e.g., tour operator: “I don’t want to be part of that circus act. I don’t like that mentality: Tourists know what they want and they want it now. I don’t like the feeling like I have that kind of power over the whales”) and to draw contrasts between the current situation (e.g., whale advocate: “boats zipping everywhere, a circus”) and possible ideal situations (whale advocate: “a protected and treasured marine reserve for incredible rare beings”).

Tour naturalists further resisted popculture entailments by foregrounding a central characteristic marine park scripts strategically leave out—that orcas live in close-knit, matriarchal families, never leaving their mothers and matrilineal kin. Desmond (1999) discusses how SeaWorld frames a heteronormative family, one where humans are knitted into a make-believe nuclear orca family that naturalizes isolating captivity. These anthropomorphic marine park representations are in stark contrast to insider identification statements about SRKW that “knowing who the animals are was everything” in that scientific identification of individuals not only revealed pods led by century-old matriarchs, but also dangerously low population numbers due to captures and killing (Milstein, 2011).

### Cameras

A tour company’s website states, “So be sure to get your cameras ready, as you never know if Keiko<sup>13</sup> the Orca Whale will be spending the afternoon with you!” The marketing statement positions the captured Icelandic orca featured in *Free Willy* as interchangeable with area wild orcas while enhancing SRKW star status and further blurring the line between popculture constructions and wild lives. It also begins to illustrate ways popculture informs the metaphoric entailment of cameras.

Professional photographers carry the best equipment and could take years to get the perfect photograph; nature documentaries feature narrated, slowed, zoomed images of only the most spectacular or aesthetically attractive activity. Marine parks assist in image capture with cued actions and announcements to ready cameras. These wider framings combine to create, as one tour operator said, “really unreasonable expectations.” Wild orcas do not perform on cue. Instead, as one naturalist put it:

Everything is different out here everyday. Mother Nature never gives us the same show twice.

While this statement reproduces (a feminine maternal) nature giving a “show,” it also works to strategically adjust tourist expectations, pointing to pleasure in variation and unknown, evoking Taylor’s (2003) “repertoire.” Still, it was in the colonizing power of archiving “Mother Nature’s” “show” that tourists were most often caught up—and which nature, in its ephemerality, resisted. Tourist expectations of getting the perfect “shot” (at times, reminiscent of whaling harpooning) were generally unmet. When cameras emerged, “oohs” and “aahs” synchronized to orcas surfacing were replaced with lamenting or even aggressive cussing as cameras missed the shot. Many camera’d tourists shifted to director role, demanding particular actions (e.g., “Come on closer, little fuckers”). With cameras, wild animals challenged the performer metaphor; their images, when captured by tourists, were often hazy, distant, decidedly unspectacular. Whereas tourists often viewed cameras as a way to remember and share experience with others, the discouraged archiving—attempts to freeze the ephemeral—often belittled the experience. Some insiders and repeat tourists took on personal camera bans and some naturalists whispered their wish to ban cameras on

boats. In contrast, for some insiders, cameras were an important way to daily provide identification information about orcas' locations, who was with whom, and who was alive and well—whereas this could be seen as fulfilling an archiving paparazzi role, these images were exchanged to keep in touch with orcas, who, for many, were as familiar and intimate as dear friends.

### *Ocularcentrism and frontal orientation*

Cameras can be understood as a techno-extension of ocularcentrism. Though the site itself centered ocularcentric expectations with the clearly stated aim of whale “watching,” broader Western framings heightened such vision-centric frontal orientations and so, too, did the overall nature tourism genre, in which the tourist body plays a crucial role in human–nature interactions (Markwell, 2001) but in which the powerful tourist surveillance gaze is usually favored (Hollinshead, 1999).

In this way, camera use was embodied in that, once tourists raised cameras, transpecies moments shifted further from multidimensional multisensuality and toward two-dimensional visuality, providing an example of Macnaghten and Urry's (1998) argument that Western vision sensory dominance relegates aspects of nature to a safe distance that renders them passive and contracts embodied experience, incorporating a “spectacularization of life.”

On site, the privileging of vision manifested in participants devaluing or dismissing other senses. For instance, one repeat tourist described an orca surfacing next to her and viscerally spraying her with a loud exhale so that she heard, felt, smelled, and even tasted the presence of the orca, who submerged before the tourist turned to look: “We were so angry we missed it!” Such legitimizations of gaze over other sensory relations illustrate the feminist argument that an overemphasis on visuality can reduce perceptions to the superficial, bringing about an impoverishment of embodied relationships (Irigaray, 1978; Plumwood, 1993). Naturalists reproduced the primacy of vision in tour introductions (e.g., “The captain is excellent at positioning us for great views,” “We like to use the face of the clock to tell you where to look”).

### *Predictable, spectacular wild*

Both local and wider cultural texts informed tourist desires for a predictable wild (e.g., “will we see whales today?” “how long until we see them?”) who did spectacular things. This entailment is decidedly intertwined with former entailments, but important to examine on its own due to “pressure” tour operators attributed to this entailment and, subsequently, pressure whales experienced. In establishing orcas as star commodity, early marine park producers identified audience-pleasing movements, such as body exposing breaches and slides onto platforms, informing expectations akin to objectifying peek-a-boo shows and mediating modes of value for wild orca activity.

Whale Watch Park's shoreline signage on orca behavior further mediated expectations for predictable revealing displays, featuring only breaching, tail lobbing, and spyhopping. Similarly, postcards and photographs for sale on site overwhelmingly featured breaching and spyhopping. Eighteen of 22 tourism company brochures featured covers of orcas breaching or spyhopping, and one a perfectly clear photograph of an orca's body underwater that resembled a marine park window, not the site's plankton-rich wild waters. In contrast, only three brochures featured images of what whale tourists are most likely to witness—surfacing to breathe—and two of these were for kayak tours. Spectacular activity likely would have different appeal to those considering partially submerging in kayaks instead of viewing from elevated distances of motorboats or shores. Kayakers had contentive, embodied vantages:

They were jumping everywhere around us. I was *really* scared. And it stunk. It stunk like dead fish because they were blowing. I was yelling, "Shit! Shit!," and in between I was saying 'Hi, beautiful.' I could see their faces, their eyes. My heart didn't stop pounding for two hours. I've seen lots of animals. Nothing compares to this experience.

This kayak tourist's "experience" was not a "show;" instead, kayakers were sensually immersed and consciously vulnerable, feeling intensely positive and negative emotions at once. I do not delve into kayaking discourses, largely because my participant observer outings on kayak tours never intersected with whales, so data are limited. However, I venture immersed locations can decenter the human and disrupt the performer metaphor.

Tour operators noted they felt a paparazzi-like "pressure" to produce whales. A practice of whale sighting guarantees by some companies reproduced the economy of predictability (e.g., brochure: "You want to see Orcas, we GUARANTEE you will"). In contrast, best practice operators attempted to counter notions of predictability by emphasizing the importance of not taking wild orcas for granted (e.g., operator introduction: "It's a special thing when we get to see them") and resisting the performer metaphor (e.g., company website: "only an amusement park can truly guarantee whale sightings").

### Alternative Metaphors

The performer metaphor and attendant entailments were remarkable not only in pervasiveness but also in apparent lack of culturally available alternatives. I observed only one alternative, used much more rarely, across the range of participants: "experience." Less a metaphor, "experience" as a blank slate provides space for portrayals of meaningfulness, which I address later in this section. Other nominal terms in use were exchanged solely among insiders, who shared extensive knowledge about, and relations within, the bioregion. As such, these terms did not require supportive description and were specific to what speakers focused on in their work. For instance, researchers and monitors used "activity" to describe whales they

observed, often to measure whether “activity” changed with human presence and always to avoid defining behaviors. Operators often took their lead, saying, “Great activity today,” to describe orcas. “Activity” lacks metaphoric qualities, but, unlike “experience,” can be typified as specialist talk intended to uphold scientific objectivity norms.

Insiders among themselves often characterized the day (e.g., “This is a great whale day”), communicating a state of knowable temporal coexistence. For instance, after orcas had been traveling for weeks in search of food, insiders witnessed them slow as they found salmon, then share fish and breach together. Over the marine radio, an operator said: “These are the kinds of days we look for;” a monitor responded: “It’s a great whale day.”

Another term invoked by insiders was “visit,” connoting a purposeful socializing. In such cases, whales and humans were implicated as visiting one another. Speakers used the term to describe close encounters, and often referred to multisensory experience and identified whales, by name or alphanumeric identifier, as individuals with agency. For example, one operator described being with a gray whale who had been feeding for days in one area: “We had a really nice visit yesterday. Steady Freddy came so close to the stern—about 5 feet away—that he got passengers wet.”

The fact I rarely observed performer metaphor alternatives with tourists as interlocutors point to the necessity of extensive shared bioregional or specialist knowledge in informing and supporting alternatives. In contrast to tourists’ scant knowledge of whales or their ecosystem, insiders shared relatively deep knowledge, which made explanation unnecessary when using some alternate terms. Specialist, high-context, and interactive talk is not the same as a holistic language of indigeneity, but these alternatives do point to the importance of close, continuous transpecies relations to support different discourses. Speakers of alternative descriptors at times used “show” in the same utterances, indicating a discursive hybridity as in other sites of environmental communication (Marafioti & Plec, 2006).

After the first fieldwork summer, I shared the performer metaphor with three best practice insiders who had asked about my observations. Though I shared observation of its use without evaluation, each independently thoughtfully offered alternatives they believed might be better for their goals, including “encounter,” “great day,” “treat,” and “nice viewing,” and some described cultural hurdles. One naturalist highlighted differences between children and adults, active enculturation of children, and tourist-insider co-construction of discourse:

The kids tend to not interpret, they just experience. The grownups are saying, ‘Isn’t it a great show,’ to the kids. I bet we say it, too, the naturalists—we’re just talking to the passengers, responding to what they are saying.

A monitor volunteer, who discussed “encounter” as an alternative, later approached a privately owned boat near orcas to pass them a boating guidelines brochure. Before pulling away, the volunteer said:

So, yeah, it’s really quiet and you’re getting a nice little show. <After we pulled away, she turned to me> I said ‘show.’



Me: I'm certain I would say 'show' if I were talking to people about what they were seeing all the time. Could you have said 'encounter' to them?

Volunteer: I would say it. I could. But it doesn't slip off the tongue. They probably wouldn't understand what I was talking about.

The volunteer worked to teach people to respectfully encounter wild whales and was dedicated to changing perceptions. Though she implied "show" was not ideal for such purposes, she also illustrated cultural constraints: Unlike "show," the alternative did not "slip off the tongue" nor would it likely be understood. After years on site as advocate, the volunteer had a strong sense for what was normatively comprehended versus what was counter discourse and difficult to convey. Another on-board volunteer joined our conversation:

Volunteer 2: What about 'experience'?

Volunteer 1: Or 'treat.' By saying that I mean rare, in this case. It's rare to see them without (a lot of other) boats—but that may not be something they know about... Or perhaps that was 'a nice viewing.'

Volunteer 2: I like 'encounter.' It lets them sound more wild. Like you encounter a grizzly bear.

The dialogue reflected monitor goals and listener reception, identifying a lack of shared bioregional knowledge as a hurdle to using alternate terms. "Encounter" may align more closely with goals, but just as "show" is a metaphor so, too, is "encounter." "Encounters" were not what monitors actually perceived were taking place. Monitors recorded whales being paced and surrounded by persistent boats, which seemed more like being pursued by paparazzi than an "encounter." Monitors discussed how the pursuit of repeated "encounters" was not sustainable at a mass scale. "Encounter," too, connoted interspecies vulnerability—something most tourists do not experience on tours, but that wild animals regularly experience with humans.

In contrast, "experience" offered open-ended characterizing. Goatly (2007) describes such terms as grammatical metaphors, in that they closely resemble culturally accepted lexicon and serve crucial roles in denaturalizing and reconstructing common sense. Along such lines, Chawla (2002) explains, "despite our embeddedness in our history, we can create a metaphorical 'clearing,' in which we invite phenomenon to show itself on its own terms—whether child, tree, or any other object of knowledge. In this shared place, we seek to move from a mode of domination to a mode of listening" (p. 205). "Experience" provides such a clearing without seeming immediately counter to Western ecocultural paradigms—"experiential marketing" is core to tourism industry and studies literature and is based on the capitalist construct of charging for feelings customers get engaging a particular product (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). In a neoliberal capitalist society, "experience" slips through, and more easily slips off the tongue, making way for a range of alternative, though often unspoken, meanings. Relatedly, in the past few years, terms have emerged from best practice tour companies with whom I shared initial observations—such as "sighting," "look," and "glimpse." These vision-centric terms avoid performer framings (e.g., operator: "We just had a great glimpse of a minke whale")

and reflect the core activity of watching, yet perhaps constrain more expansive, multisensual, or connective meanings that “experience” does not.

## Discussion

Communication is “interested” not only because it forms, and is formed by, cultural perceptions, but because it has a particular force in praxis. As new materialist and environmental communication scholars claim one cannot separate matter from meaning or vice versa (Barad, 2007b; Carbaugh, 2007; Cox, 2007; Milstein, 2008; Rogers, 1998), performance scholars illuminate power in this dynamic by historicizing the colonizing force of the archive (hegemonic language of record) and the ever resistive force of the repertoire (embodied lived knowledge; Phelan, 2003; Taylor, 2003). In what follows, I elucidate ways this case study allows for a close empirical examination of the interplay of metaphor and living world. In the process, I exhibit usefulness of new materialist and performance lenses to environmental communication scholarship. I also suggest an alternative metaphor—that of witness—and illustrate ways future research might explore the performer metaphor’s transfixing power.

A vascular system of oceanic life and terrestrial humans surge through this study, yet the performer metaphor appeared largely cut off from the sensuous, the ecological, and the transcorporeal. Instead, as Cloke and Perkins (2005) similarly found, cetaceans were largely subjugated in relational accounts, overshadowing their power:

to change the nature of nature through contradiction of the spectacular wild by imminent engagement and unpredictability, which on occasions refutes staged performance and representational strategy; and the power to evoke elusory, sublime, transcendent, emotional, and aesthetic relations with humans. (pp. 920–921)

Based on wider ethnographic observations on site, most insiders and many tourists yearn for and at times experience such profound power of cetaceans and oceans, a power that decenters humans and senses interconnection. These integrated selves are often under-accessed, concealed, even derided in the West, but still heave and swell against prevailing bounds. Indeed, opening up to these selves, even momentarily, requires the rupturing of powerful cultural constraints (Milstein & Kroløkke, 2012) and is a crucial move toward acknowledging vulnerable interdependence with/in the more than human world and toward confronting humanity’s integral role in ecological devastation.

Perhaps such knowing cannot be adequately put into Western language because doing so would effectively dissolve the humans Westerners have become. While being awed by, and connected to, magnificent beings and ecosystems can provide posthumanist moments, the performer metaphor reasserts cultural binaries of self–other, audience–performer, reifying boundaries as they momentarily disassemble. Indeed, there may be something terrifying about this dissolve, at least subconsciously, and the performer metaphor could be an ameliorating metaphor. Where there is a sense things could go extraordinarily wrong in the Anthropocene, there, too, may be

a sense things could go terribly wrong when commingling with giant wild mammals. The performer metaphor may be a reassertion of mastery in the face of global transcorporeal vulnerability.

Donna Haraway (2007) writes, “I am very much concerned about the instrumentality of languages, since they are forms of life” (p. 165). Similarly, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue we “live by” metaphors. Metaphors help create realities, guide future actions. In turn, actions reinforce a metaphor’s power to make experience coherent. As exhibited in this case, the performer metaphor was “interested” in that, for instance, it was associated with a lack of human-implicating ecological discourse and an increased pressure on wild animals. In contrast to nature performance studies emphasis on process and dynamism over objects or facts (Gray, 2007), the common-sense performer metaphor is inevitably caught up in the archiving power of spectatorship, which detaches “agent from its environment, and ... reduces the chances of insight into the environment of the agent and therefore the agent itself in biocentric terms” (Kershaw, 2006, p. 71). This extraction of inhabitants from habitats has particular implications for endangered species, whose ecosystems, of which humans are an integral part, are basic to survival.

Yet the overpowering cultural coherence of the performer metaphor may lead to its metaphoric nature being overlooked. Many tourists appeared to understand “show” as equivalent to, or denotative of, their wild nature experience. The *OED* provides secondary definitions of “show:” “The external aspect (of a person or thing)” and “In appearance. Often with the idea that the reality behind is different.” Both definitions refer to facade in contrast to complex substance.

Whereas this study illustrates the performer metaphor as an example of the archive’s colonizing power (Taylor, 2003) and its attendant culture of commodification and economy of reproduction, matter and meaning also refract the archive via embodied intra-activity. The naturalist’s statement “Mother Nature never gives us the same show twice” exhibits this dynamic interplay, inscribing nature as performer but also pointing to unarchivable knowability. Placing the living world in the center of one’s analysis opens the door to observing its relocative force. For instance, whales elude archiving cameras, frustrating tourist attempts to control and record. “Friendlies,” too, on a wider cultural scale, shape companionable rather than performance lenses. Likewise, insiders denounce the “circus” metaphor and use it to reinscribe wildlife as “not put here to perform for us.” As Phelan (2003) argues, archival attempts to co-opt the repertoire ultimately fail as ephemerality always eludes control and regulation.

The profit-based model of nature tourism, however, exacerbates the performer metaphor with the imperative of providing all customers a good time. Despite best intentions in nature tourism, the edutainment model, a product of Western consumer culture, falls short of claims that tourists will become attuned to complex, interconnected, and vulnerable ecosystems they visit. As this study helps nuance, the Western performer metaphor and its entailments help constitute nature’s entertainment value, which, not coincidentally, is related to “the correspondingly

high price that can be extracted by providing access to it” (Muhlhausler & Peace, 2001, p. 373).

In research on zoos (Milstein, 2009, 2012), I have argued for alternate formats that emphasize *witnessing* in order to shift objectifying ecocultural orientations to those that are rehabilitating. Reformulating the tourist as witness—instead of audience/fan/talent scout—could help shift watchfulness of wildlife watching from an overly simplistic anthropocentric aperture to that of ecological interdependence and informed restorative responses. As Barad (2007b) states, “‘We’ are not outside observers of the world. ... rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity” (p. 146). Possibilities for enacting change exist in every moment and “entail a responsibility to intervene in the world’s becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering” (p. 144).

Tourists make nature tourism possible and play a strong role in shaping its day-to-day discourse. Due to their temporary and transitory nature, most are largely ignorant of ecosystems they visit and remain so—even when guides teach bioregional knowledge. In this way, it is generally those with the least knowledge of the ecosystem under purview who have the strongest hand in shaping conversation, propagating wider prevailing ecocultural discourses and constraining localized alternatives. The restorative efficacy of alternative metaphors, such as witness, experience, visit, glimpse, etc., depends upon finding ways to connect visitors to inside-the-world watchfulness.

One way might be through what new materialist Nancy Tuana (2007) calls the “viscous porosity of flesh,” which is “a hinge through which we are of and in the world” (p. 199). In describing how membranes of various types—skin and flesh, prejudgments and symbolic imaginaries, habits and embodiments—serve as mediators of interaction, Tuana gives the example of breast milk concentrating levels of anthropogenic toxic pollutants and downloading these carcinogens into infants. This is true for all mammals. I observed a handful of best practice naturalists tell tourists how human-created toxins bioaccumulate in orcas as top predators, resulting in deaths of SRKW first-born calves, and how human infants swallow these very same toxins we continue to manufacture. Issues like anthropogenic toxic pollutants, boundlessly carried by water, air, and living tissue “render it nearly impossible for humans to imagine that their own health and welfare is disconnected from that of the rest of the planet” (Alaimo, 2007, p. 260). A witness orientation could inform awareness and responsibility.

Prevalence in Western settings may vary; however, my observations in other research settings such as zoos (Milstein, 2012) and numerous everyday sites suggest presence of the performer metaphor is steadfast. My hope is future studies will examine the metaphor at work in other phenomena at local and global scales. Is climate disruption, for instance, at times framed as a spectacular horror show from which humans are removed audience? If so, how does this inform human (lack of) response? At a comparative scale to the present study, I have begun to ethnographically examine the performer metaphor in swim-with-wild-dolphin tours in New Zealand where, instead of cetaceans as entertainers, tours under study strategically

frame humans as entertainers. A guide, for instance, tells tourists readying for their ocean plunge:

We are going to be swimming with *wild* dolphins, OK? This is not SeaWorld. These are *wild* dolphins. We do not train them, we do not feed them, we do not entice them into the area—apart from your beautiful singing voices. I say that because it is your job to entertain the dolphins.

Similarly, a mandatory pre-tour video states:

Remember, this encounter is more about *you* entertaining *the dolphins* than the other way around.

This strategic reversal in positioning is enabled, in part, by a more immersive and interactive setting. Being in a wetsuit bobbing in the open ocean among potentially hundreds of dolphins evokes vulnerability, orienting one less as audience member and more as visitor. The reversal is also tactical, driven by economic interests to control tourist expectations. However, in referencing and flipping the performer metaphor, operators reorient and introduce a more intra-active humanature production.

Questions remain about whether the performer metaphor of wildlife entertaining humans or the other way around serves to support ecotourism's core justification of promoting ecological awareness and ecocentric practice—a claim fundamental to the industry's financial success. Indeed, does the reverse-performer metaphor do any work in pursuing Barad's (2007a) notion of intra-acting responsibly as part of the world by "being responsive to the possibilities that might help us and it flourish" and taking "responsibility for the role that we play in the world's differential becoming" (p. 396)? Or does metaphor's ubiquity, in reverse or otherwise, constitute a perilously narrow Western aperture on life?

### Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank participants of Toronto's Aquatic Media Workshop for helpful feedback on an earlier draft.

### Funding

A part of this work was supported by US Fulbright's Core Program and Fulbright New Zealand's Senior Scholar Programme.

### Notes

1. I use compound terms like "humanature" and "ecoculture" to heuristically integrate human and nature, ecology and culture, in scholarly conversation as they are in life (Milstein, 2012; Milstein, Anguiano, Sandoval, Chen, & Dickinson, 2011; Milstein & Dickinson, 2012).
2. Though orcas are the world's largest dolphins, a range of participants, from scientists to tourists, overwhelmingly refer to orcas as whales. I refer to them as such to reflect participant and popular Western naming practices.
3. Violent captures debilitated SRKW familial networks and populations. Captives who survived had lives drastically shortened in marine park and aquarium confinement. In the late 1970s, as

SRKW became understood as threatened due to captures, and public outcry mounted, North America outlawed capture. “Lolita,” captured in 1970, is the last SRKW alive in captivity. At 20 feet long, she is held alone in Florida’s Miami Seaquarium’s 20-foot-deep 80-by-35-foot tank. At the time of publication, only 77 SRKW remained in the wild with no known births for the past two years.

4. Orcas have been culturally important to many area First Nations peoples. Some continue to recognize orcas as another tribe or people that walk the land at night, some as purveying justice of the ocean, and some as the namesake of their clan. Contemporary accounts point to orcas rarely, if ever, hunted by First Nations peoples.
5. Canada declared SRKW endangered in 2001. After the USA declared endangerment in 2005, voluntary boating guidelines around SRKW became “strongly recommended” by both governments. In 2011, guidelines became regulations under US federal law, requiring a 200-yard whale buffer and prohibiting parking in whales’ paths.
6. An increasing body of studies suggests orcas and other cetaceans behave differently with boats present. “Orcas are said to spend less time foraging and more time in ‘surface active behaviors.’ .... In a food-challenged population, distractions from feeding generate concern for many...” (Herbert, 2014, p. 7).
7. The term best practice refers to those held up in the industry as models to emulate due to well-thought-out approaches to whale tourism focused on education and preservation.
8. San Juan Island, a top US destination for SRKW watching, is home to Whale Watch Park (Lime Kiln Point State Park), an internationally topographically unique setting of deep waters next to shore.
9. “Insiders” refers to participants closely and daily involved with whales, ranging from tourism industry workers to whale advocates to researchers.
10. San Juan Island’s Whale Museum is an internationally recognized scientifically informed setting for learning about cetaceans, specifically orcas, and is dedicated to their protection through education and marine monitoring.
11. Ruffles, or J1, who died recently, was the elder son of the still living 103-year-old J pod matriarch and leader Granny, or J2. Ruffles had a distinctive wavy dorsal fin and was one of the best known, most easily identified SRKW. He is thought to have fathered many of the surviving SRKW.
12. In Neumann’s study, tourists look for where Alice Brady hurt her leg in the Brady Bunch family vacation or Thelma and Louise drove off the cliff, recalling “another place and time when visitors occupied another form of spectatorship, in a theater or in front of a television” (p. 170).
13. Keiko died in 2003 (years before I observed this website) in Norway’s coastal waters, after being released into the wild and returning to humans.

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