

Title: Blackfish Unleashed: Aquatic Encounters and the Quest to Enact Proximity and Care

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Abstract:

This paper examines the case of public aquaria where undersea lives are displaced into high-tech, small-scale undersea environments that bring into being a close, real-time aquatic encounter for large numbers of people at leisure. The morality of these encounters is underwritten by the idea that these encounters with sea life in captivity will ultimately captivate audiences and transform them into stewards of oceanic life and conservation. However, this relationship is being progressively challenged by those who demand the abandonment of the practice of captivity altogether, in movements that call to ‘empty the tanks’ and a growing preference for natural aquaria as an alternative way to generate proximity and care. Both sides of the debate are hampered by a lack of hard evidence about how well public aquaria do enact a propensity to care among visitors, so the ‘facts’ are always shifting and malleable. Increasingly, both positions across the debate are drawing upon the voice of marine life itself to make the case.

The recent ‘Blackfish effect’ (Brammer, 2015) exemplifies this, describing the aftermath of the very public death of a trainer to a captive killer whale and how this has invigorated the campaign to abolish the captivity of large charismatic marine life. This paper will examine this effect, exploring how the otherness of aquatic life, and the captive whale in particular, is mobilised to make a difference to both sides of this conservation debate. The paper will attempt to follow the blackfish themselves (after Franklin, 2017), as they are variously unleashed across competing interests that identify them as simultaneously playful, tortured, psychotic, profitable, well-loved, and necessary in the production of encounters and marine conservation. Through this method, which resists the urge to discipline blackfish to an orderly worldview or to reveal its true nature, the whale instead remains resolutely indifferent to the developing environmental schism across which it is variously compelled to speak and is endowed with the ability to enact multiple, disruptive realities in its wake.

References:

Brammer, R. (2015). Activism and antagonism: The ‘Blackfish’ effect. *Screen Education*, 76, 72–79.