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WHALES, WATER, AND DISABILITY. TOWARDS A BLUE CULTURAL DISABILITY STUDIES

Abstract: The article explores possible intersections between cultural disability studies and the blue humanities. It opens with a discussion of cultural representations of atypical aquatic mammals and fish. Yet, the main focus is placed on various contemporary literary texts (Mateusz Pakuła’s *Wieloryb: The Globe*, John Wilson’s *From the Depths*, and Kaite O’Reilly’s *In Water I’m Weightless*), which were written either by or for artists with disabilities. As will be shown, all of them allude to water or/and marine environment in order to comment on disability, its social constructiveness and context dependence, and the conservation of biological and cultural diversity. In doing so, these texts challenge the fixedness of the disabled/non-disabled binary and subtly hint at a possibility of transgressing the traditional opposition between the human and the animal. This in turn points to the potential of applying the oceanic perspective, or what Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters call ‘wet’ and ‘more-than-wet’ ontologies, in disability studies.

Keywords: the blue humanities, cultural disability studies, aquatic imagery, wet ontologies, more-than-wet ontologies, disability and marine life, Mateusz Pakuła, John Wilson, Kaite O’Reilly

Having recently emerged from environmental studies as a research area in its own right, the blue humanities, by focusing on water environment, open new perspectives and non-binary ways of understanding the world. The key notions that lie at the heart of this academic field include: fluidity/liquidity, flow/unfixedness, and connectedness. As Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters argue, wet and “more-than-wet” ontologies¹ provide us with more than just “a perspective for understanding the ocean”,

¹ A few years after publishing their article on wet ontologies, Peters and Steinberg stated in another text that “[a]lthough earlier attention to the ocean’s liquid volume was a necessary antidote to surfcial static ontologies typically associated with land, this is insufficient in light of how the ocean exceeds material liquidity” (*The Ocean in Excess: Towards a More-than-wet Ontology*, “Dialogues in Human

since “thinking from a perspective informed by the ocean’s material and phenomenological distinctiveness can facilitate the reimagining and re-enlivening of a world and our being-in-the-world”.² The blue humanities are thus founded on a similar premise as a number of areas of academic study that propose reinterpreting the world beyond simplistic binary oppositions, and fixed hierarchies and constructs. Although essentially post-anthropocentric and post-terracentric, this field of study puts forward similar arguments to those that have been developed in various more human-oriented areas of research, such as contemporary disability studies. This particularly concerns its new, less human-centred offshoot – environmental disability studies. Often combining academic reflection with activist engagement, the new research area proposes alternative post-anthropocentric and non-ableist understandings of the world. This is, for instance, conspicuous in Sunaura Taylor’s explorations of ableism in the human perception of and attitude to human and non-human animals, and Anthony J. Nocella II’s concept of eco-ability – “the theory that nature, nonhuman animals, and people with disabilities promote collaboration, not competition; interdependency, not independence; and respect for difference and diversity, not sameness and normalcy”,³ which – as Nocella, J.L. Schatz, and Amber George explain elsewhere – seeks “to produce a radical liberatory movement from varying experiences and theories that addresses systems of oppression”.⁴

What serves as a crucial area of interest of both contemporary disability studies and the blue humanities is cultural representation. In their seminal book in which they put forward the concept of narrative prosthesis, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder note that in Western literature disability has frequently served as a metaphor rather than a social and cultural phenomenon. As they put it, the function of people with disabilities “in literary discourse is twofold: disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device”.⁵ In a similar vein, Hester Blum opens her article *The Prospect of Oceanic Studies* with a statement: “The sea is not a metaphor. Figurative language has its place in analyses of the maritime world, certainly, but oceanic studies could be more invested in the uses, and problems, of what is literal in the face of the sea’s

Geography” 2019, no. 7 (1), p. 2) – it is more than water as it includes solid materials and air. The idea of “more-than-wet” ontologies thus “offers further frontiers for understanding a world beyond the static simplicity of landed place” (ibidem, p. 13).

² Ibidem, p. 2.

³ A.J. Nocella II, *Defining Eco-Ability: Social Justice and the Intersectionality of Disability, Nonhuman Animals, and Ecology* [in:] S.J. Ray, J. Sibara (eds.), *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln–London 2017, p. 150.

⁴ J.L. Schatz, A.E. George, A.J. Nocella II, *Introduction*, [in:] J.L. Schatz, A.E. George, A.J. Nocella II (eds.), *The Intersectionality of Critical Animal, Disability, and Environmental Studies: Toward Eco-Ability, Justice, and Liberation*, Lexington, Lanham–Boulder–New York–London 2017, p. xxi.

⁵ D.T. Mitchell, S.L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2000, p. 47.

abyss of representation”.⁶ Many oceanic and disability scholars thus call for critically examining and going beyond the narratives and concepts that have for centuries been projected on the phenomena that they investigate. Studying cultural representations of disability as well as aquatic life – both metaphorical and literal – is often informed by a desire to investigate and deconstruct the cultural sediment that reinforces certain traditional ways of perceiving the world and organizing our knowledge thereof.

With all this in mind, in this article I will explore several popular representations of atypical aquatic animals, which will provide a useful background for the analysis of a selection of literary texts that address the experiences of the disabled human Other, in other words a specific category of those who have often been denied the status of whole and complete humans and thus occupy the margins of the Anthropocene. In my analyses I will examine literal and metaphorical allusions to water and sea-life, which most often do not ignore or neglect its materiality. As will be argued, these texts frequently use the aquatic environment to facilitate reflection upon the situation of people with disabilities and by doing so, they contribute to the project of rethinking the world from new, more fluid and flexible, non-ableist perspectives.

While intersections between disability studies and the blue humanities still remain largely underexplored, the possibility of finding a common ground between disability studies and the environmental humanities has recently been critically examined by such scholars and writers as: Sunaura Taylor, Sarah Jacquette Ray, Anthony J. Nocella II, Matthew J.C. Cella, and Eli Clare. What deserves a special mention in the context of this article is the research done by Taylor, who has thoroughly investigated the connection between anthropocentrism and ableism. In her book *Beasts of Burden. Animal and Disability Liberation* (2017) she argues that “[s]ystems of species classification have relied heavily on hierarchies that have placed humans above animals, and these hierarchies have always been entangled with constructions of human difference”.⁷ This leads her to a conclusion that “[a]ll [both human and non-human] bodies are subjected to the oppression of ableism”.⁸ Taylor illustrates her argument with the story of a fox which had the same condition as she does (arthrogryposis). The Canadian fox was shot in an act of “mercy killing” by a man who was concerned about the animal’s unusual gait which he interpreted as a sign of illness. What surprised the researchers who examined the body post mortem was that “[t]he animal, whose disabilities were quite significant, had normal muscle mass, and his stomach contained a large amount of digested food, which suggested [...] that «the limb deformity did not preclude successful hunting and foraging»”.⁹ As Taylor argues, deeply rooted in the medical model, which conceptualizes disability in terms of lack, deficit, and aberration that can only be fixed by medical intervention, such ableist presump-

⁶ H. Blum, *The Prospect of Oceanic Studies*, “PMLA” 2010, no. 3 (125), p. 670.

⁷ S. Taylor, *Beasts of Burden. Animal and Disability Liberation*, The New Press, New York–London 2017, p. 19.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 21.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 23.

tions are conspicuous in the ways in which the life quality of both human and non-human animals is assessed.

Similar stories of adaptation are based on the observation of atypical marine animals that have devised their unique ways of functioning with an impairment. In their 2004 article, Jorge Urbán et al. mention a number of cases of “grey whales [observed in the San Ignacio Lagoon] that have lost their flukes most likely because of entanglement in fishing gear”¹⁰ and, in consequence, developed “unusual surfacing and diving behaviour”.¹¹ As the scholars further note, the whales that have recovered from the trauma caused by the injury “apparently are able to swim sufficiently well to undertake an annual migration to the breeding lagoons of Baja California, and in at least one instance, able to reproduce”.¹²

In their study of “skeletal deformities” in bull sharks, which are most likely caused by environmental stressors, André Afonso et al. explain that it has commonly been assumed that “a low rate of observations of these phenomena can be expected because many malformations may translate into early mortality and thus not be detectable in older individuals”.¹³ Nevertheless, their study of two specimens – “mature, seemingly healthy females”¹⁴ with “conspicuous deformities in their caudal fins”,¹⁵ caught off Recife, Brazil within a short period of time suggests that their initial assumptions may not necessarily be correct or accurate. In fact, the research shows that “the abnormalities [...] had no obvious effect on shark fitness because both individuals were large-bodied and seemed to have healthy weights”, which makes the authors reconsider the standards by which they measured the “severity” of the “deformations”.¹⁶ They conclude by stating that “[t]he example described herein, however, is probably too mild a deformity to have negatively influenced the swimming ability of these sharks”.¹⁷

Such an argument does not hold good in the case of a shark that was found in 2017 by researchers from the Bimini Shark Lab in the Bahamas. Nicknamed Quasimodo,

¹⁰ J. Urbán R. et al., *Gray Whales with Loss of Flukes Adapt and Survive*, “Marine Mammal Science” 2004, no. 2 (20), p. 335.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 336.

¹² Ibidem, p. 337.

¹³ A.S. Afonso et al., *Spinal Deformities in Free-ranging Bull Sharks, Carcharhinus leucas (Müller and Henle, 1839), from the Western South Atlantic Ocean*, “Journal of Applied Ichthyology” 2016, no. 32, p. 1.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 2.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 1.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 3. Many contemporary disability scholars, including Sunaura Taylor, point to the fact that ‘severe disability’ is a subjective category that “presume[s] undesirability, objective tragedy, and potentially a lack of personhood” (S. Taylor, *Beasts of Burden...*, op. cit., p. 131). See also Alison Kafer’s arguments supporting the idea that “defining «profound» impairment constitutes contested, and slippery, terrain” (A. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington–Indianapolis 2013, p. 60).

¹⁷ A.S. Afonso et al., *Spinal Deformities in Free-ranging Bull Sharks...*, op. cit., p. 3.

it had a Z-shaped spine. As the Bimini Biological Field Station media manager explains, “When I saw the size of him, I was immediately surprised that he could be so enormous and generally healthy looking despite this deformity”.¹⁸ Although the shark was tagged and released, the team did not have much opportunity to study its life as the animal soon got caught on a fisherman’s line and fell prey to a larger predator.¹⁹ A short film about Quasimodo published by the Bimini Shark Lab in social media takes recourse to the popular (human) narrative of overcoming disability (or rather bodily impairment or atypicality which is depicted as a tragic flaw). The animal thus embodies the “resilience of sharks, as even with a severe deformity, he was otherwise a hearty, healthy animal”.²⁰ While the story challenges the original presumptions made by the researchers, it easily conforms to the narrative of heroic overcoming. This example suggests that a doubly-othered (animal and disabled) body serves as typical “inspiration porn”²¹ and shows the prevalence of certain stereotypical preconceptions about disability across species boundaries.

A popular story of marine disability that cannot be easily moulded into a narrative of overcoming (one that presents heroic individual struggle against a tragic predicament) and could potentially fit in well with Nocella II’s concept of eco-ability is that of impaired orcas that satisfy their basic needs with the help from their pods. The heart-warming narratives inspired by the story facilitate identification with the animals and their anthropomorphization.²² Yet, despite challenging the common understandings of the Darwinian phrase about the survival of the fittest, which provided fertile ground for social Darwinism to flourish, they still reproduce other stereotypes. Often revolving around the notions of charity and altruism, they show the marine world as offering a moral lesson about the need to support the “weakest” ones in acts

¹⁸ S. Keartes, *Meet ‘Quasimodo:’ The Bull Shark with a Very Crooked Spine*, “Earth Touch News Network,” 25.10.2017, <https://www.earthtouchnews.com/oceans/sharks/meet-quasimodo-the-bull-shark-with-a-very-crooked-spine/> (accessed: 27.12.2020).

¹⁹ *A Special Catch! Quasimodo the Bull Shark with the Deformed Spine!*, Bimini Biological Field Station – Shark Lab, Facebook, 13.05.2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=238994853832167> (accessed: 27.12.2020).

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ The term was originally coined by Stella Young who explained it, for instance, in her TED talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much (accessed: 29.01.2021), in which she defines it as a popular tendency to “objectify one group of people [disabled people] for the benefit of another group of people [non-disabled people]” by communicating the following motivational message to the latter: “well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that [disabled] person”.

²² See e.g. B. Evans, *Disabled Killer Whale with Missing Fins Survives with the Help of Family Who Hunt for Its Food*, “Daily Mail”, 19.05.2013, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2326868/Disabled-killer-whale-missing-fins-survives-help-family-hunt-food.html> (accessed: 27.12.2020); K. Smith, *Orca Pod Helps Disabled Family Member – Proving These Beautiful Animals Belong in the Wild*, One Green Planet, 2016, <https://www.onegreenplanet.org/news/disabled-orca-survives-with-the-help-of-his-pod/> (accessed: 5.02.2021).

of love and good will and thus, squarely fit in with certain traditional human disability narratives.

At the same time, many such stories of impaired non-human animals are populated by characters who are lonely and dejected. What may serve as an excellent example of this tendency are cultural representations of a whale whose calls were studied by a pioneer of marine mammal bioacoustics William A. Watkins. In an article summarizing the results of a twelve-year-long research in the central and eastern North Pacific, Mary Ann Daher, Joseph E. George, and David Rodriguez examine the case of rare recordings of whale sounds at the frequency of 50–52 Hz. They established that these calls were produced by a single, unique whale that “did not concentrate its activity in any particular locale[as t]he whale spent relatively little time in any particular area, and did not repeatedly visit the same location during any season, or in subsequent seasons except during passages on somewhat different tracks”.²³ Based on the acoustic material that had been gathered, the scholars speculated that the animal may be “some anomalous or hybrid individual with a modified call”,²⁴ yet their hypotheses have not been confirmed to this day.

Some years later in 2012 in an interview with Kieran Mulvaney, Daher noted that

Obviously, he’s able to eat and live and cruise around. Is he successful reproductively? I haven’t the vaguest idea. Nobody can answer those questions. Is he lonely? I hate to attach human emotions like that. Do whales get lonely? I don’t know. I don’t even want to touch that topic.²⁵

Yet, it was generally assumed that the whale was a lone wanderer that cannot communicate with other representatives of his species. Rather than admired for its uniqueness, in popular imagination the animal has mostly been an object of pity and an epitome of loneliness, social alienation and disconnection.

As Mulvaney comments on the story of the whale, which has earned a cult status,

Nobody is certain because nobody has claimed to have seen it. But several people have heard it. And many more have heard of it. And what this latter group has heard about it has turned the whale into an unwitting celebrity, a cultural icon and a cipher for the feelings of many unconnected people around the globe. It is, allegedly, the Loneliest Whale in the World.²⁶

The whale served as a source of inspiration in film (e.g. Stare Yıldırım’s film *My Name Is Batlır, Not Butler*), music (e.g. Mike Ambs’s audio project entitled *The Loneliest Mix*, and the album *Migratory Patterns* by Lowercase Noises), literature (e.g. a young adult novel *A 52-Hertz Whale* by Bill Sommer and Natalie Haney Tilgh-

²³ W.A. Watkins et al., *Twelve Years of Tracking 52-Hz Whale Calls from a Unique Source in the North Pacific*, “Deep-Sea Research” 2004, no. 1 (51), p. 1894.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 1896.

²⁵ Qtd. in K. Mulvaney, *The Loneliest Whale in the World?*, “The Washington Post”, 26.01.2017, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/style/2017/01/26/the-loneliest-whale-in-the-world/> (accessed: 27.12.2020).

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

man) and fine arts (e.g. Aurora Robson's sculpture entitled *52 Hz* which was made of salvaged plastic debris). Although the 2010 findings made by John A. Hildebrand *and his intern* from the *Scripps Whale Acoustic Lab* suggest that the whale is no longer a single specimen on the planet,²⁷ the story of the Loneliest Whale in the World still feeds popular imagination, as evidenced by Geoff Marslett's 2019 animated short *The Phantom 52* or Chrysta Bell's 2018 song "52 Hz".

As Joshua Zeman, the co-founder of the Lonely Whale Foundation and the co-author of the *Finding 52* documentary film project,²⁸ stated in 2015, when launching a campaign to crowdfund his film, "For some people, he's so lonely[.] For others, he's celebrating his alone-ness. He's an inspirational message – because he continues to call out no matter what."²⁹ Due to his atypical behaviour, the whale has often been seen through the anthropomorphic lens as the disabled Other. As a consequence, the popular story of the animal served as a source of pity and inspiration also for the human "normals". As Zeman states elsewhere, "Humans are lonely. I think that people are transferring their own loneliness onto this creature".³⁰ Yet, people do more than that, as the whale serves as a mythical figure onto which they have been projecting their often ableist assumptions about behavioural difference. In this context, it is also noteworthy that Mulvaney posits that specialists in whale vocalization argue that the whale's idiosyncratic song probably does not prevent him from communicating with others,³¹ and what serves as the major disabling factor that may hinder these animals' communication is the environment and, more specifically: "the noise of shipping traffic, oil and gas exploration, dredging and other human activities"³², in other words, various types of anthropogenic noise and ways in which humans influence whale populations.³³

The story of the Loneliest Whale in the World as well as other popular cultural texts about marine animals, some of which address the problem of atypicality, such as Julian Tuwim's poem "Mr Miniscule and the Whale" or Disney's *Finding Nemo*

²⁷ See C. Baraniuk, *The World's Loneliest Whale May Not Be Alone After All*, BBC Earth, 15.04.2015, <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20150415-the-loneliest-whale-in-the-world> (accessed: 27.12.2020).

²⁸ Funded through a 2015 Kickstarter campaign, the film has not been released till this day.

²⁹ Qtd. in J.D. Sutter, *Help Find the World's 'Loneliest Whale'*, CNN, 12 February 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/11/opinion/sutter-loneliest-whale-kickstarter/index.html> (accessed: 11.09.2021).

³⁰ Qtd. in K. Mulvaney, *The Loneliest Whale...*, op. cit.

³¹ Mulvaney refers to the arguments put forward by Christopher Willes Clark (Cornell University), a researcher in bioacoustics who recorded the whale in 1993 and argues that "the animal's singing with a lot of the same features of a typical blue whale song" (qtd. in C. Baraniuk, *The World's Loneliest Whale...*, op. cit.) and thus can be heard by other whales.

³² K. Mulvaney, *The Loneliest Whale...*, op. cit. See also: Hildebrand qtd. in C. Baraniuk, *The World's Loneliest Whale...*, op. cit.

³³ In their article on *Worldwide Decline in Tonal Frequencies of Blue Whale Songs* M.A. McDonald, J.A. Hildebrand, and S. Mesnick mention also that "shifts in song frequency may be related to changes in a density index as these populations recover from commercial whaling" ("Engendered Species Research" 2009, no. 9, p. 20).

(2003), also resonate in Mateusz Pakuła's 2016 *Wieloryb: The Globe (The Whale: The Globe)*. The play was dedicated to the famous Polish actor, Krzysztof Globisz who experienced aphasia after a stroke and who played the eponymous role in the original production directed by Eva Rysova. *Wieloryb: The Globe* juxtaposes Globisz's biographical story with that of a whale that has been washed ashore. At first glance, this strategy may be seen as a hazardous, as people with disabilities and especially with intellectual disability or speech impairments (which are often mistakenly seen as indicative of intellectual disability) have often been denied humanity. Instead of humanizing his protagonist, Pakuła makes the voices from the margins of the Anthropocene speak in unison in their own unique language which "normal" humans struggle to understand. The whale is found on a beach by two young women, whose childish names (Zuzia and Marysia) underscore their ignorance and good will. The women step into the roles of Greenpeace activists and do all they can to communicate with the animal (and to this aim they approach him through the prism of various popular cultural texts) and alleviate the traumatic situation that he has found himself in.

In the context of Globisz's personal experience of disability, being washed ashore metaphorically represents the trauma of gaining disability and losing the old ways of functioning in the world. It thus seems tempting to interpret the animal's final return to the sea in terms of the restoration of the actor's former, non-disabled self in a process of long therapy. As Eli Clare notes, "[w]hen it works, restoration can be a powerful antidote to grief, fear, despair".³⁴ Yet, such restoration is not always possible, especially when it is informed by a nostalgic longing for a somewhat idealized original state. Thus, in his article which examines the concept of "restoration" in environmental and disability studies, Clare asks: "But how do we deal with bodily and ecological loss when restoration in its various manifestations is not the answer?"³⁵ Pakuła's text suggests that the answer to this question is adaptation. Although in the end the whale returns to the sea, the story presented in the text is not so much about a restoration, but rather finding the right means to express one's experience and communicate with the Other, using a wide variety of available, even if atypical means. First and foremost, it is a story of Globisz's return onto the stage and his devising new, alternative ways of communicating with his audience.

Globisz's lack of access to language is described in terms of the whale's separation from the ocean. It is most explicitly voiced in the whale's most lyrical monologue, which borrows from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and Fernando Pessoa's poem *Time's Passage*,

The world is the stage.
My brain is the stage.

³⁴ E. Clare, *Notes on Natural Worlds, Disabled Bodies, and a Politics of Cure* [in:] S.J. Ray, J. Sibara (eds.), *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln–London 2017, p. 254.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 255.

I am the stage.
 Sometimes all sensations seize me.
 For a moment I am more motley
 than a random crowd.
 All eras have belonged to me for a moment.
 All souls for a moment have had their place in me.
 But there are such waves
 such storms, such squalls
 that cause
 that the ocean draws away from me.
 Then I'm left with nothing.
 As if the water miraculously divided
 And I'm left in this divide
 on sand between two walls of water
 and I cannot walk as I have no legs
 because I'm a fucking fish
 Filled with emptiness to the brim.³⁶

Powerfully communicating Globisz's "existential anxiety"³⁷ and sense of frustration and loss, the monologue subtly hints at the unstable nature of his condition – the ebb and the flow of aphasia. This is also conspicuous in the whole play in which moments of anger and defeat are counterbalanced with comic and light-hearted scenes where the whale acts as a jester or "a new version of Charlie Chaplin with a cane and a frock",³⁸ draws sexually-explicit puns on a board, and dances to Freddie Mercury's *I Want to Break Free*. In a similar manner, the pathos of the above-mentioned monologue is instantly ruined by bathos, as the whale's well-meaning, but largely ignorant female helpers burst out crying and admit that they are "no rainbow warriors"³⁹ and they are not even members of Greenpeace, which sheds light on their earlier somewhat inept attempts to understand the whale, using various clichés taken from the *Finding Nemo*,⁴⁰ or Simon Wincer's 1993 cult classic *Free Willy*. Such references to shared cultural knowledge and experiences played an important role in Globisz's own process of healing and learning to communicate with his environment anew. Initially, the doctors were convinced that the stroke robbed him of intellectual capacity. A moment of breakthrough came when Globisz's wife told him a joke from one

³⁶ M. Pakuła, *Wieloryb. The Globe*, Lokator, Kraków 2016, pp. 43–44. In the original version, the first three lines are in English. In my translation of the remaining part of the monologue, I've used fragments of Richard Zenith's English translation of Pessoa's poem (F. Pessoa, *F. Pessoa & Co.: Selected Poems*, R. Zenith [trans. and ed.], Grove, New York 1998, p. 162).

³⁷ J. Kopciński, *Globisz*, "Przestrzenie Teatru" 2017, no. 2, <http://www.teatr-pismo.pl/przestrzenie-teatru/1658/globisz/> (accessed: 5.02.2021).

³⁸ D. Dudko, "Wieloryb. The Globe": *I want to break free*, Onet Kultura, 14.04.2020, <https://kultura.onet.pl/teatr/wieloryb-the-globe-online-recenzja-spektaklu-z-krzysztofem-globiszem/89n0ymp> (accessed: 4.02.2021).

³⁹ M. Pakuła, *Wieloryb. The Globe...*, op. cit., p. 44.

⁴⁰ In the Polish version of the film, Globisz voiced one of the characters – Marlin.

of his favourite films.⁴¹ While the references the female characters make to various cultural texts strongly resonate with Globisz's personal story, they seem comically absurd as a strategy to understand a whale. Thus, the process of communication in the actual stage production of the drama took place beyond words. As Dawid Dudko notes, what played the key role in it were: "the melody, body language, and touch".⁴²

Importantly, the play does not suggest that the communication problems result solely from the whale's limitations. On a literal level, the nature of his disability does not result from any form of impairment but is rather caused by dislocation into an environment that is maladjusted to his needs. This points to the context-dependent character of disability, as defined by the interactional model, according to which "it is the interaction of individual bodies and social environments which produces disability".⁴³ The problem of the environment that the play suggests, but does not fully explore in the context of Globisz's disability, is largely connected with the stereotypes and clichés (including the story of the Loneliest Whale in the World) that the female characters evoke to better understand the animal Other and his lived experience.

This problem is also conspicuous in some responses to the play. Although far from presenting Globisz as an object of charitable pity, some popular reviews reduced the performance to a romantic tear-jerker in which the actor heroically struggles with his limitations. Waldemar Sulisz, for instance, openly admits that he "lacks words" to describe "this unique play" and mostly focuses on the actor's personal story of disability. We also learn that "[w]e see tears in the finale of the performance, and earlier among the audience. One can feel a lump in one's throat".⁴⁴ At the same time, there is little to no mention of the artistic quality of the performance. Even in Jacek Kopciński's otherwise insightful review of the performance, one may find a statement that turns the performance into "inspiration porn" for non-disabled audience. He states that the play has as much therapeutic value for Globisz as for the spectators who are "mostly strong and able-bodied", but who nevertheless easily "get dispirited".⁴⁵ This shows how difficult it is to empathetically respond to the sense of loss that often accompanies acquiring an impairment without taking recourse to stereotypical, often ableist interpretations and narratives of disability.

In the play the two women eventually develop a sense of bond and connectedness with the whale and in the end when the animal is released back to the sea, they re-

⁴¹ Ł. Badula, 'Wieloryb *The Globe*' w *Łaźni Nowej: Mów do mnie jeszcze*, Kultura online, 25.01.2017, rpt. in "Dziennik Teatralny", <http://www.dziennikteatralny.pl/artykuly/mow-do-mnie-jeszcze.html> (accessed: 4.02.2021).

⁴² D. Dudko, "Wieloryb. *The Globe*"..., op. cit.

⁴³ T. Shakespeare, *The Social Model of Disability* [in:] L. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed., Routledge, New York-London 2013, p. 218.

⁴⁴ W. Sulisz, *Wieloryb the Globe w Teatrze Starym*, "Dziennik Wschodni", 8.01.2017, <https://www.dziennikwschodni.pl/co-gdzie-kiedy/teatr/wieloryb-the-globe-w-teatrze-starym-recenzja-spektaklu,n,1000192418.html> (accessed: 4.02.2021).

⁴⁵ J. Kopciński, *Globisz*, op. cit.

peatedly “howl like wild creatures”⁴⁶ in an attempt to bid the whale farewell in a more animalistic way to the melody of Joe Cocker’s *With a Little Help from My Friends* which they all sang together in the preceding scene. Finding a way to communicate in spite of the differences does not rest exclusively with the Other, but is a collaborative process in which all interlocutors need to make an effort to reach out to one another. The play is not about an animalized disabled Other finding a human voice, but about searching for a new language to communicate with the Other – be it a disabled or an animal Other. After all, the title of the play alludes not only to Globisz’s last name or the famous Elizabethan theatre, but also the globe of the Earth and thus to its all aquatic and non-aquatic inhabitants.

What serves as another example of using a marine animal to comment on the forms of human diversity that are commonly labelled as disability is the BSL poem *From the Depths* by John Wilson,⁴⁷ which provides a hash commentary on the 1880 Milan Conference (the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf). Choosing oralism over manual education, the conference participants passed a ban on the use of sign language in schools, which nearly resulted in the death of sign language and marked the beginning of what is often referred to as the Dark Ages of Deaf education. The violent “slashing” of sign language has been presented as an act of extreme violence by a number of Deaf artists in their works, such as: the 1993 painting *Milan, Italy 1880* by Mary J. Thornley, which alludes to Francisco Goya’s *Third of May, 1808* and presents bluish geometrical figures of the executioners pointing their rifles at a cracked ASL sign, or the above-mentioned poem by Wilson.

From the Depths compares the damage done to Deaf culture to hunting and killing a whale. It juxtaposes the hectic, rapid, and violent actions performed by the whalers with the elegance and refinement of the whale “whose graceful tale slices the waves”.⁴⁸ The harpoon with which the former inflict a mortal wound to the animal is compared to a cane with which a Deaf child is punished for signing. The second part of the poem presents the events that took place one hundred years later in the 1980s: the rise of Deaf activism in the UK. The slogan “Save the Whale!”⁴⁹ used by the activists in the poem positions their political struggle to preserve BSL in the environmental context. The poem finishes with an image of a majestic whale gracefully slicing the waves with its tail.

The whale serves as more than just a metaphor for sign language. It points to the interconnectedness of biodiversity and cultural diversity. Accentuating “the in-

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 62.

⁴⁷ The poem was produced in 1993 by the Deaf Owl Productions, the first all-Deaf production company in the UK. A recording of the poem signed by John Wilson and directed by Nick Sturley is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCtW6BDYoHQ> (accessed: 5.02.2021).

⁴⁸ J. Wilson, *From the Depths* [in:] K. O’Reilly (ed.), *Face On: Disability Arts in Ireland and Beyond*, Arts and Disability Ireland, Dublin 2007, p. 61.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 62.

terweaving of bio- and cultural diversity”⁵⁰ and challenging the socially constructed nature-culture binary, Eli Clare argues that

[e]cological restoration is one powerful way to repair the damage wrought by monocultures and to resist the forces of eradication. A radical valuing of disabled and chronically ill bodies inseparable from black and brown bodies; queer bodies; poor and working-class bodies; transgender, transsexual, and gender-nonconforming bodies; immigrant bodies; women’s bodies; young and old bodies; fat bodies – is another part of the same repair and resistance [against] the impulse toward and the reality of monocultures.⁵¹

A similar idea emerges from Wilson’s poem which highlights the close connection between biological and cultural diversity in order to reinforce its argument for Deaf conservation.

The question of hostile, inaccessible, and maladjusted environment is also addressed in the play *In Water I’m Weightless* (2012). Written by the disabled UK-based playwright Kaite O’Reilly, it consists of a series of monologues about experiences and social perceptions of disability, which in a post-dramatic fashion are not attributed to any specific characters. Commissioned for the Cultural Olympiad that accompanied the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics, the play was produced by National Theatre Wales by a cast of five d/Deaf and disabled actors.

In one of the monologues, a wheelchair user who is about to start an independent life in his/her own apartment, declares that the first thing s/he is going to do when s/he moves out of his/her parents’ place is take a bath. S/he describes this celebratory act in the following way: “I think the first thing I’d do is run a long, deep bath and float seductively in the bubbles. In water I’m weightless, like a mermaid – in my own element, free to move”.⁵² Free from the “watchful eyes and caring, prying fingers”⁵³ of the parents, carers, and therapists, who always strictly control this activity and the amount of water in the bathtub for fear that s/he might drown, the speaker presents taking a bath in the privacy of his/her own apartment as the epitome of freedom – an able-bodied privilege that is often denied to people like him/her.

This image also works on a metaphorical level, which is connected to “a theme that runs through all the monologues of the play,” which Nina Muehlemann defines as the “discrepancy between the ways disability is read and interpreted by society and the ways it is experienced by disabled people themselves”.⁵⁴ The sense of weightlessness – resisting the gravitational pull of the earth – represents being free from the burden of social constructs and expectations which the speaker discusses earlier in his/

⁵⁰ E. Clare, *Notes on Natural Worlds...*, op. cit., p. 258.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 259.

⁵² K. O’Reilly, *In Water I’m Weightless* [in:] K. O’Reilly (ed.), *Atypical Plays for Atypical Actors*, Oberon, London 2016, p. 149.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁴ N. Muehlemann, *Interrogating Wholeness through Access Aesthetics: Kaite O’Reilly’s in Water I’m Weightless*, “Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance” 2018, no. 23 (3), p. 462.

her monologue when s/he mocks the charity discourse that conceptualizes a disabled individual as an object of pity. The so-defined weightlessness thus accentuates the socially-constructed and context-dependent character of disability which disappears, or rather dissolves, in an alternative, liquid environment in which solid and fixed ideas developed in the terracentric and ablecentric world no longer hold water.

Submerging one's body in water is not only a liberating but also sensual experience which facilitates free expression of one's sexuality. Although spatially limited by the side walls of the bathtub, the speaker juxtaposes the experience with the oppressive control of the environment in which s/he has been raised. "Float[ing] seductively in the bubbles" is described by him/her as "be[ing] in [his/her] own element".⁵⁵ Water is presented as more compatible with his/her alternative embodiment which is no longer seen as a liability but a desirable physical asset and a source of sensual pleasure. The sensory experience described in the play integrates the speaker with the water environment and shifts the perspective from that offered by "terrestrial ontology of bounded zones"⁵⁶ which sees "matter as fixed and grounded"⁵⁷ to that which values fluidity and flow. The fixedness of the material and social environment traps the speaker in a narrowly defined role of a helpless victim of fate. By contrast, the sense of unity, integration, and openness to potentiality that the watery experience triggers allows him/her to embrace his/her impaired body and enjoy its sensual pleasures.

Resisting easy categorizations, the speaker positions himself/herself in a space in-between the human and the animal. In water, s/he transforms from an object of pity into a mermaid – an extraordinary and amazing supernatural creature that has a power to seduce. In the context of disability, the image of a mermaid may bring to one's mind an instant association with such disability drags as Dolores Delago, or Lady Gaga's 2011 performance. Yet, the crucial difference is that in O'Reilly's play the image of a mermaid connects with personal and intimate experience of disability. The empowering performance takes place in water without an audience and serves not so much as an act of enfreakment that aims to satisfy the visual expectations of those who fit in the norm, but as an act of self-definition and self-discovery. The water in the bathtub is both literally liberating, as it facilitates unrestrained movement, and metaphorically cleansing, since it frees the protagonist from the burden of social preconceptions about his/her disability. In O'Reilly's play water thus serves an alternative environment which enables new ways of thinking about one's body and disability as a socially-constructed category.

To conclude, in all of the text I have examined, water and aquatic life stimulate a reflection on various aspects of disability, suggesting a potential for intersections, inspirations, and alliances between disability studies and the blue humanities. Subtly

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ P. Steinberg, K. Peters, *Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking*, "Environment and Planning D: Society and Space" 2015, vol. 33, p. 253.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 248.

hinting at the possible problems of approaching the Other through the prism of cultural clichés and stereotypical representations, Pakuła's *Wieloryb. The Globe* offers an image of a whale washed ashore which shows disability as a context-dependent phenomenon that requires certain forms of accommodation. A similar idea pervades Kaite O'Reilly's play where water is shown as an alternative, accessible, and liberating environment which is juxtaposed with the physical and mental barriers of the human, amphibiotic world. Finally, John Wilson draws a connection between biological and cultural diversity in his poem *From the Depths* which uses the image of whale hunting to comment of the history of the d/Deaf community in the UK. Although in all of the stories presented in the texts that I have discussed water and marine life still remain an area of human projections or a source of metaphorical representations, they all challenge traditional terrestrial and ablecentric binary categories which have for centuries been used to explain and organize the world, and suggest their unfixity and fluidity. In doing so, they turn to what as Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters call wet and "more-than-wet" ontologies which may "facilitate the reimagining and re-enlivening of a world and our being-in-the-world" along new, not only non-anthropocentric and non-terracentric, but also non-ableist lines.

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