

introduction

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 do they do it. How do they live in salt and depth and motion? You very well might wonder. And in that case you would need a guidebook. The most available guidebooks around right now are the *National Audubon Society Guide to Marine Mammals of the World* and the *Smithsonian Handbook: Whales, Dolphins & Porpoises*. They will summarize 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.

What I found was that the 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 criminalization of mammals that escaped the gaze of biologists showed 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, heteropatriarchalizing capitalist constructs that are trying to kill me—the net I am already caught in, so to speak. So how can I tell you who and what I saw?

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 felt. So I posted on social media every day 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.

As I continued to post what I was learning, my Instagram followers spiked, people gave me watercolor journals of whales,¹ mailed me knitted humpback earrings,² sent me the actual vertebrae of a whale (for real!),³ and more. I also got messages online every day asking when and where they could buy these reflections in a book, offering to be my research assistant, testifying that these posts had become their daily meditations and offering to collaborate on creating apps, song-based audio meditations, and one special message from adrienne suggesting that these writings could be a part of the Emergent Strategy imprint/bookflow/paradigm at AK Press. And here we are.

So this is a different kind of guidebook for our movements and our whole species based on the subversive and transformative guidance of marine mammals. Where Emergent Strategy offers us the opportunity to study and practice the work of shaping change by understanding ourselves as part of the ongoing emergence of nature, this guide to undrowning listens 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 this rising of the ocean. And the other is that a pandemic that emerged while I was sending back copyedits for this book also threatens our breath.

I don't see this book as a critique of the two guidebooks I mentioned. I see this book as an offering to you and as an artifact of a process I am in the midst of called *Marine Mammal Apprenticeship*. If there was ever a time to humbly submit to the mentorship of marine mammals it is now. Did I mention the ocean is rising? Have you noticed the adaptation in our breathing? This is a pragmatic course of study. At the same time, part of what is at stake for me in this apprenticeship is a transformed relationship to my own breathing, the salt-water within me, the depth of my grief, and the leagues of my love. 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 colonizing 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 Audubon and Smithsonian guidebooks are the sources of all unattributed quotations in this book, and I often start the meditations mimicking the cadence of objectivity that guidebook entries perform. I'm doing that on purpose, I want to

remember it's a performance and then I want to transform it. Though I usually avoid the passive voice because it hides accountability (I've written about this elsewhere),⁴ in this text the passive voice is a major mimicking device of the scientific forms of writing, which teach scientists to use the passive voice in order to take themselves out of the intimacy of their research towards the illusion of objectivity. Nothing is objective. And think about it, scientists, especially those people who have designed their entire lives around 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.⁵

In this book I move, mostly without warning, from a clinical tone to a profoundly intimate tone. The words "I love you" appear more than any other phrase in this book. I'm sure those words have never appeared in scientific studies about marine mammals.⁶ My hope, my grand poetic intervention 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, this is not a book in which I am 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 refeel my own relations, possibilities, and practices inspired by the relations, possibilities, and practices of advanced marine mammal life. That's an emergent strategy. If interlocking underground communication of trees, dandelion resilience, and responsive mycelium networks can inspire us to relate within and across species differently so can marine mammals. And emergent for real. I am mostly asking questions of myself and of you in this text. We get to continue to consider what is possible from here (and here and here).

And since 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 militarized context our species has imposed on the ocean and ourselves, this work is accountable to the movements that are boldly seeking to transform the meaning of life on the planet right now. Movements for Black liberation, queer liberation, disability justice, economic justice, racial justice, and gender justice are core to the meditations that are included here. But these are still meditations. 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, yes, still emerging.

The book consists of an introduction and nineteen thematic movements (it would be too linear to say "chapters" and, anyway, they are much shorter than chapters) organized around core Black feminist practices like breathing, remembering, collaborating, etc., as they can be informed and transformed by learning from marine mammals (and a couple of sharks). Some of the hashtags I originally used for these pieces on social media remain as references and citations. It closes with a movement called "activation" that offers some guided group and individual activities for you to do with the meditations in the book.

Did I Introduce Myself?

Oh right. I'm a queer Black feminist love evangelist and a marine mammal apprentice. 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 Feminist Fugitivity*, *M Archive: After the End of the World*, and *Dub: Finding Ceremony*—all bring the work of Black feminist theorists (and high theorists at that) 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; my years writing for *Make/Shift* and *Left Turn* magazines; and my many contributions to AK Press books (*Pleasure Activism*, *Stay Solid, Dear Sister*, *Feminisms in Motion*, *Octavia's Brood*, etc.) also draws on archives of Black feminist practice to nourish the bravery we need right now. My creative writing spans from poetry to visionary fiction, like the story "Evidence" in *Octavia's Brood*, which imagines a future researcher studying "the time of the silence breaking" and how the world, free of sexual violence, that they live in came to be, or "Bluebellow" in *Strange Horizons*, which imagines mermaid zombie survivors of the middle passage connecting with Black people who take a reverse transatlantic journey to Europe.

My movement work has focused on poetry, ceremony, and facilitation. As a founding member of UBUNTU, a women of color survivor-led coalition to end gendered violence and create sustaining transformative love and Earthseed People of Color Land Collective in Durham, NC; a member leader of Southerners on New Ground; a member of the founding vision circle of Kindred Healing Justice; a founding member of the transformative local foundation Warrior Healers Organizing Trust; and a member of SpiritHouse, my participation in movement is accountable to Black queer visionaries in the US South and beyond. As founder of Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind, Brilliance Remastered, and co-founder of Black Feminist Bookmobile, Black Feminist Film School, and the Mobile Homecoming—an experiential archive of Black queer brilliance—I am committed to creating counter-institutions that facilitate Black feminist presence across time and space.

What is the ecology?

This book already exists in an ecology of kindred works. First of all I exist in the ecology of my Shinnecock ancestors who have been in sacred relationship with the Atlantic Right Whale for centuries and my Ashanti ancestors who call the name of the whale as one of the names of god. And my grandmother Lydia Gumbs created the three dolphin insignia for the revolutionary flag of Anguilla during the 1967 revolution. Certainly this work is a baby cousin of *Emergent Strategy* and has been nurtured by the revolutionary and humble approach to learning from nature modeled by my dear sister adrienne there. In fact, I first shared these posts in the Emergent Strategy group on facebook. The great movement folk singer Toshi Reagon also facilitated audio versions of eleven of these meditations and composed incredible songs that will be released together as "Long Water Song." This practice was influenced by my daily engagement with Sharon Bridgforth's oceanic oracles, the *dat Black Mermaid Man Lady* oracle deck, and *dem blessings*, the companion series of oceanic compassion prompts. Every day those oracles set the tone for my deep listening. At the end of each post I encouraged readers to support my dear sister collaborator Michaela Harrison's *Whale Whispering Project*, a Black feminist collaboration Michaela designed with the Humpback Whale Institute in Bahia, Brazil, through which she co-writes songs with whales using underwater microphone technology. The approach to life science that emerged for me in this process is also deeply informed by my dear sister (and fellow UBUNTU founding member) Kriti Sharma, the biologist and philosopher who wrote the book *Interdependence*. On one of Kriti's first deep sea voyages, she sent a cup with a prayer for all beings to the bottom of the ocean. The pressure of the ocean compressed the cup and she brought that compressed prayer back for me. The cup has been on my altar ever since. Right now Kriti is in Pasadena (Octavia Butler's home and final resting place), studying how sediment at the bottom of the ocean processes methane. She may be right now discovering the key to reversing global warming! Also the seeds of this process came from the historian Charles McKinney who taught a group of gifted eleven- and twelve-year-olds about the Middle Passage by assigning us to read the scene in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* where the protagonist jumps off of an enslaving vessel and becomes a dolphin. Clearly I am still gratefully inside of that assignment. I am also influenced and inspired by my kindred spirit dreamer, self-identified ocean creature Tala Khanmalek, the founder of Sailing for Social Justice, who is imagining oceanic justice through revolutionary sailing. This kinship with ocean animals is also inspired by my twin portal Leah Lakshmi-Piepzna Samarasingha and the *Femme Shark* collective's zines and manifesta, as well as Qwo-li Driscoll's *Bull Shark Manifesto*. And as you will soon see, a few sharks even snuck their way into this marine mammal journey.

Who is this book for?

This book is for you! Also known as everyone who knows that a world where queer Black feminine folks are living their most abundant, expressed, and loving lives is a world where everyone is free. I imagine that most people will not read the book front to back, but I have still organized it based on the Black feminist/marine mammal principle of flow, just in case. I imagine that folks will work with one meditation at a time as part of a daily meditation practice. So far people have shared with me that they have excerpted these meditations during their own keynote lectures, used them as a way to start the day, used them to launch writing prompts of their own, and shared them with friends as love letters and accountability reminders. I wrote this with you in mind, you comrades who go to the Allied Media Conference, who used to read *Make /Shift* and *Left Turn*, and use social media fluently. I wrote this with you in mind, dreamers that live near the shore and wonder about the whale bones you find. I wrote this with you in mind, those of you lobbying at the United Nations about deep ocean ecology and what it takes to honor it. And you, the ones who can't keep from crying when you read the daily news. And you, the ones who feel cut off from nature. And you, the people who prioritize nature in your lives. And us, the people who are anxious about climate crisis. Us, the people who take long social media fasts and want peace. Yes, you and me, the ones who thought our practice of looking at pictures of marine mammals was completely separate from our economic justice work. This is for all of us. You are on my mind and in my heart.

The word "Black" is capitalized throughout this text. Thanks to the work of Black writers and editors over decades the convention is that usually the word Black is capitalized when it refers to Black people and lowercase when it refers to Black as a color or adjective. But Blackness is more expansive than the human. And there is no symbolic or descriptive reference to the term Black in this society that does not also impact Black lives. So Black is Black.

1 Thank you Solanke Omimuyegun!

2 Thank you Natalie Clark!

3 Thank you Tema Okun!

4 See Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "The Problem With the Passive Past Tense," in *Black Perspectives*, July 10, 2018.

<https://www.aaihs.org/the-problem-with-the-passive-past-tense/>.

5 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!

6 But if you have read that study, please send it to me!