Humpback Johannes (a.k.a. Johanna): a Dutch tragicomedy featuring a hyperreal whale
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Of old, stranded whales have attracted considerable attention in the Netherlands. Several sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings portray scenes of men and women standing near or on top of the beached animals, often showing a particular fascination for the impressive size of the genitalia of male specimens (see, for example, Barthelmess and Münzing 1991; Sliggers and Wertheim 1992). A whale that had beached itself or washed ashore was a rather rare event, a spectacle that facilitated gazing at the beast that would otherwise be submerged in the oceans, invisible to landlubbers. Whales were subject to fantasies and myths and believed to be hideous and ominous creatures. Most of the time, however, they were objects to be hunted down, killed and used as economic resources. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century industrial whaling brought several species to the brink of extinction.

Until the late 1960s, the whaling business went largely uncontested. This changed almost overnight, and from objectified litres of oil, kilos of meat and blubber and other marketable products, large cetaceans turned into sacrosanct symbols of threatened oceans and nature (Einarsson 1993; Blok 2007; van Ginkel 2007b; Epstein 2008; Kalland 2009; Zelko 2012; Sowa 2013). Television series like Flipper and the Jacques Cousteau documentaries about the undersea world contributed significantly to this transformation (Kawashima 2005), as subsequently did the highly mediatised Greenpeace ‘Save the Whale’ campaign. In general, human-animal relations were changing rather radically by then (Mullin 1999; DeMello 2012). Some social scientists regard this transformation as part of the civilizing process (Franklin 1999). The ‘natural’ dominance of mankind was questioned: 'the categorical
boundary between humans and animals, so fiercely defended as a tenet of modernity, has been seriously challenged, if not dismantled in places’ (ibid.: 3). This applies in particular to the relations between humans and whales. From dreaded Moby-Dick-like sea-monsters whales seem to have transformed into humankind’s surrogate kin or even venerated saintly creatures.

While stranded whales have for centuries been arousing human curiosity, the interest has only intensified over the past four or five decades. As part of the changing nature of human-animal relations, animal rights issues surfaced. Nowadays, there is a widespread belief in the West that stranded whales demand the special care and assistance of humans, as happens for example in New Zealand when a pod of stray pilot whales end up on a beach and rescuers and volunteers go to great lengths to refloat the animals. Something similar happened in the Netherlands, when on Wednesday 12 December 2012, a 12-metre humpback whale (Megaptera novaeangliae) stranded itself on the sandbank Razende Bol (Raging Knoll) near the island of Texel. Humpback whales are very rarely spotted in this part of the North Sea. Still alive upon discovery, the vicissitudes of the young humpback received huge media attention, and increasingly so because local people began attempting to save the marine mammal from a sure death.

In this article, I will first describe the events as they unfolded in the week following the stranding of the whale. The drama attracted a barrage of (social) media attention, especially because the humpback was alive upon discovery. Second, I will analyse why it made headline news in the Netherlands for a week. What makes a stranded whale so special? My central argument will be that whales in general occupy a special position in the human-animal divide, and that this applied to the stranded individual humpback in particular. The whale was soon dubbed Johannes, although eventually ‘he’ would turn out to be a ‘she’. Subsequently, Johannes was renamed Johanna. Such anthropomorphism is not uncommon. Although they are wild animals, whales have become something of near-humans or humanoid animals, and individuals are sometimes given names. Cetaceans are not just any other animal, and some may even be ranked higher than humans, particularly so in the diverse world lumped together under the name of New Age or esotericism (see van Ginkel 2007b; Zelko 2012; Servais 2005). They can incite strong emotions. While the blurring of the nature/culture boundary made the stranded humpback of special interest, the heavily mediatised efforts to rescue the animal escalated into a contest about knowledge claims with high moral overtones. The matter of concern became who was entitled to appropriate the whale, dead or alive. By then, the humpback had turned into a hyperreal creature, a Super Whale that was saturated with a plethora of meanings.

Methodologically, my work is a ‘netnography’. I have used communication via Facebook, Twitter, blogs, community websites, audiovisual media, digital versions of national and regional newspapers with online commentary sections and so on to chronologically reconstruct what happened and how people reacted upon the fate of the marine mammal and responded to each other’s views and opinions. The tragicomedy that evolved triggered my interest because it merged two of my (maritime) anthropological interests: how humans
perceive and deal with large cetaceans on the one hand and Texel and its population on the other. The island and the islanders have been the locus and focus of two prolonged stints of ethnographic fieldwork I did, particularly among fisher folk.³

Texel is the westernmost of the Dutch Wadden Islands and home to approximately 13,600 people. It is a popular tourist destination: during the summer, the rate of holiday-makers to islanders is four to one. Partly in connection with tourism, the island hosts a nature museum and seal and bird sanctuary: Ecomare. It employs several marine wildlife experts and animal caretakers. In addition, the internationally renowned Netherlands Institute for Sea Research (NIOZ) and the Institute for Marine Resources and Ecosystem Studies (IMARES) are also based on Texel. By chance therefore, humpback Johanna beached itself in the vicinity of a number of institutions that seemed to be highly qualified to assess the animal’s condition. As we shall see, however, their knowledge and expertise became highly contested during the events that unfolded after the whale had stranded.

A whale of a week: how a dying animal divided the Dutch

Wednesday, 12 December 2012

Soon after the skipper of a local boat and a kite surfer discovered the humpback, Ecomare, IMARES and NIOZ staff started to size up the situation. In addition, the Royal Dutch Navy sent a landing craft from its small naval facility on the island. People from the local branch of the Royal Dutch Sea Search and Rescue Society (KNRM) went out with a boat to see what could be done. They asked the sos Dolphin Foundation and the Dolfinarium (Oceanarium) in Harderwijk for advice. Together, the institutions began planning a rather modest rescue operation to get the whale back to the open sea. They had good hopes that they might be successful during high tide. They expected that the sea mammal would perhaps be able to free itself from the sandbank. With small boats, they could then try to prevent it from getting beached again.

By noon, the water was rising and a few hours later the whale was seen swimming. However, the beast remained trapped in shallow waters. Although it briefly left the sandbank, it returned after an hour or so. The whale now seemed to be stuck solidly. At 15:30, Ecomare staff twittered that hopes for the animal were quickly running out. They apprehended that due to its weight, internal organs and muscles would be damaged to such an extent that the humpback would die soon.

When the initial efforts to rescue the humpback whale failed, a public outcry to ‘do something’ began mounting steadily. Several news programmes on radio and television and websites and social media were devoting attention to the whale’s plight. In its hopeless position, the animal proved tragically photogenic. Being out of its natural habitat, it was easy to photograph and film for those who braved the strong tidal currents near the sandbank. The sorrowful images added to the media attention, particularly when the whale was said to be ‘crying’—secretion was dripping from one of its eyes, probably because it was trying to get rid of sand. The eight o’clock evening news on national tv also broadcast an item on the whale. Many expected s/he would die overnight.
Thursday, 13 December 2012
The next morning, however, the humpback was still alive, albeit it on the face of it barely. Its position was considered to be hopeless. By about 13:00, biologists reported that the animal's condition was too weak to survive a stressful rescue operation with heavy equipment. It would also be virtually impossible to get the equipment in situ, because the sandbank had treacherous, ever-changing gullies. But with the rising tide the animal seemed to become livelier again, occasionally flapping its tail, moving a fluke and spouting. At around 18:00, the Sea Search and Rescue Society decided that there would be an ultimate attempt to free the whale. In freezing weather conditions, a team of twenty-five whale rescue volunteers with four boats attempted to liberate Johanna from her desperate straits. It was a pitch-dark evening. A helicopter was hovering above the scene to provide light. No doubt, the noise and sounds exacerbated the whale's agony. The attempt was in vain. The net that should drag the whale to open water was not strong enough to cope with 20 tonnes of weight and slipped, threatening to inflict injuries to the beast. Johanna could not be moved an inch and faced a sure death. Much to their own disappointment, the men had to give up their efforts. By about 21:00, Ecomare reported the failure on social media.

Friday, 14 December 2012
Ecomare and the Sea Search and Rescue Society decided that no further rescue attempts would be made. They deemed bringing in heavier equipment impossible, while the humpback would also suffer needlessly from using it. The time that had elapsed since Johanna's stranding was simply too long for the animal to stand any chance of survival, even if it could be dragged to open water. At around 16:00, the Ministry of Economic Affairs decided that the humpback's suffering should not continue. It sent two veterinarians who would sedate and euthanize the animal. At 16:30, Texel's mayor, Francine Giskes, used her discretionary political powers and declared the area around the humpback subject to a local state of emergency (noodverordening). Due to this ordinance, boats were not allowed to come in the vicinity of Johanna unless they were authorized to do so.

By this time, some people began interfering in what was going on off the Texel coast. Despite the emergency order, salvage company Het Noordgat sent their boat 'Orca' from Terschelling, another Wadden Island. The crew wanted to aid the 'ignorant' Texel whale rescuers, but their trip was in vain. Police boats stopped them from entering the prohibited zone. Apparently, the 'Orca' crew had been contacted by Dion Graus, an MP for the populist Party for Freedom (PVV). Graus had animal welfare in his portfolio and was a staunch defender of animal rights. Another proponent of the outcry to take action was Lenie 't Hart, who in the early 1970s founded a seal rehabilitation centre in Pieterburen, a small village near the Wadden Sea. She and Graus were acquaintances and cooperated in matters of animal welfare, more specifically marine mammal welfare. 't Hart twittered: 'The mayor @Texel will not stop the action! The #whalesavers of #Terschelling will attempt to rescue the animal'. The message was ambivalent: 't Hart probably implied that Giskes could not stop the action. However, some followers misread the message as stating that the mayor would condone the
action. One of the reactions to this tweet reads: 'At last, has the lady [the mayor] come to her senses? Really, such a tart. #humpback go for it! We will deal with that woman later on!'4 Despite 't Hart’s big words, the salvage boat was stopped and had to return after the skipper was fined.

Early in the evening, Johanna was sedated with the intention to euthanize her. The authorities considered it to be the most humane option given the animal’s desperate situation. Vitriolic responses to items devoted to the issue began flooding news websites and social media. Lenie ‘t Hart twittered: '#Humpback hits its murderers with its tail. They continue nonetheless. Lots of blood. There is video footage'.5 According to the website of The Black Fish, a small marine conservation organization, this is what allegedly happened:

Men held down the animal and used large syringes to inject the animal. It is still unclear exactly as to what was injected and where. But the rescue team that was still blocked from the site by maritime police could clearly see the animal frantically flapping its tail, a clear sign it is in pain.6

How a small number of men could hold down a struggling 20-tonne animal is unclear. It was abundantly clear, however, that the mood started to grow grim.

Saturday, 15 December 2012
With a small team including a biologist and escorted by a police boat, mayor Giskes inspected the situation on the Razende Bol sandbank Saturday morning. Although the humpback had been declared dead the evening before, amazingly the animal still showed signs of being alive. During a Saturday afternoon press conference, Giskes announced that the humpback's condition would be assessed again the next morning. If needed, a second attempt to sedate or euthanize the animal would be undertaken. However, vets of the Harderwijk Dolfinarium had meanwhile stated that they would not take on this task, because they deemed it too dangerous to approach the whale's tail. The Dutch branch of Sea Shepherd, a militant anti-whaling organization, was squarely opposed to supplying sedatives in order to kill the animal. Its director, Geert Vons, told news reporters: 'Usually, explosives are utilized. They are an effective means. But the skeleton has already been promised to Naturalis in Leiden, and explosives will of course damage the skeleton'.7 The 'promise' was simply standard procedure, however. The state had long before assigned the general task to take care of the remains of stranded whales to Naturalis Biodiversity Center. Nevertheless, some pro-animal activists even began suggesting that the skeleton had been sold to Naturalis, a bizarre accusation that has never been substantiated.

More and more acid critique was hurled at Ecomare, Naturalis, Texel municipality, mayor Giskes and the KNRM. The latter organization responded with a statement on its Facebook page, making it clear that the volunteers felt 'deeply shocked,' 'offended' and 'hurt' by the criticism.8 There were also words of praise, but they got lost in the cacophony of negative social media messages. Among the more moderate reactions was a press release by Greenpeace. Greenpeace contended that the rescuers were highly competent and could not be blamed for anything: 'If they cannot save the whale, we cannot either. ... It is very unfortunate that the
rescuers who have gone to such great lengths are currently being critiqued’. The media ignored this matter-of-fact statement and focused exclusively on the emotionally charged calls of more radical animal activists. This made for one-sided journalism, a bias that can only be explained by the hysteria that peaked on this Saturday. On social media, people seemed to have an incontinent urge to vent their immoderate opinions, unrestricted by any concern about what their words might mean or cause to the people they targeted. The cloak of anonymity apparently encouraged uncivil behaviour.

Sea Shepherd twittered a melodramatic message asking their supporters to come to coastal town of Den Helder (situated relatively close to the Razende Bol sandbank) to aid the stranded whale: ‘Johannes needs our help’. In reality, the activists probably wanted to launch a protest against what they regarded as a ‘very unprofessional rescue operation’. A score of people showed up, some armed with black Sea Shepherd flags. This flag is a version of the Jolly Roger pirate flag: the emblems are an angry-looking white skull with a dolphin and whale engraving and below it a Neptune’s trident crossed with a crosier in the shape of a shepherd’s crook. Many of the protesters were dressed in black uniforms as if they were about to chase off infamous whale hunters. No heroic victory was achieved, however. The boat that took them to the stranded whale had to return to Den Helder; maritime police summoned the crew to leave the area. How the Sea Shepherd people had wanted to help Johannes remains unclear, unless they had intended to shove the beast back into the sea with their bare hands. Their prime goal was media attention, however, and that goal they did achieve. A media celebrity had also boarded the vessel. Brimming with indignation, she exclaimed in front of a television camera: ‘We [Sea Shepherd] represent the people’.

The Sea Shepherds were not the only ones who wanted ‘to do something’ or, rather, sought to capture free publicity. Marianne Thieme, Member of Parliament for the Party for the Animals (Partij voor de Dieren), also made her appearance. She had already twittered that she had serious doubts about the rescue operations, retweeting a message by ’t Hart who claimed that there had been ‘a lot of blood’. Interestingly, the previous day Thieme had twittered that ‘Humpback Johannes will find peace on the Razende Bol. @ Ecomar, @ knrm and the military have done what they could do’. Apparently, she had changed her opinion overnight. Looking at the responses to her Friday tweet explains why: some of her followers were dissatisfied with her standpoint and expressed critique. Thieme must have thought that she would have to act in order to come across as a dependable ‘animal friend’. In a series of tweets, she hinted at the possibility of a new ‘rescue operation’. With a small boat of The Black Fish, Thieme headed for Johannes to see for herself what was happening. Wearing a survival suit and a helmet, she made sure that her attempt was photographed and published on social media. She had to return soon, however, because the weather was too inclement to ride the waves and darkness prevented spotting the location of the whale.

With the press present in Den Helder, Thieme announced that she would ask the government to create a ‘platform’ of experts in order to prevent ‘the mistakes’ that in her view had been and were still being made in the case of Johanna. She denounced the fact that whale
'specialists' of 'environmentalist organizations' had been kept away from the rescue operations. No doubt, she was referring to Sea Shepherd and The Black Fish, leaving it in the dark what their expertise was and what they would have been able to accomplish. Thieme further complained that the Harderwijk Dolfinarium vets, who according to her lacked specific knowledge concerning stranded cetaceans, had tried to sedate the animal. She contended: 'It is sad and alarming that due to the absence of an adequate state protocol, rescue operations have been frustrated, while so many experts were available to extend a hand'. Sea Shepherd director Vons said similar things. Thieme and her Party for the Animals professed that such a protocol was badly needed and announced that questions would be submitted during next week's Parliamentary meeting (that is, on Tuesday 18 December 2012).

In a message posted on The Black Fish website, its director Wietse van der Werf – a former Sea Shepherd activist – referred to the Netherlands being a wealthy nation with a global reputation in maritime affairs and engineering,

yet removing a small amount of sand to rescue a humpback whale off our own coast suddenly proofs too challenging for us. I am very keen to see us become a country exploring the very cutting-edge of marine mammal rescue technology and innovation. I think everyone will agree that we need to be a lot better prepared to deal with other stranding incidents in future.12

This claim to modernity and expert knowledge would resurface later on.

Though not her domain of expertise, Lenie 't Hart also participated in the discussions about the stranded humpback. Previously, she has been pivotal to many controversies concerning the question of whether to rescue sick or injured seals. 't Hart took the position that every individual seal should be saved, whereas some organizations – including Ecomare and IMARES – were of the opinion that as long as the seal population as a whole was not at risk, the weaker specimens should not necessarily be saved, rehabilitated and released again, because this would potentially spread diseases and thus hurt the seal population. In regard to the rescue operations of the humpback whale, 't Hart claimed that in her network, there were 'real' experts who had first-hand knowledge about how to refloat cetaceans. They apparently included the salvage company from the island of Terschelling. In numerous tweets, 't Hart launched her criticism. She talked about the 'heartless experts' based on Texel, the Naturalis 'body-snatchers', the rescue workers who 'screwed up' and so on. Posing as 'Ambassador for Seals' (and by extension any marine mammal), she sought and easily received media exposure because the charisma of seals and whales shone on her.

Saturday noon, a message appeared on a Facebook page calling on the world to take action and e-mail the following statement to Texel municipality:

I am so shocked about you not letting the real experts try to save the stranded, endangered humpback whale. ... It is all over facebook and we are already aware that Dolfinarium Harderwijk are NOT competent to take ANY decisions about stranded whales! The Dutch authorities are being laughed at.
Thousands of people from all over the world are now following this, contacting media, and much more. I urge you to let the rescue orgs [organizations] such as The Black Fish, Sea Shepherd and others do their job at the spring tide tonight! The world is watching you!13

Jackie Bigford, a Canadian social media strategist and animal friend, concocted the message. (We will encounter her again.) Apparently, the activists who believed they could still rescue Johanna had used their global connections to put more pressure on the Dutch authorities. I don't know how many e-mails the Texel authorities actually received, but they did not make a difference anyway. The humpback continued to be shielded from further interventions. But the issue was now out in the worldwide digital arena, with talk of a whale being ‘murdered’ because even before it died its skeleton had been ‘sold to a nature museum’ 14 Such accusations continued to be launched over the next few days. Ecomare, nioz and Naturalis staff as well as mayor Giskes began receiving intimidating phone calls, nasty text messages, hate mails and even death threats.

Sunday, 16 December 2012
Early Sunday morning, an emotional ‘t Hart fulminated in front of a TV camera: ‘He is dead, dammit. No! This is terrible. This makes me cry. They didn’t give the animal a chance. Oh, this is terrible’.15 Soon thereafter, she tweeted a message stating ‘The #humpback is dead’. In an interview with Radio 1 she told on the phone that ‘Those who wanted him dead have won. We could have saved the animal’. For RTL’s ‘Hart van Nederland’ television programme ‘t Hart moaned: ‘I am so powerless against people who don’t give other people an opportunity to give the animal a chance to live. They have only thought about death, and I find that so horrible that I could cry’. The news that Johannes had succumbed spread quickly. Messages of sympathy filled ‘t Hart’s Twitter account, sometimes referring to ‘murderers’, ‘assassins’ and so on. At the same time, there were also critical tweets aimed at ‘t Hart, but these were by far outnumbered by sympathising ones.

Even prior to the authorities, ‘t Hart was informed by some of her allies that the whale had died. They had illegally entered the off-limits zone around Johannes aboard The Black Fish boat. These witnesses included Pieterburen seal rehabilitation centre employee André van Gemmert and ‘independent cetacean researcher’ Laura Lauta van Aysma. According to the activists’ press statements, this ‘medical team’ went to the Razende Bol to check on the humpback’s physical condition.16 However, neither van Gemmert nor van Aysma was trained as a veterinarian or biologist, but apparently the protesters attributed them more expertise than all the other specialists combined. Van Gemmert had a long experience as a zookeeper and van Aysma had just earned an MA degree as a musicologist with a thesis on humpback songs. Nonetheless, the media referred to her as a ‘biologist’ and gratuitously accepted that a medical team had checked on the whale. Whatever their expertise and merits, they were no professionals concerning whale physiology. As in the case of Thieme and her Party for the Animals, ‘t Hart’s claim was that ‘real’ knowledge and expertise had been available – implicitly deriding the ‘knowledge and expertise’ of institutions like Ecomare, the Insti-
tute for Marine Resources and Ecosystem Studies, the Harderwijk Dolfinarium and Naturalis.

There seemed to be no end to ‘t Hart’s social media outburst. She tweeted: ‘The #naturalis body-snatchers are already dissecting the #humpback. They could not wait’.17 This was untrue, but that did not matter. The culprits also included nioz: ‘Eyewitnesses report that #nioz vessel Stern kept everyone away from the humpback. At that moment he was still positioned in such a manner that he could have been rescued more easily’.18 This tweet was also inaccurate. Showing no self-restraint whatsoever, ‘t Hart continued deluging the social media with her tendentious messages. She stated that according to ‘eyewitnesses’ ‘four men in white attire’ (vier mannen in witte pakken) had been with the humpback the previous night. Allegedly, fast police boats had taken them in the dead of night and two helicopters provided light. Not a shred of evidence was provided for these ‘facts’. It is important to know, however, that whenever disaster strikes in the Netherlands, mysterious ‘men in white attire’ are said to have shown up, implying conspiracy and cover-up activities.

The allegations need not surprise us, given the fact that ‘t Hart’s and Ecomare’s (and nioz’s and IMARES’s) take on the tasks of seal sanctuaries were at loggerheads. In the recent past, there had been several other frictions that to some extent make the controversies intelligible. The Party for the Animals, The Black Fish and Sea Shepherd and their supporters were involved in a fierce fight with the Harderwijk Dolfinarium in connection with a stray orca that in 2010 was found in the Wadden Sea. The killer whale – dubbed Morgan – was in an ill condition and taken to Harderwijk to gain in weight and recover from its weakness. A team of scientists decided that it could not return to nature thereafter. Instead, the animal was transported to an Oceanarium on the Canary Islands. This aroused indignation among animal welfare activists, who initiated a ‘Free Morgan’ campaign, demanding that the marine mammal be released to the sea. These activists included many of those who again raised their voice in connection with Johanna. Salvage company Het Noordgat and the knrm had entertained their own sustained conflicts, which had to do with the latter conducting its operations free of charge, while as a commercial venture the former did charge salvage fees. It deemed the knrm to be an unfair competitor.

Interestingly, the activists occasionally referred to the ‘commercial interests’ of their opponents (Naturalis, Ecomare, the Dolfinarium), without ever mentioning their own commercial interests. What would seal sanctuary Pieterburen earn without putting ‘pitiful’ seals on display for an entrance fee? Marine mammals generated income in other ways, too. Only months after the Johanna media hype, the national lottery organization Nationale Postcode Loterij supported the Dutch branch of Sea Shepherd with a donation of 900,000 euro. It was not the first time. The lottery has been supporting Sea Shepherd since 2007, with donations totalling an amount of €14,700,000.19 Its argument must have been something like the following: ‘whales are good; anti-whaling is good; Sea Shepherd activists are anti-whaling, hence, they are good and deserve our support’. In this case, media attention produces money. When it concerns whales, all critical thinking seems to recede because whales are considered to be gentle, flawless, morally superior, but vulnerable alas. They therefore need human protection (even if they do not belong to
any of the endangered cetacean species). To be associated with whales proves to be an asset for both sponsors and recipients.

But let's go back to Sunday the sixteenth. Sea Shepherd announced they would organize a silent march with lights and lanterns in the Den Helder to commemorate Johanna's tragic death. News sites that covered this remarkable initiative were quickly inundated with witty and ironic comments. It would be tempting to quote a copious selection, but I will limit myself to just two examples that seem to be mocking whale lovers: 'For my dearest Johannes... That he may rest in peace... Of course I offer my heartfelt condolences to the bereaved... I'm all devastated... inconsolable and utterly desperate'.20 Someone else twittered: 'The Netherlands has now officially gone berserk'. Many comments announced that there would be a silent parade for a dead fly, a dead worm, a dead spider, and so on. A few newspaper cartoons ridiculed the issue, including one that shows a few protestors holding torches above water whilst apparently walking over to the sandbank to commemorate Johanna. Furthermore, a rogue book of condolence appeared on the internet, using the motto 'You will always remain in our hearts, humpback Johannes'.

The messages implicitly derided the fact that in the Orwellian view of pro-animal activists, some animals apparently are more equal than others. The gist of most remarks was that silent marches for dead animals are ridiculous. However, they were less rare in the Netherlands or other western countries than many thought.21 Still, silent marches for animals are a relatively recent phenomenon. In the Netherlands, they started by the turn of the millennium, mimicking earlier examples for human victims of 'senseless violence'. For instance, when in 1999 the police shot an aggressive dog ('Boris') to death, animal lovers protested loudly and organized a silent parade. Subsequently, there were similar marches, although they remained rather exceptional events.

Johanna was not killed, however. She died from myopathy and massive internal damage because she had been lying on the sandbank for too long. In the end, Sea Shepherd refrained from organizing the silent march, but others took over and posted messages on Facebook to come to the Den Helder railway station at 18:00 on 16 December. A few score of people showed up. Most of them arrived by train. They walked from the station to the nearest sea-dike. They were furious and frustrated. A woman said: 'An animal doesn't have a vote, therefore we have to call out.... The whale could have been rescued; so many volunteers were available. But they were stopped by politics [read: politicians]'. Some of them expressed the opinion that Ecomare and NIOZ employees had failed to rescue the behemoth, that they killed it or – perhaps worse still – that there had been a conspiracy to let the whale die so that her skeleton could later on be exhibited in the Leiden Naturalis museum. A former martial arts champion who had co-organized the march said: 'The animal friends among us regret this murder – I just regard it to be a murder. Secondly, I just think that the people here should just devote a lot of attention to this – Parliament also – to what has happened. This is inadmissible'.22 After a brief moment together on top of the dike, he thanked the participants, who then returned home.
Monday, 17 December 2012
During high tide on Monday, the dead humpback was towed to the nearby NIOZ harbour in order to be dissected. The beast was hoisted onto the quay, where staff of Naturalis and the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of Utrecht University subsequently removed its blubber and meat from the bones. Everyone who wished to do so could take a look on the NIOZ premises. Johanna’s blubber and meat were eventually recycled into engine oil and green energy. The skeleton went to Naturalis, not to be exhibited but to enable scientific research. The humpback’s bones are still stored in the institute’s depository.

Johanna’s inglorious end did not mean that the media hype stopped immediately. In a press statement dated 17 December,‘t Hart’s seal sanctuary, Sea Shepherd and The Black Fish reiterated the need for a whale stranding protocol. Van Aysma, who was referred to as an ‘independent scientist’, suggested that the experience with refloating beached whales in Australia and New Zealand should be introduced in the Netherlands. (Note that these whales are usually pilot whales, which are considerably smaller in size than humpbacks). The Black Fish director, van der Werf, stated that the expertise to deal with these kinds of situations was present in ‘nature conservation organizations’ not the ministry or the Dolfinarium in Harderwijk. Presumably, he hinted at the ‘independent’ expertise of the three organizations that had released the press statement.23 Journalists of the conventional media used the press statement and apparently took it for granted again that there had been a ‘medical team’ and that ‘real experts’ would have been available. In an interview with a radio programme, Sea Shepherd director Vons once more insinuated that there existed an intimate connection between Naturalis and IMARES; the latter advised the authorities, while the former had been promised the skeleton. He implied that this was the reason why the humpback should die without using explosives to euthanize it.

On 17 December, Jackie Bigford, who had dramatically called on the world to rescue Johanna a few days earlier, posted the following blog for ‘the Great One of our Watery Spaces’ whose life was ‘stolen’:

I see a puddle of tears pooling below her compassionate eye. I am understanding her tears were shed not for herself, but for those who stole her life through wrong thinking, which directly or indirectly led to wrong choices and actions. She weeps tears for them, as she knows they have yet again lost an opportunity to use her plight of being in need of rescue, as an opportunity for them to rescue themselves. ... Despite what her family has suffered time and time again due to a society’s lack of compassion and awareness and greed, she still choose to forgive and then to grace another opportunity for a people to make a deposit in their Karmic Bank, simply by using right thinking and right choice.24

Such spiritual stories of suffering and sacrifice would seem to have obvious parallels in New Testament creeds. They position Johanna in a realm beyond the human and animal world, yet intervening on behalf of them. New Age was heir to what has been dubbed ‘countercultural mysticism’, which among many other things had constructed a ‘metaphysical whale’ (Zelko 2012). Cetaceans are felt to be enchanting, and are
believed to communicate with humans to reveal deeper truths (Servais 2005). In other words, they are animals of a sacred supernatural kind: ‘creatures surrounded by feelings that are ambiguously those of awe and horror’ (Leach 1964: 33).

Tuesday, 18 December 2012
As they had announced, Dion Graus of the Party for Freedom and Marianne Thieme of the Party for the Animals posed questions to the Economic Affairs minister, Henk Kamp, during the 18 December parliamentary session.25 Graus referred to ‘humpback Johannes’s protracted and needless torment’, continuing to state that ‘For five days, Johanna has been lying on a sandbank and this was not acted upon well’. ‘Why’, he said, ‘was emergency help by experts [meaning salvage company Het Noordgat] refused? They went there amongst others at my request, but they have been denied access’. Graus asked several other questions, including the following: ‘Why does the mayor [of Texel] scoff at a globally renown sea mammal centre [that is, ’t Hart’s seal sanctuary in Pieterburen]? Is there more at play? Are there other issues at the expense of the whale?’

In his answer, minister Kamp did not flinch. He calmly explained that everything had been done to save the whale, and that he admired the rescuers and their heroic behaviour. When it became clear that their rescue efforts were to no avail, the animal should not suffer needlessly any longer. Hence the decision to euthanize the animal, according to Kamp. The first attempt to do so failed, and a second one was not necessary because the humpback had meanwhile died.

Graus replied that he also respected the people who had conducted the rescue efforts, but that they had not been conducted properly. He once more referred to the salvage company Het Noordgat and people with expertise (ervaringsdeskundigen) who had been refused access. ‘We need a rescue protocol and a euthanasia protocol like the ones in New Zealand, where they succeed in refloating humpbacks in no time’.26 Graus then almost literally repeated words The Black Fish website had released days earlier about the leading position of the Dutch in maritime engineering and salvage: ‘The minister cannot convince me that we are unable to refloat a humpback of a few thousand kilos. When Johanna had died, she was refloated within half an hour. Why wasn’t this possible when she was still alive?’

Kamp answered that the whale would have probably been severely injured by doing so, and he reiterated his admiration for the rescuers. He fully backed the decisions of Texel’s mayor:

The actions have been impeccable. No-one has been refused to offer help. The experts have only tried to keep the matter in hand. Every time we can learn from events like these. However, to harm the people who have done their utmost in difficult circumstances is something else. I know that mister Graus does not want that. I think that all of us should not let that be the result of this discussion.

Graus continued to mutter his complaints, but shrewd political veteran Kamp had cleverly and effectively defused the debate. Thieme then stepped in and claimed that there had been no direction because ‘expert organizations like Sea Shepherd, Lenie ’t Hart
[that is, the Pieterburen seal sanctuary] and Het Noordgat have not been involved. This implied that a chance was missed to fully rally all available experience and knowledge. Leaving it at that, she asked Kamp whether he was prepared to work on a protocol. Although Kamp vehemently denied that there had been no direction, he immediately promised that his civil servants would draft a 'whale stranding protocol'. ‘Next time such things happen, we can act according to a protocol so that the chances for these unique animals, for which all of us have warm feelings, are as good as possible’. Indeed, no-one could accuse Kamp or his civil servants of postponing to draft this document. Within half a year, it was sent to Parliament as if it concerned a hugely important matter (Protocol 2013). The protocol elaborated on responsibilities and what to do if a large cetacean beached itself. Important for the activists was the promise that an ad hoc expert team would be formed, which would include a veterinarian, a marine biologist and ‘representatives of the sea mammal sanctuaries’ (ibid.: 6). No names of institutes were mentioned, but one might surmise that perhaps the Pieterburen seal sanctuary would be one of them.

Clearly, social and political pressure was on and politicians wanted to make sure that they showed their concern and drive. The dictum ‘politics makes strange bedfellows’ also applies in this case. There once was a time when animal rights activism was considered to be the prerogative of political left-wingers, but such political clarity has obviously vanished. The self-pronounced spokespersons on behalf of Johanna the humpback cannot be pinpointed to a specific political ideology – except for their pro-animal rights stand. As we have seen, Thieme had close connections with The Black Fish, and ’t Hart and the Sea Shepherds as well. ’t Hart entertained warm relationships with Graus, who according to her was a fine ally in the fight for ‘animal welfare’. They joined forces in ‘club Johannes’, a temporary coalition. Even though this coalition was hardly mighty, it could yield considerable persuasive power because of its master symbol the whale that appealed to a wide audience, apparently also to a die-hard neo-liberal like minister Kamp.

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Party for the Animals leader Thieme published an opinion article in which she defended her position and pleaded ‘to give ratio a chance again via a value-free state protocol’.27 In a ‘motion of approval’, Texel’s municipal council extended unanimous support for the mayor and the way in which she had dealt with the situation. A big round of applause followed. Mayor Giskes told these had been ‘enervating days’. The island’s council also thanked those who had been involved in the rescue operations. Some twenty-five Ecomare employees and KNRM and other volunteers attended the council’s meeting to which they had been invited.

For a week, Johanna had been making headline news. With the whale dead and dissected, the commotion finally seemed to subside, although for a while comedians continued to poke fun at incorporating whales into the human world and organizing a silent march for a dead cetacean.
A hyperreal animal

We might say that to some extent the conflict with regard to the stranded humpback concerned an ideological and epistemic imbroglio. The activists continually called into doubt the professional adroitness of the institutions involved in the rescue efforts, contesting their legitimacy and authority and framing them as incompetent amateurs. At the same time, they created a self-image of dexterity, expertise and experience, claiming the right to appropriate the whale — symbolically at least. ‘t Hart stated that from the very start, ‘not the proper people’ had been involved in the rescue operation.28 ‘We know best and they are ignorant’, seemed to be the stand taken by those who opposed what had been going on. This peremptory knowledge claim evolved from a mixture of populist politics and populist science: ‘Oh well, which science?’, ’t Hart wondered in connection with the Johannes controversy, referring to the informed view of biologists.29 Through their use of modern media the activists succeeded in mobilizing support and sympathy among their constituencies. In a pattern underlying most Us-Them stand-offs, they used all means to scapegoat Ecomare, NIOZ, KNRM, the Harderwijk Dolfinarium, Naturalis, the Texel mayor and other authorities. That their messages struck a chord with a wider audience had much to do with the image of cetaceans and other charismatic animals that began surfacing in the 1960s and 1970s.

What we have at hand here is a case of speciesism: that is, the hierarchical ranking of human and non-human animals with some holding special rights and privileges over others on the basis of their biological species (Dunayer 2004). For a long time, whales have been commodities whose exploitation was not controversial at all. But in the 1970s, they gradually turned into the master symbol of environmentalists, nature lovers and subsequently a much wider audience (Kalland 2009; Epstein 2008; Zelko 2012). Whales have become ‘charismatic’ species, sacrosanct symbols of the marine environment that are invoked ‘as a metaphor for all that is sublime in nature’ (Gupta 1999: 1742).

Characteristics of various species of whales have been projected onto a kind of ‘super whale’ (Kalland 2009: 28ff.), which is believed to be at the brink of extinction. This fictitious super whale — a composite of elements taken from various species of cetaceans — is anthropomorphized and therefore heavily charged with meaning and emotion. The super-whale has come to stand for all whale species and is considered to be intelligent, communicative, cooperative, sensitive, compassionate, caring and social. In short, this sentient beast metonymically represents everything that is ‘good’ in nature/culture (van Ginkel 2007b, 2007d).

As Niels Einarsson argues, the potency of whales as symbols and subjects of identification is their ‘humanized image’: ‘It is the implicit and explicit projections of human motives on to the behaviour of cetaceans which has given rise to a whole body of cetacean mythology’ (1993: 79). For some people whales occupy the top position in a hierarchy of animal species, even above human beings. In their view, whales are our ‘better selves’: ‘As metaphors whales have come to epitomize values and qualities that we like to see in our own species but that many of us feel that we have lost’ (Kalland 2009: 2). At the very least, many westerners perceive the animals as possessing some human qualities.
Although only a few cetacean species are in fact endangered, the super whale – symbolic representative of all whale species – is considered to be extremely vulnerable. The super whale is a simulacrum, a hyper-real creature (Baudrillard 1994) with particular public appeal. Humpback Johanna, the helpless leviathan in distress, seemed to embody the super whale in all its dimensions: for a week or so, the animal became the hyperreal Super Whale – in the Netherlands at least. At the same time, of course, the humpback was a very real animal that was dying, a perfectly natural thing in nature. But the hyperreal Johanna belonged to nature/culture.

The attention for the animal is also partly explained by its liminality; stuck on the sandbank while still alive it was a creature ‘out of place’ (Douglas 1966), while in a broader sense, whales seem to blur boundaries between fish and mammals (Blok 2007: 72). Liminality is ‘anti-structure’: a ‘gap’ in space, time and social structure. Ridden with ambiguity, the liminal often attracts maximum cultural and symbolic attention (Leach 1964; Turner 1977 [1969]; van Ginkel 2013). If this seems to apply to dead stranded cetaceans this size, it goes all the stronger for a live animal. This became clearly evident when, amazingly, a second whale washed up on the sandbank near Johanna only days later. This time, it was a sperm whale, and it was already dead. There was no outcry about this animal and it received relatively little media attention (at least until months later it was discovered that its intestines contained a treasure of highly valuable ambergris).

But let us focus on Johanna again. Right from the very first attempts to save this individual creature, it was drawn out of nature into the realm of nature/culture and moral ecology. It became the subject of extreme identification. From a ‘matter of fact’, the issue of rescuing it had evolved into a ‘matter of concern’ – or what Bruno Latour dubs ‘cosmopolitics’ (Latour 2004; also see Blok 2011). This is evident in the mediatised discursive competition that soon ensued. The politicization of the dying whale involved charges, counter-charges, conspiracy theories, and machinations. It was a contest that seemingly superseded any rational or reasonable goal. Interestingly, such struggles have usually occurred between the ‘moral community’ of anti-whalers and their opponents the pro-whalers (see, for example, van Ginkel 2007c; Kalland 2009). In this case, however, both sides to the conflict wanted to save the individual humpback whale. The activists’ accusations hit all the harder. Unsubstantiated allegations (‘lots of blood’, ‘murder’, ‘body-snatchers’, ‘men in white attire’, ‘conspiracy’, ‘money-making’) percolated in the social media and aroused indignation – on both sides: the one that sympathized with the activists and the other one that expressed empathy with the original rescuers (or believed that the animal should have been left to itself to die in peace right from the beginning).

In the week before she was literally reduced to energy and bones, Johanna seemed to embody – or perhaps was – a real Latourian ‘actant’. Departing from an Actor-Network Theory perspective, Anders Blok argues that whales ‘are increasingly individualised in their actor-hood, acquiring “personalities”, thus shifting moral territories and giving the idea of legal rights for non-humans increasing social plausibility’ (Blok 2007: 82). Depending on our theoretical and methodological point of view, we may or may not agree with this. However, the object–subject–object transformation of
Texel’s stranded humpback makes it abundantly clear that the whale’s quasi-actor dimension – if it can be termed that – was short-lived. Soon after her death, Johanna returned to an objectified natural realm. From a hyperreal creature, she became a really real dead animal that quickly disappeared into oblivion.

Epilogue

The first time the whale stranding protocol could have been used was by late July 2013, when a live sperm whale stranded itself on the island of Terschelling. Salvage company Het Noordgat, ‘the real experts’ according to the activists, attempted to rescue the animal, to no avail. It died the next day, nameless. There was no media turmoil and ‘t Hart, Thieme, Graus, Sea Shepherd and The Black Fish did not show up. Apparently, all cetaceans are equal, but some are more equal than others. Perhaps humpback Johanna (and orca Morgan) were in the limelight long enough to trigger an outburst of emotion. Be this as it may, the protocol that the activists had deemed so important, had not been of any use at all. Het Noordgat did not even pay any attention to it, stating that it would only lead to bureaucratic delay. In November 2013, an MP for the liberal party VVD (minister Kamp’s party) asked to expunge the protocol as part of a larger operation to cut excess state rules and regulations.

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Notes

1 This applies in particular to marine mammals held in captivity. Compare the story of Keiko the killer whale (Brydon 2006).
2 Robert Kozinets coined the term netnography in the late 1990s (see Kozinets 2010). It refers to a new method of ethnographic research, which initially focused mainly on consumer behaviour on the internet. Subsequently, it was broadened to other themes concerning communities and cultures on the world wide web (see, for example, Bowler 2010; Kulavus-Onal and Vasquéz 2013). Akin to ethnographic research, doing netnography requires immersing oneself in digital communities and studying ongoing interactions in online environments. Netnography can involve participation, observation, conducting interviews and so on. In my case, I have observed communication via online media in hindsight.
3 I conducted anthropological research on Texel from December 1989 to March 1991 and from August 2005 to September 2006 (see van Ginkel 2009).
4 Both messages appear on https://twitter.com/Lenie_t_hart/status/279608186636472320 (accessed 20 February 2015).
5 https://twitter.com/Lenie_t_hart/status/279654596601860096 (accessed 22 February 2015).
7 ANP press message, 15 December 2012.
15 RTV Noord, 16 December 2012. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v06L_6k9K9U. Also see http://www.noordhollandsdagblad.nl/stadsstreek/denhelder/article19622273.ece for a different camera position and editorial cut.
17 https://twitter.com/lenie_t_hart/status/280312283358429184 (accessed 27 February 2015). In another tweet, ‘t Hart claimed that Naturalis was already ‘cutting up’ the whale, while seals looked on. She soon apologized – rather haphazardly – for getting it wrong in another tweet. For an overview of her twitter messages (in Dutch), see http://es.twtrland.com/profile/Lenie_t_hart.
18 https://twitter.com/Lenie_t_hart/status/280306959901683715 (accessed 27 February 2015).
21 For example, in the state of Washington there were also memorial services for a whale that was killed by the Makah tribe in 1999 and in addition, a memorial was erected (see van Ginkel 2007a: 67ff.).
23 The press release can be found on http://www.theblackfish.org/media/pr/bultrug_protocol.pdf.
26 Graus probably referred not to humpbacks, but to pilot whales. Note that it often takes days to refloat the animals. Usually, a considerable number die.
27 De Volkskrant, 19 December 2012.
28 Radio interview NOS Radio1, 17 December 2012.
29 Argos TV Medialogica (min. 29:40), broadcast by Human/VPRO, 3 June 2013.
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