

three  
**remember**

WHAT DO WE REMEMBER AND what do we forget? How do we name and categorize what we can barely observe, for what purpose, with what results? For example, there is only one marine mammal that the dominant scientific community calls by their Indigenous name. There are supposedly impossible hybrid dolphins along the route of the triangular transatlantic traffic trail of captive human cargo that defy species. There is a battle for the domain name "amazon" in which a huge corporation has more leverage than the ancient rain forest, a whole region of the planet.

What do we need to remember that will push back against the forgetting encouraged by consumer culture and linear time? What can we remember that will surround us in oceans of history and potential? And how?



Once upon a time, I thought the name “Amazon” belonged to Black lesbians. Then I learned that the Amazon was a specific place storied around the world by colonizers who were afraid of the fierceness of the people who would not conform to their ideas about gender and land. I continued to rejoice. And to identify.

As of this writing, the giant retailer that doesn’t even have to be named may be about to win a lawsuit for the domain name “amazon.” A lawsuit against the rainforest itself. The whole geographic region. Wasn’t it only in 2018 that Colombia acknowledged that a rainforest has rights?

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

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

I love you impossible dolphin, quietest in the river, breathing close to the surface. I’m grateful for what you remember even if you never say. And I’m keeping your name in my mouth like a river internal, like this love ever flowing. I am keeping your name in my mouth every day. All day.<sup>10</sup>



<sup>10</sup> #mariellepresente

In 2016, reports circulated with evidence that dolphin mothers sing to their babies while they are in the womb, and for a few weeks after so they can learn their names. Not only that, but according to the report, the rest of the pod holds space for that learning, quieting their other usual sounds so this can happen.<sup>11</sup>

Several loved ones have sent me the articles that share this information. And as a person whose mother sang and talked to me before I was born, it resonates. And interestingly enough this new research was shared, according to these articles, not at a meeting of marine biologists, but at the American Psychological Association meeting in Denver in August 2016. The article never mentions the species of dolphin. This is something that it would feel so good to generalize. As mammals, it would satisfy a deep longing to be part of a practice of mother-child singing, community listening. Held. Named.

Held. Deep diving, as I often do, I learned that the observations leading to this insight about mother/baby womb singing were observed in a specific context. Captivity. A mother dolphin who gave birth at Six Flags Discovery Kingdom. From the pictures I would say a bottlenose dolphin, but even the website doesn’t name the species. It matters to me that this practice of singing, communal listening, was observed not in the open ocean but in the confines of captive dolphin birth. I think of Debbie Africa, who gave birth secretly in prison, how the other women prisoners used sounds to shield her birth process. They protected the two of them from guards so that she and the baby were able to share precious time together, undetected for days. I think of Assata Shakur too, impossibly conceiving and giving birth to her daughter while a political prisoner, mostly in solitary confinement.

<sup>11</sup> See many articles including Stephanie Pappas, “Mama Dolphins Sing to their Babies in the Womb” in *LiveScience*, August 9, 2016, <https://www.livescience.com/55699-mother-dolphins-teach-babies-signature-whistle.html>.



And how she listened to her angry daughter, and the dreams of her grandmother when they told her she could be free. They could be together. And a community of freedom fighters made the demand and the dream real.

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

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

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



Have you heard about Clymene? A popular name in Greek mythology (and the hair weave and wig marketplace,

apparently), Clymene is also the name of the dolphin at the forefront of the minds of marine biologists studying hybridity.

Who is she? A dolphin who escaped the record, only identified as a species in 1981. Mistranscribed when Europeans first identified her in the 1800s and then dismissed as a false identification. What is her range? The shape and trajectory of the transatlantic slave trade, West Africa to the Caribbean and North and South America. Height? About the height of a stolen person. Weight? About the weight of a stolen person.

The Clymene dolphin moves in revolutions like a spinner dolphin. She has a Black cape like a striped dolphin. Where did she come from? Her origins are elusive. Genetic testing of her skin about five years ago in Portugal found that, depending on how they approached the research, they got different results. Quantum skin? Particle genes?

When they did nuclear genetic testing, it seemed the Clymene dolphin was more closely related to the spinner dolphin, but when they tested the mitochondrial DNA (tracing only the maternal line), they found Clymene was more closely related to the striped dolphin. What happened?

The theory now is that she's both. The Clymene dolphin is a hybrid of the spinner and the striped dolphin and therefore may be the most recent dolphin to evolve into existence. And while usually a hybrid form would have to be isolated from the parent species to retain its distinct features, Clymene has somehow, done this while swimming all the time in pods with Striped and Spinner dolphins, but giving birth as Clymene over and over again. Her revolutions. Her Black cape. Sometimes you need both. Her corkscrew turns, her Black lips, spinning from West Africa to the New World, hidden in plain sight for centuries.

My grandfather once told me he identified with Atlas, son of the mythical Oceanid Clymene. Sky on his shoulders. Burdened. Strong. The other young people in Anguilla used to call him "World," and maybe that's the riddle. If Atlas stood at the edge of the world and held up the heavens so the Earth wouldn't break, what did my grandfather find at



the edge of himself that was so heavy or heavenly or starred? What did he learn from his mother, grandchild of shipwreck, about the edge of the world or the end? Here, on a particular edge of the Caribbean Sea, a curve in Anguilla they call Rendezvous Bay, ancient site of transient Arawak ceremony, stewarded this half century by my family of origin sometimes with grace, my grandfather taught me to float on my back. He said look at the sky. This is where I still come to look for him. That sky is where I see him in my dreams. I am still learning to trust that something can hold me.

My default mode is burdened strength.

Atlas, Titan, son of the Oceanid Clymene, father of Calypso is an interesting referent for a young man on a small island. The 2019 Junior King of Calypso, Super Mario, won the annual competition with a song about the neglected youth of Anguilla, which was centered around the question "Who's looking out for me?" I guess Super Mario, the heroic plumber, Italian immigrant brother is an interesting referent too. I think my grandfather, who grew up a so-called "illegitimate" child, wearing clothes his mother made out of flour sacks could probably relate. How strong do we have to be? Does it have to do with how traceable our origins are?

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

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

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

The sky.



What struck me first was this sentence: "Several of the captives have gained renown as quick learners and creative performers." They were talking about the oceanarium lives of the slope headed dolphins with the ridged teeth (*Steno bredanensis*), but I thought they were talking about you. And me. And all of our brilliant friends who have had to learn so fast, perform so creatively here in our captivity.

I kept reading. "At Sea Life Park in Hawaii, a Rough-toothed Dolphin mother and a Common Bottlenose Dolphin father produced a calf that lived for four years." The life span of this dolphin should be thirty-two years. What happened? I researched Sea Life Park, which celebrates its hybrids. They advertise on their website right now that you can swim with a "wholphin." Say they teach children about genetics with a special creature who is part bottlenose part false killer whale or was it melon headed whale, or was it...? 140 dolphins have died in captivity at Sea Life Park. The ones who are hybrids are marked as "UNSPECIFIED DOLPHIN OR PORPOISE" in all capital letters like that. Also none of their causes of death are listed definitively. But I dug and I dug as if morbidly compelled and I found the hybrid calf who lived four years. And according to this death record, she had no name but "HYBRID STENO MAMO" in all capital letters like that.

There is a 1974 article in the *Journal of Mammalogy* about this captive dolphin and her tragic story.<sup>12</sup> Her mother was born in the open ocean and captured in 1969, while pregnant. Shortly after arriving at Sea Life, newly captive she had a miscarriage. What did they name her? Makalani, the eye of

<sup>12</sup> Thomas P. Dohl, Kenneth S. Norris, and Ingrid Kang, *Journal of Mammalogy* 55, No. 1 (February 1974): 217-22.



heaven. God is watching. At the time she became pregnant again, she was captive in a tank with two male bottlenose dolphins. The article does not characterize this as a breeding scheme, more like an aquatic housing crisis, but who knows. Three months before she gave birth, they placed her in a different tank with two female dolphins of her same species. She gave birth around 4pm on October 4, 1971. Scientists were allowed to come to the facility but not to measure the newborn or anyone else. If this dolphin lived, she would not only be a hybrid of two different dolphin species, but what scientists also had defined as two different dolphin families. A big deal. A small dolphin. Female, showing signs of both species, swimming clockwise around her mother perpetually. The other female dolphins with her helped the mother release her umbilical cord.

As a mother, Makalani was protective. Slapped a trainer who tried to move the young dolphin. Makalani attacked another person who tried to touch the baby. In Egypt, the name Makalani means "she knows." What did she know? The scientists looked on and referred to the newborn based on her talent for following her mother. They called her a "precocious youngster." When the scientists concluded their several months of observation they felt all signs were good. The dolphin was smart and well and protected. One day she would be a star performer at Sea Life Park. In their article, they proposed that maybe she was proof that those two different dolphin families weren't different families after all. What a victory for dolphin unity, conservation, education! This article is cited again and again in studies on dolphin hybridity.

But according to the death records this same precocious youngster died in 1975 at four years of age. Was Mamo her name? Her cause of death is left completely blank. The other causes of death at Sea Life are disturbing when listed: food poisoning, malnutrition, brain hemorrhages, multiple still births, killed by another dolphin. But they don't list the cause of death for this dolphin at all. What would be incriminating enough for this facility to refuse to mention? It leaves us to

fabulation. The death records say Makalani died two years earlier. Was it the loss of her mother at two years old that did it? Did they separate the dolphins, try to breed the mother again? Were Makalani's actions against trainers in protection of her child too disruptive for the Sea Life way of living? Was it a housing problem, a feeding problem, an unanticipated function of being a dolphin that had never before existed in captivity?

Keiko Conservation, the organization that re-published the death records online, says that Sea Life Park should be shut down.<sup>13</sup> The Sea Life Park website says you can swim with dolphin hybrids and eat a meal with your family at an authentic nightly luau today if you want.<sup>14</sup> They don't say anything about a once famous hybrid who lived to be only four. They don't say anything about her mother who died four years after capture. Nothing on their website either about the dozens of spinner dolphins, bottlenoses, sea lions, seals who have died in their care over their forty-year existence. Some scientists, those who depend on dolphin and whale captivity for their research, protest the use of what they call biased terms like "emotional," "majestic," "children," "solitary confinement" in documents about marine mammals in captivity.<sup>15</sup> Because you might think of these animals as people—you know, as parents, as prisoners, as relatives, as friends.

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

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.keikoconservation.com/post/kamoana-s-death-marks-140-dolphins-that-have-died-in-sea-life-park-s-care>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.sealifeparkhawaii.com/>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/animal-emotions/201907/orcas-are-majestic-emotional-beings-who-have-children>.



question. He died in captivity too, after great grandma Edith succumbed to pressure from her community and especially my great grandfather (after whom little John Gibbs was named) to place him in an institution. He died there. In captivity. Within the first twenty-four hours. I have not heard the cause of his death in there.

Captives learn quick, perform creatively, or else. I am writing this for great grandmother Edith. The artist. Eye of heaven. In honor of what she knew even if she couldn't act on it. I am honoring her as who she is. Creator of the universe, source of all love. Thwarted protector of a child like no one had seen before. Her love never ended. Her love lives right now. Here in my breathing. I would swim around her clockwise. I would show her how her love survived all of this time, in the quick learning creatives who scream here in captivity. I am circling and circling her name. I am writing this for great uncle John Gibbs, the forgotten. The reclaimed. The proof that what they said family was, was not family. With a witness that it is not too late to create structures of care that honor his existence. To unlearn the hiding and the shame.

What I need to say is, you are. The walls around your life, the silence around your death, and the language all work to erase you and remove you from me, but they are not stronger than my grief, because my grief is fueled by love and I claim you. And I've come back for all the names I've never known since you were stolen. And I am never far away from you in fact. I am creator and creation. Right here, the source of all love ever. I strike away the lies about you with my lungs and tears, my circles and slaps. Eye of heaven. You are watching. And I don't know everything, but yet, I know.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> #nomorebackrooms #disabilityjusticenow #freeallmammals  
#abolitionnow



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

Decades earlier, my grandmother Lydia Gumbs got a message from some Atlantic bottlenose dolphins too, they inspired her design of the revolutionary flag, seal, and insignia of Anguilla: three bottlenose dolphins swimming in a circle. She colored the dolphins orange to represent endurance. The circle represented continuity. And though the revolution was short-lived, our listening continues. My sister has this symbol as a tattoo. It lives on as the major logo and symbol of Anguilla to this day.

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

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

The message for me today is about specificity. About choosing a lane with all my infinite potential. About how my world-traveling grandmother made a commitment to a small island. About how strong we grow sometimes, swimming upstream. About what the world can learn from the visibility of



our message in a context that is specific enough to ring clear. And to trust that all water touches all water everywhere.

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

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



Sing the song of the new narluga or the old skull (my age) newly named. Sing the song of the twisted toothed of the bottom feeder of the thrice betrayed. Open mouth of the singing narluga whose song Sony Hifi did not record. Much is made of the narwhal mother who found in beluga whatever she found. Beluga is known for being whatever and changing forever into whatever's around. Knotted life of the noun narluga whose hybrid name means nothing much. Known only by the Indigenous hunter who kept the skull on his roof until taxonomists clutched. Wonder yet, at the penciled presumption of the shape one made in a break in the ice. Wonder yet at the warmth in the Arctic that makes life out of life against frigid advice. Call the

name of the known narluga, which is not narluga and you do not know.

But imagine what it took without breakthrough technology to eat like a walrus but not haul onto ice. Or to gravitate towards pack ice and open water for the same reasons. Or to know yourself only by yourself and not from reflection anywhere nearby. Or to sing a song that means something, but only to you unless a nearby bowhead whale can remember something similar from centuries ago. Imagine what it is to be depicted in the newspaper based on an extrapolation of remains in the imaginations of the ones who hunt hunters. Or to know there are songs like "Baby Beluga" that are not about you. They are not about you. Or to sometimes, for a moment, know there has never been anyone more magical. Or to secretly inherit the powers of unicorns and shapeshifters in the bright cold dark of the 1980s. Or to die a thousand deaths of misrecognition, sacrificed to an insistence on the integrity of species. To remain impossible as long as species exist. Or to live forever for the same exact reason. And to sing.