



Why Mourning for Minks Matters: Rebellious Grief as Practice of Solidarity

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Abstract The paper advocates the idea of grief as a key emotion for transformation. Following Judith Butler’s concept of grievability, it argues that a critical reflection on who (or what) is mourned reveals the normative orders of a society as well as its possible blind spots. As a particularly telling case, the mass culling of Danish minks that took place in 2020 as a preventive public health measure in the Covid-19 pandemic is examined. The response to the case sheds light on the various barriers of broadening the moral community. The paper explores some of the reasons for the practical disability to mourn for animals bred for use and argues that it is part misleading to focus on the species-line. Rather, it is a question of selective moral responsiveness which is dependent on the specific cultural context and way of life. In the last part of the paper, it is suggested that ecological grief work is a means to move from grief to empathy and solidarity and finally resistance. When others are discovered as grievable, they are acknowledged as vulnerable fellow beings which have to be morally considered. Grief, then, can be understood as a disruptive emotion which questions the current understanding of normality.

Keywords Anthropocentrism · Environmental ethics · Eco-grief · Grievability · Transformation

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Warum es von Bedeutung ist, Nerze zu beklagen: Widerständige Trauer als Praxis der Solidarität

Zusammenfassung Im Beitrag wird die These vertreten, dass Trauer eine Schlüssel-emotion für Transformation darstellt. Die Frage, wer (oder was) in einer Gesellschaft betrauert werden kann, so wird im Anschluss an Judith Butler argumentiert, legt deren normative Ordnungen offen. Exemplarisch wird dies an der Untersuchung der präventiven Massentötung dänischer Nerze im Zuge der Covid-19-Pandemie nachvollzogen. An den Reaktionen auf diesen Fall werden die verschiedenen Hürden für die Ausweitung der *moral community* herausgearbeitet. Dass Nutztiere nahezu unbetrauerbar sind, wird dabei nicht in erster Linie als Problem der Speziesgrenze rekonstruiert, sondern auf eine selektive moralische Ansprechbarkeit zurückgeführt, die wiederum auf einen spezifischen kulturellen Kontext zurückgeht. Ökologische Trauerarbeit kann daher ein Weg sein, den moralischen Horizont zu erweitern und Empathie und Solidarität zu entwickeln, die schließlich in widerständige Praktiken münden. Die Betrauerbarkeit von Mitlebewesen zu entdecken, holt sie in den Kreis derer, die moralisch zu berücksichtigen sind. Trauer ist somit eine Emotion, die mit Normalitätsvorstellungen brechen kann.

Schlüsselwörter Anthropozentrismus · Umwelthethik · Ökologische Trauer · Betrauerbarkeit · Transformation

1 Introduction

The idea of the Covid-19-pandemic as a magnifying glass has been brought forward prominently since its very beginnings: The virus and its global spreading did not only cause problems itself, but relentlessly revealed the vulnerabilities of the global community. Thus, the pandemic was also seen as a possible turning point, a chance for “rethinking the rules of reality” (de Paula 2020), to learn from experience, especially with regard to the climate crisis.

Yet, these hopes seem to be largely frustrated by now. Though there were striking examples of solidarity and a rising awareness of the interconnectivity of human and other-than-human agents, a fundamental revision of social, political or economic practices held off. Even worse: instead of broadening the moral community, the pandemic produced provincializing effects (such as re-nationalisation of dealing with a pandemic, most prominently evident in the highly unjust distribution of vaccines among affected countries depending on their economic power). It looks as if in the wake of the pandemic, a new tribalism emerged that narrows the limits of grievability.

What has been publicly displayed as pandemic grief so far shows a surprising lack of affectedness by suffering outside a rather intimate circle. It barely extends from those we share our daily lives with to co-citizens. Invisible borders for adopting an empathic we-perspective seem to result from belonging to different social, national, or cultural groups. The species-line, however, which might be expected to be strict, is at least semi-permeable – or rather: highly selective. Whereas news from sick pet

and zoo animals became a kind of popular journalistic genre that could count on compassionate reactions, the death of other animals was framed completely different. A particularly telling case is the virtual non-response after the killing of round about 14 million minks in Denmark.

In my paper, I will explore the conditions of “ungrievability” (Butler) for those peculiar victims of the pandemic. I will argue that the inability to mourn for minks sheds light on the various barriers that block the road to broadening the scope of those we consider morally relevant, let alone to rethinking the human/other-than-human relationship. Finally, I will suggest that practicing extended grief is crucial for true ecological solidarity.

2 What Happened? The Curious Case of the Danish Minks¹

The first and relatively early alarm with regard to minks in the covid-19-pandemic came from a Dutch government agency, the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NFCPSA), in April 2020. An investigation of the 16 reported cases of a covid-19 infection of minks and the one human case, that of an employee, on mink farms, led to an unsettling result: After all we know, it is highly likely that covid-19 is a zoonotic disease, that is, the virus has been transmitted from an animal, probably a bat, to its first human host. Along with bats and pangolins, minks are one of the many mammal species that can be infected with coronaviruses. What was troubling the authority is that these special cases provided evidence that the virus could travel also in the opposite direction and the transmission works “between humans and minks and back to humans” (Oude Munnink et al. 2021). In consequence, the mink farms turned into massive breeding grounds for mutations of the virus, each with thousands of potential mink hosts and thus of potential new variants to emerge and spread. Suddenly, minks appeared to be possible accelerants of the pandemic, a manifest danger.

Denmark, then the global market leader in mink fur with up to 1.500 farms, registered a first mink-case of covid-19 on the 15th of June 2020 (which is surprisingly late after the first human case in Denmark on 27th February). Unsurprisingly, the virus spread and mutated. The so-called ‘Cluster 5’ was born, a new variant that was found on 191 farms, in humans as well as in minks. On the 3rd of November, the Statens Serum Institute (SSI), the Danish public health institute, published a risk assessment with regard to human health that concluded that “continued mink breeding during an ongoing COVID-19 epidemic poses a significant risk to public health, including to the possibilities of preventing COVID-19 with vaccines” (SSI 2020: 1). This is due to a greater disease burden among humans as well as an increased risk of recurrence of new virus mutations by a large virus reservoir against which vaccines do not produce optimal protection. What is more, the assessment warned that there may occur “a significant deterioration of our opportunities to maintain epidemic

¹ The given reconstruction of events rests largely on the detailed and insight-driven study by Arich-Gerz (2022).



control in Denmark”, leading to the necessity of “further restrictions and limitations on community life” (SSI 2020: 3). Mink lives competed with human well-being.

One day later, on the 4th of November, Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen publicly announced the resolution that every living mink in Denmark has to be killed. By the end of November, 10 million Danish minks had been culled, roughly another 4 million until February 2021. The whole Danish mink population got annihilated.

The pictures of the dead mink-bodies and of the mass graves that were filled with heavy machinery went around the world. Once again, the mink adopted another role: that of the innocent victim, sacrificed for the sake of public health. Only then they were recognized as creatures and a belated compassion emerged, an effect evoked largely by paralleling human and non-human bodies.²

It is a tragic irony that while this iconography of horror was produced and thereby the minks became visible as fellow beings, it became increasingly clear that not only the legal but also the scientific basis for the mass killings was not very robust, to say the least.³ The Danish decision-makers were jumping to severe conclusions on a thin evidential basis. On the 12th of November 12, a rapid risk assessment of the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) came to a rather moderate evaluation with regard to the risk of transmission and the severity of infections:

On the basis of evidence available, the probability of infection with mink-related variant strains is assessed as low for the general population, moderate for the populations in areas with a high concentration of mink farms and very high for individuals with occupational exposure. [...] Patients reported to be infected with mink-related variants, including Cluster 5 variant in Denmark, do not appear to have more severe clinical symptoms than those infected with non-mink related variants, either in Denmark, or in the Netherlands. (ECDC 2020: 7)

Nevertheless, and in accordance with the earlier SSI paper, this one also does not rule out that living minks state a danger to public health. That is, the uncertainty about future transmission, infections and mutations is interpreted as severe risk. Though the likelihood and consequences of possible new variants are unclear, it is a scenario the ECDC advises to take into consideration (ECDC 2020: 8). As one among other and less drastic responses, such as human and animal testing or infection prevention, the ECDC adds the following policy recommendation: “National authorities should consider culling mink from infected farms and destroying raw pelts in accordance with appropriate biosecurity measures” (ECDC 2020: 2). That is, the scientific evidence did not dictate to kill all Danish minks. It did not even prescribe what to do with infected minks. It only suggests to consider a variety of responses and the need for political deliberation.

My point here is not so much that the decision of the Danish government appears questionable in hindsight. Of course, in order to make preventive measures

² Willfully or not, the pictures echoed the iconography of the victims of the shoa. For a further analysis of the iconography and its effects see Arich-Gerz (2022: 81-88).

³ In fact, the legal basis for killing the minks was highly disputed, see Arich-Gerz (2022: 60-77). Also, the federal minister of agriculture, Moge Jensen, resigned only two weeks later: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/11/18/denmark-mink-cull-coronavirus-minister/> (accessed 21.12.22).

effective, you cannot wait until all evidence is in. In other words, you have to act under conditions of uncertainty. In the Danish case, the culling appeared as a way to preclude undesirable future paths and thereby eliminate risk factors, that is, to reduce uncertainty (Arich-Gerz 2022: 93-94). Only later research confirmed that the Cluster 5 variant was no ‘variant of concern’ and the effectivity of vaccines was not weakened by it (Arich-Gerz 2022: 37-39; 112-115). Rather, it is striking that the political decision was more or less cloaked as a scientific one, that is, a necessity, an act without alternative. The killing of the minks was framed as inevitable. It *had* to happen.

Yet we are not at the end of the story of the culled Danish minks. The human intervention in non-human lives engendered a Lovecraft-like aftermath: The dead minks were not buried properly and resurfaced from their mass graves. They were killed but not gone, undead. The idea of the “zombie minks” suggested itself and was widely taken up in journalistic and social media. Explained down-to-earth, the rotting bodies produced gas and pushed them up through the light soil. Yet could there be a better manifestation of the idea that you cannot get rid of your deeds and that they will haunt you? Like ghosts of revenge, the minks seemingly refused to be ignored and forgotten. What they weren’t able to do in life, they did after their deaths. At least for a short moment.

What could be understood as the actual message of the scientific evaluations as well as of the minks was not heard. Instead of consistently reflecting on the man-made share of the conditions for the pandemic in general and the emergence of the Cluster 5 variant in particular, someone else was chosen a scapegoat, convicted guilty and executed in order to go ‘back to normal’: On the 25th of September 2022, the Danish government announced to lift the ban on mink farming and take up the production of fur again in 2023.

3 Beyond the Species-line: Fellow Beings vs. Resources

In a very concrete and practical sense, the case of the Danish minks had no fundamental learning effects.⁴ Despite this quite bleak outlook, I would like to suggest that looking at the case through a philosophical lens can help to illuminate a major problem of environmental ethics, namely that of widening the moral community beyond human beings. This project of reaching beyond the species-line has been brought forward prominently for decades and is still a major concern. Ethical anthropocentrism has early been identified as the ideological root of ecological problems by environmental thinkers (White 1967; Routley 1973). Consequently, the need for a new environmental ethics was stated, one that overcomes human chauvinism, that is, the principle that “humans [...] always come first and everything else a bad last”

⁴ In the Netherlands, which had been the 4th biggest producer of mink fur, this might look a bit different: After the killing of half a million minks, most of them by gas, the industry was shut down. But, to be more precisely: it was only shut down ahead of schedule, since the end of fur farming had been terminated until 2024 anyway, see <https://www.nationalgeographic.de/tiere/2020/06/coronavirus-ist-der-sargnagel-fuer-die-nerzzucht-in-den-niederlanden> (accessed 29.09.22).



(Routley 1973: 207). From deep ecology to posthumanist models, environmental thinkers seek to leave behind the anthropocentric rationale. In traditional western ethics, it is argued, non-human entities – animals, plants, eco-systems or nature itself – do not have a value on their own. Human chauvinism renders them valuable only in so far as they have a value for humans. That is, their value is nothing more than a derivative, which leads to rather morally troubling and counterintuitive consequences, as Richard Routley illustrates in his ‘last man scenario’: Imagine the last living man on earth. Human chauvinism would permit him to eliminate every other entity that is left (Routley 1973: 207).

Though the scenario may sound extreme, Routley’s thought experiment reveals the fundamental shortcomings of anthropocentric thinking when it comes to environmental issues. In the classic framework, it is quite difficult to provide reasons for why clearing rain forests, hunting whales or other activities that make use of natural resources for human benefit may *not* be morally right. If it is of advantage for human health, what could be possibly wrong with culling 14 million minks? Nothing to see, move on.

Bio- and eco-centric as well as holistic approaches, in contrast, have tried to shift the burden of the proof for morally permissible interventions, and I clearly sympathize with that strategy. I guess it is uncontroversial to say that at least in some cases, spelling out the consequences of anthropocentric ethics makes us feel uncomfortable or even contradict our moral intuitions. The pictures of the dead minks evoke moral discomfort, and this unease marks a flaw in the theoretical legitimation of our practices. Jokes about zombie minks only hardly cover the horror – including the awareness of the horrible human practices behind them. I would like to suggest that grief could be a more appropriate reaction to the millions of mink lives that has been eliminated. Yet grief or even public mourning have seem to be no real option in this case.

In what follows, I would like to explore some of the reasons for that practical disability to mourn for the minks. The first and – at least for environmental philosophers – most obvious reason that renders the minks ‘ungrievable’ seems to be the exclusion of non-humans from the moral community (Craps 2020: 3; Cunsolo Willox 2012: 141). Though human chauvinism surely plays a certain role here, I want to suggest that this is not the whole truth and that it is partly even misleading to focus on the species-line. Rather, the issue is more complicated and therefore needs differentiation.

If we are looking at actual relationships of humans to non-humans, we find a multifarious variety of how species interact and bond. There are cases of brutal exploitation and abuse as well as cases of forming a live-long partnership and building a loving community. The species-line can be crossed without bigger efforts, in fact, it seems meaningless in some cases. Without any doubt, some animals *are* grievable. If the family cat dies, you are allowed, perhaps even expected to mourn. You lost a companion, a family member, whose presence was cherished and is missed after its gone. The death of an animal may even arouse a strong emotional public reaction, even without any personal bond.

When in April 2018 Chico, a Staffordshire mix, was put down after he had mauled his two owners in Hannover, Germany, people expressed their anger about



what they conceived as injustice and held a vigil. Before that, 250 thousand people signed a petition against the decision and created the hashtag #FreeChico.⁵

The other way round, there are innumerable cases in which other human beings fall out of our affectional radius. Not every life has the same significance for us. And this is not only a question of attention economy. We tend to give no worth to what lies beyond our practical interests, as William James diagnosed (2001: 121). What James rather poetically called “a certain blindness in human beings”, that is, a more or less robust ignorance with regard to the importance of lives different from our own, may result in far less poetic and rather concrete consequences for those whose lives has been devaluated.

Judith Butler famously elaborated on the manifest harm that is done by exclusionary evaluative schemes. They are revealed through a massive selectiveness when it comes to grievability:

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as livable and grievable death? (Butler 2004: xiv-xv.)

If we do not mourn for someone, if mourning is not even a live option, this person lacks our moral recognition and, in a way, exists beyond our empathic horizon. Following Butler, this results in a de-realization of other lives. They are “always already lost, rather never ‘were’”, and so, “from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since they are already negated” (Butler 2004: 33).

Both James and Butler are primarily concerned with devaluated human lives. Yet I would like to suggest that their ideas not only allow for moving beyond an anthropocentric standpoint, but also provide fruitful conceptual resources for reflecting ecological issues.⁶ Asking why certain lives, human or non-human, are considered non-grievable, that is, what makes them not only count less but, in some cases, worth close to nothing, reframes the question of how we draw the limits of the moral community. In this light, I arrive at the following working hypothesis: If we care for other beings and consider them in members our moral community is not so much a question of species but of selective moral responsiveness, and this ability to be receptive is shaped by cultural context and a specific way of life, a *lebensform*. A critical reflection on who and what is mourned, and under which conditions this mourning can take place, thus reveals the normative orders of a society – as well as its possible blind spots, shortcomings and defects.

This diagnosis shifts the problem and it remains an open question if it does so for better or worse, or if it just paints a different picture. On the one hand, it makes humans look less like speciesists but more like ego-centrists that hardly include strangers in their moral considerations. On the other hand, it crucially expands the range of possible moral relations. I would like to suggest that at least we arrive

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/09/germany-chico-dog-that-killed-owners-petition-hanover> (accessed 06.10.22).

⁶ Similar suggestions have been made for example by Barnett (2017); Fuller (1992); or Stephens (2009).



at a more precise description of a situation if we do not adopt the human / non-human dichotomy as underlying rationale. Rather, identity, self-understanding and the specific form of life set the parameters of moral sentiments, including grief.

Let's come back to the Danish minks. In 2019, Denmark was the largest producer and exporter of mink fur in the world with an output of 14 million furs per year. The Danish fur industry is part of the Danish agricultural economy, which has been traditionally important, though it is no longer of major economic importance. Still, it makes killing minks part of normal business, even though it might be largely (and easily) blended out in everyday life by most Danes. One could even go so far to say that perhaps blending it out is an essential condition of keeping it part of normal business. Mink farming practices remain unchallenged as long as they appear unproblematic. That is, it is in the interest of the mink industry to arouse no doubts with regard to the normality and reasonableness of what happens on the farms. Moral discomfort has to be avoided in order to evade a critical evaluation that would question this normality. An essential element is to keep minks out of the moral community: the Danish minks, as well as any other productive livestock, must not qualify as fellow beings whose lives are considered to be significant, but merely as a valuable natural resource, closer to things than to living beings. This reification is done not only by a great deal of denial and ignorance, but also by some kind of conceptual engineering. At the same time, this devaluation must somehow be covered in order to leave the benign self-image of those who are involved in practices of mink-use, be it as a producer, dealer or consumer, intact. They must be classified as morally legitimate at least, or even beneficial and animal-friendly.

Kopenhagen Fur, the world's largest auction house for furs and the global centre of fur trade, gives a telling example of this strategy on its website. Besides commitments to animal welfare, Kopenhagen Fur advances its products as especially sustainable and environmental-friendly.⁷ Fur is promoted as "a natural material" that is "completely biodegradable and naturally returns to the ecological cycle". Furthermore, Kopenhagen Fur warrants that the local production cycles make "100% use of every animal bred for the trade to benefit the environment", a complete "utilisation of the mink": not only the pelts but also the "residual products" are processed (fat for biodiesel, bone meal for heating and as a fertilizer component, ash as component in cement, concrete and asphalt). The "optimum use of resources" continues with regard to feed. Following Kopenhagen Fur, the fur trade contributes to sustainability by producing feed from "residual matter from food production", that is "matter from the fish and poultry industry".

Leaving aside possible critical requests to the exhibited understanding of sustainability, what is really striking is the stark contrast between the text and the image language: Next to the praising of the utilization of minks, we see a friendly elderly man, probably an employee of the farm, presenting a mink on his arm to two younger women and two toddlers in front of a hay bale. Together, text and image create something close to a schizophrenic concept of the mink: on the one hand, we

⁷ All references are taken from the section "Fur and the environment" <https://www.kopenhagenfur.com/en/responsibility/fur-and-the-environment/sustainability-in-danish-mink-farming/> (accessed 16.12.2022). Unsurprisingly, the 2020 incident is not mentioned with one word.

have the mink as a friendly pet, a possible member of the family, an individual that is surely lovable. On the other hand, ‘mink’ is referred to only as a product, a fur resource or even a synonym for the fur itself.⁸ This double-faced concept leads to a deep dissonance in our relation to what is either labelled ‘companion’ or ‘productive livestock’, resulting in moral recognition respectively moral ignorance of the very same being.

The mink’s incomplete reification became prominent in the way the Cluster 5-incident was handled, culminating in the inconsistent responses to the killing of the Danish mink population on fur farms. When the minks appeared to pose an imminent danger to the well-being of humans, there was little deliberation on how to prioritize lives. Rather, the decision to eliminate the minks was framed as an act of self-defense: If it comes to ‘us or them’– it has to be them without any doubt. I don’t want to deny that giving human health and lives priority over other lives is a legitimate choice. Even from a holistic perspective, we are not forced into a position of a radical biotic egalitarianism of a kind that forbids us to act in the line of self-preservation and thrive for one’s own well-being (see, for example, Gorke 2000). Yet the reification of minks seems to have played a major role in settling the case very quickly and, as the idea of scientific necessity, added to the inability to conceive the mink’s elimination as something distressing.⁹ In the decisive moment, the idea of the minks as a menace overruled the idea of the minks as vulnerable fellow beings. Before the minks showed this quality in the most drastic way, by the sheer force of their corpses, they were othered to the extreme of being no relevant other at all. In the first place, the killing of the Danish minks was seen as a material loss, an economic disaster. Significantly, official statements addressed to the affected farmers bemoaned not the lost lives but the problems the culling stated for their family businesses, some of them passed on over generations (Arich-Gerz 2022: 94-95).¹⁰ All in all, mink-lives were de-realized, to speak with Butler again, so that they couldn’t be mourned (Butler 2004: 32-33).

And still, I would like to suggest that mourning for minks is possible as well as crucial for a critical examination of our current way of life. By disrupting our understanding of normality, it transcends the sphere of a private feeling and gains a political dimension. Practicing grief, thus, may finally lead to reshaping hitherto unquestioned practices.

⁸ Accordingly, the “types of mink”, also presented on the website, are different colors and samples of fur that are praised for their quality.

⁹ With Butler, the elimination could be even understood as an (futile) act of confirming their insignificance, since those whose lives are de-realized “have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again) [...] and they must be killed, since they live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness” (Butler 2004: 33).

¹⁰ For a critique of an economic model of loss see Liebsch (2016: 247).



4 Towards A Practice of Rebellious Grief

In this last part of the paper, I will outline why mourning for minks matters and indicate how to get there despite the obvious challenges. Following Butler, my underlying assumption here is that there is a way to move from grief to empathy to solidarity and finally resistance. Grief, then, and against a Freudian conception of grief as negative and paralyzing (Liebsch 2016: 201, 229-230; Barnett 2022: 16-18),¹¹ can be understood as a transformative emotional condition:

To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself. The disorientation of grief – ‘Who have I become?’ or, indeed, ‘What is left of me?’ ‘What is it in the Other that I have lost?’ – posits the ‘I’ in the mode of unknowingness. But this can be a point of departure for a new understanding if the narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia can be moved into a consideration of the vulnerability of others. (Butler 2004: 30)

Ashlee Cunsolo Willox highlights this transformational quality for the mourning person herself: a person will not be the same after her loss in unexpected and uncontrollable ways (Cunsolo Willox 2012: 144-145). Thus, mourning has also a disruptive quality that may make us more open to others, including other-than-humans. Therefore, mourning can become “a resource for recognizing non-humans as fellow vulnerable entities and mournable subjects, capable of degradation, destruction, and suffering” (Cunsolo Willox 2012: 147).

When others are discovered as grievable, we find ourselves to be connected to them. It is the recognition of shared vulnerability that expands our moral sensitivity and may come with an insight into collective responsibilities.¹² Perhaps this is one of the major pandemic plot-twists: In a strange way, we are pushed to the acknowledgement of a certain community with other animals – a community of infection and mutation.¹³ Mourning, then, has the capacity of “we-creating” (Cunsolo Willox 2012: 149; Butler 2004: 20-24).

As I hope to have shown in the beginning, this transformative mourning is culturally blocked. Our current way of life virtually forbids us to grieve for non-humans that are only bred to be killed. They are framed not as fellow beings, and more: not even possible fellow beings, since they are objectified, framed as a ‘natural resource’ to make use of, a product like wood or water.

¹¹ For an overview of Butler’s dealing with Freud’s concept of grief and melancholy throughout her work see Oberprantacher (2018: 216-218).

¹² Cunsolo Willox strongly advocates the nexus to collective responsibility (see 2012: 150).

¹³ Furthermore, this twist challenges the solitary status of human agency: The pandemic made the innumerable and complex interrelationships of different kind of acting entities visible: minks, health organizations, scientific papers, governmental agencies, the media and the public, vaccines and, of course, the virus and its permanent mutations itself (for a contextualization in Bruno Latour’s actor-network-theory see Arich-Gerz 2022: 99-105).



Hence, if we, against all odds, strive to include the minks in our pandemic grief, we face an at least threefold challenge. Let me just briefly point out the different dimensions of *expanding our sensibilities*.

4.1 Openness to Vulnerability

A first precondition is the ability to be affected at all (Oberprantacher 2018: 212-213), that is: being open to potential hurtful emotions in the face of past (and also future) losses. Becoming and remaining vulnerable (Liebsch 2016: 245; Oberprantacher 2018: 220.) is thus indispensable. In the case of ecological losses, this means for some to give up a privilege: the ability to overlook, forget or disregard the severe damages and destructions (Barnett 2022: xi-xii). Thus, noticing (and feeling) losses is not a common default position and requires the readiness to be hurt instead of avoiding it.

In short, we have to actively allow for grief, which implies reflecting on our own vulnerability and dependency. This is also an important demand with regard to the ecological crisis, since it is an essential access to acknowledgement of what is at stake, that is, to overcome denial.¹⁴

4.2 Getting in Touch: De-de-realization of Other Lives

A second challenge is the de-de-realization of other lives, especially those that have been marginalized or not even counted as lives. As Aldo Leopold stated: “We grieve only for what we know. The erasure of Silphium from Western Dane County is no cause for grief if one knows it only as a name in a botany book” (Leopold 1949: 48). Leopold meant not only a cognitive knowledge, but an active acquaintance, by which for example a plant – like the silphium – can reveal its personality (48-50).¹⁵ That is, we have to get in touch with them, get practically engaged. It is not enough to have a neat theoretical model of an extended ethics. A more inclusive approach of who (or what) counts as fellow being cannot just be adopted. It has to be practiced and connected to experience. If we take this demand seriously, there would be massive consequences for industrial forms of breeding which rest on a high degree of disconnectedness and estrangement. Being connected, though, comes with the price of possible bereavement that has to be dealt with (Barnett 2022: xix-xx). Broadening our empathic horizon and the community of those we care for comes with the cost of much more options to feel loss and the challenge to endure it.

4.3 Ecological Grief Work

Thirdly, it is an open task how to do ecological grief work. When Aldo Leopold spoke at the new monument for the passenger pigeon in 1947, he remarked that “[f]or one species to mourn the death of another is a new thing under the sun” (Leopold

¹⁴ On grief and mourning as climate emotions see Neckel and Hasenfratz (2021: 261-263).

¹⁵ This also implies taking another perspective, the ability of thinking (and feeling) like a mountain (Leopold 1949: 129-133).



1949: 110). The passenger pigeon, once among the most numerous bird species of the world, got extinct in only a century, mainly due to extensive hunting and the monument had been raised in order to “commemorate the funeral of a species” (Leopold 1949: 110). What Leopold considered so far unknown territory may rather be specified as an area that was (and more or less remains) ignored by people which consider themselves ‘modern’. Mourning practices for the loss of animals, plants, or other other-than-humans (still) do not belong to the ‘western’ cultural repertoire, at least not as a standard response. Since Leopold’s times, the extinction rate of species dramatically increased. According to the growing awareness of living in an era of mass extinction, this time man-made, the need to address and manage the feelings of grief, anxiety and despair increases (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018). So public rituals of collective mourning, for example those performed by *Extinction Rebellion*, begin to get more attention (Cunsolo Willox 2012: 147; Craps 2020: 2-4). When marginalized forms of grief gain public awareness, they also attain more social acceptance and legitimacy which helps processing them more effectively (Craps 2023: 69).

Yet it also works the other way round: Since grieving and mourning are capacities that have to be practiced and are fostered by certain conditions, public performances of mourning also enable to feel grief in the first place, that is, to extend the limits of grievability (Barnett 2022: 5, 31). If there are shared practices available to express feelings, they are normalized instead of de-realized. The phenomenon of climate or environmental grief already expands beyond the inner circle of beloved humans: it can be directed not only at plants and animals but also at the loss of glaciers, forests, lakes and landscapes. Working through this grief and extending traditional rituals of mourning (or creating new ones) can help to strengthen the affective ties with other-than-humans. A prominent example of this extension are funeral rites for vanished glaciers. After the first one was held in 2019 for Okjökull, a former Icelandic glacier, similar events in other regions followed (Craps 2023: 71-73) What is more, addressing and processing ecological grief fosters the transformation and expansion “of the discursive spaces around climate change” (Cunsolo Willox 2012: 141).

Ecological grief work, then, is not about getting over a loss, that is, the aim is not to make the pain cease (Liebsch 2016: 235-236). Rather, I would like to suggest that active and productive grief work in a certain way requires to stay unreconciled with its cause. This means first acknowledging that irreparable damage has been done and then transforming the outrage into preventive action. Hence, this kind of grief has a political dimension: it stems from awareness of unbearable circumstances and rebels against their continuation, that is, against more violence and more victims and demands action against it (Liebsch 2016: 231). In short: it is rebellious and non-compliant.¹⁶

¹⁶ Which also implies that it resists its political instrumentalization or control. On this danger see Liebsch (2016: 237-242).



5 Conclusion: Becoming a Fellow Being

Rebellious grief, then, is also future-oriented. It has the power to reveal the systemic flaws of our current way of life. Yet it does not end with mourning and remembering past victims. The solidarity it calls for is not only anamnestic, not only belated. In order to arrive at true ecological solidarity, grief has to become anticipatory, a “mourning that begins before the break event, but is based in an understanding of the experience of other losses” (Cunsolo Willox 2012: 140), as Cunsolo says.

In a similar vein, Burkhard Liebsch points to the proactive dimension of grief:

How could it be possible not to grieve in view of the fact that the future will continue to claim victims? Should we not be willing and prepared to engage in proactive grief that does not merely lag behind what has already happened but rather anticipates what threatens others, strangers, in the future? (Liebsch 2016: 230)

This is why the reaction to the culled minks lacks rebellious quality: the pictures of the mass killings evoked feelings of compassion, yet it failed to anticipate future killings and give value to future mink lives. It was more of a short-term horror than serious, transformative grief.

In order to aim at social transformation and overcome the current toxic and destructive way of life, we need to examine our collective self-image as morally responsive and responsible beings. The lack of serious mourning about animals bred for use may tell a different story about the norms and values in effect. Our emotional response thus is a kind of litmus test for our actual moral horizon and understanding of what is normal. As Butler puts it: “I am as much constituted by those I do grieve for as by those whose deaths I disavow, whose nameless and faceless deaths form the melancholic background for my social world” (Butler 2004: 46). Hence, we need to ask if we really want to be compliant with practices that consequently negate the well-being of other-than-humans and their status as fellow beings if it is in human interest. If we do not agree with what is revealed about us and our current form of life, we should practice to extend our ability to be affected. Practicing rebellious grief could be the first step to become true fellow beings.

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