Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals

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This article utilizes the work of Judith Butler in order to chart a queer and feminist animal studies, an animal studies that celebrates our shared embodied finitude. Butler’s commentary on other animals remains dispersed and fragmented throughout books, lectures, and interviews over the course of the last several years. This work is critically synthesized in conjunction with her work on mourning and precarious lives. By developing an anti-anthropocentric understanding of mourning and precarious lives, this article hopes to create ontological, ethical, and political concepts that resist the violence of the present. In so doing, the article contrasts Butler’s understanding of precarious life with Giorgio Agamben’s understanding of bare life in order to conceive of precariousness as constitutive of social reality. This intellectual labor lays the groundwork for understanding mourning the lives of other animals as a political act that produces new communities, rather than as an individuating and isolating emotion.

INTRODUCTION: GROCERY SHOPPING

This paper begins at perhaps a weird place: the grocery store. Imagine pushing your cart or carrying your basket as you have hundreds of times before. You end up at the back of the grocery store, near the meat counter. Displayed before you are all the wares of the butcher’s trade, all the prime cuts of meat. On the left are the T-bone steaks; to the right is all the ground beef. In front of you are some ribs; next to them are some chicken breasts. On the corner of the display is the lobster tank, where, out of the dozens in it, you can pick out your own lobster to take home. You look at this sight, with people picking their way through all these products, figuring out which will make the best dinner. And
suddenly, the scene in front of you shifts. No longer are you seeing normal products of everyday existence. In front of you is the violent reality of animal flesh on display: the bones, fat, muscles, and tissue of beings who were once alive but who have been slaughtered for the parts of their body. This scene overtakes you, and suddenly you tear up. Grief, sadness, and shock overwhelms you, perhaps only for a second. And for a moment you mourn, you mourn for all the nameless animals in front of you.

Those of us who value the lives of other animals live in a strange, parallel world to that of other people. Every day we are reminded of the fact that we care for the existence of beings whom other people manage to ignore, to unsee and unhear as if the only traces of the beings’ lives are the parts of their bodies rendered into food: flesh transformed into meat. To tear up, or to have trouble functioning, to feel that moment of utter suffocation of being in a hall of death is something rendered completely socially unintelligible. Most people’s response is that we need therapy, or that we can’t be sincere. So most of us work hard not to mourn. We refuse mourning in order to function, to get by. But that means most of us, even those of us who are absolutely committed to fighting for animals, regularly have to engage in disavowal.

We will turn our attention very shortly to the work of Judith Butler. We will do this in order to begin to chart a queer and feminist animal studies—an animal studies that celebrates our shared embodied finitude. It will be at times strongly theoretical, but it begins and ends in the same place—mourning the unmournable, seeking after a thought strong enough to confront that display of flesh at our local grocery store, one that will not turn its head, one that will not just take a deep breath and keep pushing the cart away.

MOURNING AS A POLITICAL ACT

Mourning is always a political act. Although it is frequently viewed as a private experience, indeed, an experience that flirts with solipsism, mourning is all about ethical, political, and ontological connections. Judith Butler’s work has always insisted upon this reality: that questions over who gets to mourn, and who is mournable, is at the heart of the political, at the heart of social intelligibility. Butler’s original foray into the question of mourning, which is to say, into the question of which are bodies that matter, came from her work on queer existence. As she explains in her early work:

To the extent that homosexual attachments remain unacknowledged within normative heterosexuality, they are not merely constituted as desires that emerge and subsequently become prohibited. Rather, these are desires that are proscribed from the
start. And when they do emerge on the far side of the censor, they may well carry that mark of impossibility with them, performing, as it were, as the impossible within the possible. As such, they will not be an attachment that can be openly grieved. This is, then, less the refusal to grieve ... than a preemption of grief performed by the absence of cultural conventions for avowing the loss of homosexual love. (Butler 1993, 236; emphasis in the original)

In other words, her work originated in places where the socially recognizable paths and protocols to mourn have been denied. Unless you have been in a situation where you have been denied the right to mourn, the stakes “of cultural conventions for avowing the loss” of any other may not be transparent. However, disavowing the life of another (and being unable to mourn always disavows the life as such) does not just cede the one whom you care for into social unintelligibility, but also cedes part of yourself into social unintelligibility. A part of you becomes unreal and ghostly. The connections we make with others are what give us livable lives; denying those connections renders our lives less livable. Mourning is a way of making connections, of establishing kinship, and of recognizing the vulnerability and finitude of the other. The protocols that refuse to recognize our mourning refuse all sorts of tangible, social intelligibility. Mourning is stitched to questions of what and who gets to count as human, and, therefore, to the very questions of how we constitute the political.

**The Construction of the Human**

Death and disavowal: this relationship applies to the animals we slaughter as well as the animals we are. It is no accident that the definition of the abject in Kristeva and the monstrous in Foucault always involve the mixing of the human and the animal. To insist, as we have, that humans are animals often seems incoherent and self-contradictory. To talk about the human animal is to open up, as Butler points out, a “chiasmic relation,” a relation that seeks to cross an abyss between, on one side, all those beings we understand as humans and, on the other side, all other sentient life forms (Butler 2009, 17). Indeed, the philosophical and scientific questions we use all involve some formulation of “What makes us human?” rather than “What makes us another animal?” In other words, we invest a vast amount of intellectual work in trying to figure out what separates and individuates the human species, rather than in what makes us part of a commonality with other lives. This separation produces a valorization of those traits that we believe are uniquely human—rationality, production, what have you—rather than valorizing those traits we obviously share with other lives—we are finite, interdependent, embodied, capable of pleasure and pain, vulnerable,
born to, and one day will, die. The intellectual work to make the human unique results in a devaluing of traits we share with animals. However, our desire not to share these animal, all too animal, traits also serves to produce a desire to construct an intellectual scaffolding for human exceptionalism.

This human exceptionalism comes from a fear and shame that we are, in fact, nothing but animals. Derrida, in discussions of the animal, frequently quotes remarks made by Adorno about Kant: “Nothing is more abhorrent to the Kantian than a reminder of man’s resemblance to the animal. This taboo is always at work when the idealist berates the materialist. Animals play for the idealist system virtually the same role as the Jews for fascism” (Adorno 1998, 80; Derrida 2008, 100–05). This sentence is not an isolated case for Adorno; variations of it can be found throughout his work. As he argues elsewhere, “In general, humanity as a species feels an extraordinary revulsion from everything that might remind it of its own animal nature, a revulsion which I strongly suspect to be deeply related to the persistence of its very real animality” (Adorno 2006, 209). The declaration, “We are all animals,” is one that revolts, and indeed, seems an attack upon dignity itself. This human dignity, hard won in many instances, may seem under attack by such a declaration, but it is not betrayed by it. Such a claim for a human exceptionalism seeks to maximize valorization and security for some beings at the expense of minimizing it for others. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that those events that betray human dignity most completely—slavery, colonialism, and genocide—have always been waged on the side of protecting the dignity of the human. This violence, which goes under the name of Auschwitz for Adorno but which we must hear outside of any Eurocentric register, is the real betrayal of human dignity. But this betrayal in the protocols of its constant border maintenance reveals the tenuous and fragile nature of any claims to human exceptionalism.

As Butler has argued in some of her earliest work, the human and the inhuman are bound together, an inseparable dyad in which the human needs the inhuman to understand itself. As she writes:

[T]he construction of gender operates through exclusionary means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation. Hence, it is not enough to claim that human subjects are constructed, for the construction of the human is a differential operation that produces the more and the less “human,” the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable. These excluded sites come to bound the “human” as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation. (Butler 1993, 8)
This is an important insight; human exceptionalism doesn’t just demarcate the human from the inhuman. Such an ability would imply that there exists an observable and consistent distinction between the inside and outside of the human. The human is not a pregiven subject position. It is not a category that exists outside of political contestations and ontological battles. As Butler would note in her later work, “the term … human has been crafted and consolidated over time.” Moreover, that crafting and consolidation comes from “power differentials embedded in the construction of the category of the human” (Butler 2004b, 13). The human is produced, and that production is the site of great struggles, violence, and hierarchy. “Human” comes to name the category of beings we seek to protect and foster, and as such the idea of human exceptionalism can only be understood as central to the claim of the possibility of livable lives.

After all, the entire concept of a livable life, the question of the construction of the human, and the importance of social recognition are all at the heart of Butler’s work. Although much of Butler’s earlier work has been about these questions, she has recently broadened her approach by beginning to think through what she calls “precarious life.” Precarious life brings with it two important advancements for Butler’s work: It begins to articulate a response to contemporary violence, and it also pushes against the implicit anthropocentrism in her earlier work. In other words, with the idea of precarious life, not only precarious humans, we begin to get to the issue of animals.

This article, therefore, pushes against the prevailing trend to see Butler’s work on precarious life as inherently anthropocentric. For example, Kelly Oliver has remarked that “the new kinship that [Butler] imagines still excludes animals,” and Chloë Taylor has argued that “[Butler] repeatedly excludes animals from the sphere of ethical consideration” (Taylor 2008, 61; Oliver 2009, 226). Both Oliver and Taylor have a point. Butler has repeatedly, especially until recently, engaged in explicitly anthropocentric rhetoric. Moreover, her comments on animals have been diffused, fragmentary, and lack any clear thesis. Yet, in exploring Butler’s fragmentary pieces on animals, we will find powerful tools for fighting for a nonanthropocentric world. Furthermore, we will also discover that Butler’s philosophy necessitates anti-anthropocentrism if it is to make sense.

**Frames of Life—Bare Life**

Early in Judith Butler’s most recent monograph, *Frames of War*, we get this bold and interesting claim:

In the same way, it does not ultimately make sense to claim, for instance, that we have to focus on what is distinctive about
human life, since if it is the “life” of human life that concerns us, that is precisely where there is no firm way to distinguish in absolute terms the *bios* of the animal from the *bios* of the human animal. Any such distinction would be tenuous and would, once again, fail to see that, by definition, the human animal is itself an animal. This is not an assertion concerning the type or species of animal the human is, but an avowal that animality is a precondition of the human, and there is no human who is not a human animal. (Butler 2009, 19)

This quotation does not come as part of a longer discussion of other animals, but like Butler’s other comments on nonhuman animals, it takes the form of an aside (in this case one on abortion). However, this is an important aside we must tease out in order to understand both Butler’s concept of precariousness and its relation to other animals. The first part of this aside that is so important is her position that animal life and human life are impossible to firmly distinguish. However, this claim is based upon an even more profound claim: that animals have a type of life particular to *bios*. This claim is clearly a response to the work of one of the great current thinkers of the biopolitical: Giorgio Agamben. Butler is subtly distinguishing her concept of *precarious life* from Agamben’s celebrated concept of *bare life*. It is important for us to understand the concept of bare life in order both to grasp its limitations and to differentiate Butler’s idea of precarious life. This conceptual clarification is particularly important as many animal scholars are increasingly taking up the idea of bare life to explain and articulate the lives of animals.2

In Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, he reiterates a distinction found in Aristotelian Greek2 between on the one hand, *zoe*, which is the life held in common by animals, men, and the gods, and on the other hand *bios*, which is qualified life, life that conforms to particular forms and realities. The second idea of life, *bios*, is the life that is particular to humans and maybe the gods. It is the life of sociality, the life of intelligibility, the life that we consider necessary to protect. Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* series investigates the situations where *bios* and *zoe* become confused, where someone who is considered to have *bios* is seen as having only *zoe*. This condition is what Agamben refers to as bare or naked life, a life stripped of all its legal and ethical protections. It is with this idea of bare life that we can understand Agamben’s entire concept of violence in today’s world.

Agamben understands the violence of modernity through recourse to various machines. Despite the large number of machines that Agamben explores, we shall examine in detail two of his privileged machines: the anthropological machine and the state of exception. The anthropological machine is the primary operator of biopolitical power, and the state of exception is the primary operator of sovereign power. Although theoretically separate, these two machines depend
on and enmesh with each other. These two machines are in many ways different; however, I will examine the common functions of their processes in order to devise the model of power in Agamben’s philosophy.

Let’s begin with what the machines contain: what exists on the inside of the machines, what drives them, what is their essence or content; let’s begin with the center. To begin with the center is to begin with nothingness. As Agamben states, the center is “perfectly empty” (Agamben 2004, 38); “a kenomatic state, an emptiness and a standstill” (2005, 48); “ironic” (2004, 29); “an empty space” (2005, 60); and “anomie, juridical vacuum … pure being, devoid of any determination or real predicate” (2005, 60). This kenomatic emptiness is exactly what powers the machine; it is what gives the machine purpose and function. If the machines contained a specific content, if there were actual delineated differences that the machines were trying to separate out, they wouldn’t function at all. Rather, they work by drawing and redrawing lines, by producing caesura after caesura. They work upon a zone of indifference, deciding what counts as legal and illegal, human and animal, bios and zoe. These machines don’t just draw the line once, but rather constantly redraw them, so there is no way to ever know which side of the line one stands on. Therefore, the machinery operates by producing exclusive inclusions or inclusive exclusions. Everyone is potentially a criminal; everyone is potentially an animal. The fact that these metaphysical machines operate without being able to firmly distinguish between bios and zoe would seem to imply that bare life repeats the gesture of Butler’s precarious life, but that would ignore the explicitly anthropocentric history of this phrase “bare life.”

Agamben’s notion of *nuda vita*—we have followed the popular translation as “bare life”—is itself a translation of his great mentor, Walter Benjamin. Bare life is a gloss on Benjamin’s *bloß leben*, which can also be translated as “mere life.” Although it appears occasionally in earlier work by Benjamin, this term primarily crops up in his essay “A Critique of Violence.” Mere life is thoroughly connected to natural life, to the life of one who can bleed and be injured. It is bound up with the guilt one experiences by having a body. Benjamin argues against those who contend for the sanctity of life, if “existence is to mean nothing other than mere life [bloß leben]” (Benjamin 2004, 251). The argument for the sanctity of life only comes to have any meaning if:

“existence” … means the irreducible, total condition that is “man.” … Man cannot, at any price, be said to coincide with the mere life in him … there is no sacredness in his condition, in his bodily life vulnerable to injury by his fellow men. What, then, distinguishes it essentially from the life of animals and plants? And even if these were sacred, they could not be so by virtue only of being alive, of being in life. (251)
In this statement Benjamin completely rejects the capacity for suffering and joy to ground an ethics and politics. The threat of such a movement based on shared vulnerability is highlighted by his immediate response, wondering what could possibly distinguish the human from animals.

We have made this brief detour through Benjamin in order to highlight a particular point: Animals are not beings capable of having *bios* for Agamben. Indeed, definitionally, the animal is that which is outside of *bios*. Bare life, because it refers to the zone of indetermination between *bios* and *zoe*, is a condition that excludes the animal, and excludes us from thinking of the animal as having a *bios*, a qualified and particular life. Butler provides us a path out of this impasse; she provides us with a way of thinking of other animals as having a fullness of being and existence. She gives us a way of thinking of precarious life as opposed to bare life.

**Frames of Life—Precarious Life**

Perhaps to gain some perspective, we need to take a step back and contrast *precarious life* to *bare life* not through the question of the animal, but rather through a more direct route that Butler uses. In a discussion with Gayatri Spivak, Butler turns her attention to Gaza, which she argues “might be aptly described as an ‘open-air prison’” (Butler and Spivak 2007, 7). Although Butler agrees that the Palestinian people in Gaza have been ejected from the political sphere of citizenship, she would not go so far as to consider the Palestinians as having mere or bare life. She contends that “any effort to establish such an exclusionary logic depends upon the depoliticization of life and, once again, writes out the matters of gender, menial labor, and reproduction from the field of the political” (38). This means that the reproduction of mere life is never merely the reproduction of life itself. Even if the Palestinian people are reduced to the basic functions of the reproduction of life itself—that is, finding food, creating shelter, getting clothes, having and rearing offspring, and so on—they are still engaged in something more than mere reproduction of life.

The tasks we perform to reproduce our biological existence are all politically and culturally relevant. What food to eat and how to eat it, what shelters to build and how to arrange them, what clothes to wear and when to wear them: these are all markers of culture; these are all markers of the political. These are never the tasks of *zoe*, of mere existence. The actions we engage in for the reproduction of our biological existence are what gives us particular forms of life, in other words, what gives us *bios*. The lives of the people in Gaza are precarious; for all of that, they are *not* bare. Thus, for Butler, precariousness is not a condition to be overcome or critiqued, in the way that bare life would be for Agamben. Rather, precariousness becomes a place from which to think and organize.
Butler develops vulnerability and precariousness as an ethic, a social ontology, and a politics. It is because we are beings who can be hurt and killed that we have sociality, that we have a capacity for being-together. Although precariousness seems to refer to an individual life, it is rather a way of thinking connections, of claiming kinship and relations. This is not about beginning with the self’s own precariousness, and then expanding that notion to others. As Butler explains: “This cannot be an awakeness … to my own life, and then an extrapolation from an understanding of my own precariousness to an understanding of another’s precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other” (Butler 2004a, 134). Precariousness is a place for thinking the ethical because it begins with the Other, rather than with the self. To apprehend the Other’s life as a precarious life is not, however, merely an ethical proposition.

Precariousness is also, at the same time, an ontological proposition, a particular kind of ontology: what Butler terms a social ontology. Precariousness is a social ontology because it affirms “[t]here is no life without the conditions of life that variably sustain life, and those conditions are pervasively social, establishing not the discrete ontology of the person, but rather the interdependency of persons, involving reproducible and sustaining social relations, and relations to the environment and to non-human forms of life” (Butler 2009, 19). Indeed, it is perhaps just a trick of language that we are able to talk about a precarious life, instead of the always already plural of precarious lives. To understand being as fundamentally precarious is to understand being as embodied, and as such, dependent on the various conditions for the reproduction of life. Precariousness isn’t just a passive fact demanding to be taken into account. Finitude is not simply fragility, and does not need to be paid attention to in the same way we stamp “Caution: Fragile” on boxes. Rather, the reality of shared vulnerability produces important facts—like sociality and plasticity, like the common and contingency. Under Butler, finitude is a productive power from which all sorts of adaptive strengths come (indeed, adaptation and evolution are entirely bound up with the notions of finitude). By turning our ontological lenses to precariousness, we begin the process of reconceiving ontology in its properly anti-anthropocentric character. This is, as Butler argues, “[t]he point,” which “would … [be] to reconceive life itself as a set of largely unwilled interdependencies, even systemic relations, which imply that the ‘ontology’ of the human is not separable from the ‘ontology’ of the animal. It is not just a question of two categories that overlap, but of a co-constitution that implies the need for a reconceptualization of the ontology of life itself” (Butler 2009, 75–76). The ethics and social ontology that precarious life demands also forms the basis of a politics, a politics that is based on our shared embodiment and becomes a way of addressing the violent political realities of the contemporary situation.

Indeed, under Butler, it is not our precarious lives we have to worry about, but instead our systems of immunity against our vulnerability that are our biggest
threat. Thus, we have wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to protect us; we have nuclear weapons to protect us; we have the Patriot Act to protect us; we lock up millions of people in the United States to protect us; and on and on. Immunity is always a function of disavowal, of a refusal to confront our shared embodied finitude.

This is why Butler insists upon the *bios* of the animal, and insists that the human animal is always an *animal*. Nietzsche had it wrong; we are not human, all too human, we are animal, all too animal. It is only by avowing our animality that we can also avow our precariousness. To do this shifts everything. It changes the questions we ask about who gets to be bearers of rights, who are subjects of ethics, who are moral patients. All of these political and ethical questions never stray far from mourning, from determining which lives get to count as life.

**MOURNING AS CREATING THE POLITICAL**

Butler’s work swerves and weaves in between a stubborn anthropocentrism and occasional brilliant ruptures of such a system. In a recent interview, Butler had this to say:

> Rather, it is common in the sense that we are reciprocally exposed and invariably dependent, not only on others, but on a sustained and sustainable environment.

> Humanity seems to be a kind of defining ontological attribute, who I am, or who we are, that properly belongs to us as persons, and in that sense, it keeps the human within the humanistic frame. But what if our ontology has to be thought otherwise? If humans actually share a condition of precariousness, not only just with one another, but also with animals, and with the environment, then this constitutive feature of who we “are” undoes the very conceit of anthropocentrism. In this sense, I want to propose “precarious life” as a non-anthropocentric framework for considering what makes life valuable. (Antonello and Farneti 2009, np)

Our precarious, vulnerable, and finite lives are not something that makes us human; indeed, to avow our precariousness is to avow our animality, to avow ourselves as human animals. To think with Butler here, to understand that precarious lives are not just human lives, means to shift our ontology, our ethics, and our politics. It puts millennia of philosophy that has sought after the uniqueness of the human being on its head. What is powerful is not what makes us unique, but what makes us in-common. What is exhilarating is not what
individuates us, but rather what brings us together. This means that precariousness forces us to examine our connections, our methods and meanings for coexistence. Because we are all precarious, because we exist in a state of shared vulnerability, we will all die. Mourning is a testament to such a life, to such a notion of existence.

When we mourn we are rendered as specter, spectral, and spectacle. We are specter as we come to be haunted by those we mourn. The beings whose lives are gone still continue with us when we mourn them. Their reality continues to impose itself on our reality; their existence continues on in our existence. Those we mourn may have left, but they have not left us. And it is because we are haunted that we become also more ghostlike. To mourn is to feel ourselves, sometimes at least, in the world of specters—to be spectral. As Wendy Brown puts it, “the condition of mourning is a stumbling and stuttering one, a condition of disturbed ground, or inarticulateness, of disorientation in and about time” (Brown 2005, 100). By investing in those no longer of this world, we feel less substantial in this world. Our senses of urgency and expansiveness of time stop being in sync with the flow of time for everyone else. As our mourning grows, so too does our sense of shame and guilt. We come to feel that our mourning is something to be left at home, to be left where no one else has to see and deal with it. Indeed, we wonder why we seem unable to keep going after our socially sanctioned time for grief—assuming there is a socially sanctioned time for grief—has expired. Thus our new spectral nature also makes us into a spectacle, one whose grief threatens to be revealed to those around us. Being a spectacle needs to be understood in two senses here: The first is a purposeful spectacle, as a living testament to those lives that are no more. The second way is as fear of spectacle, fear that our mourning and tears will suddenly erupt when we have no desire for them to: fear and shame at possibly being a spectacle of grief. Although the subjective reality of specter, spectral, and spectacle all carry with them these risks of being haunted, being insubstantial, and being ashamed, this reality also carries with it the seeds of tremendous political and ethical upheavals.

Vulnerability and mourning become intrinsically tied together at this point. We mourn because we are vulnerable, and because the Other is always vulnerable. We mourn because those we make connections to can, and sometimes do, perish. Vulnerability and mourning are active forces that have been confused as passive and negative. As Butler puts it: “Loss becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community cannot overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community. And if we say this … truth about the place where belonging is possible, then pathos is not negated, but it turns out to be oddly fecund, paradoxically productive” (Butler 2003, 468). Vulnerability is the basis of sociality, the basis of community. If we were immortal and capable of being entirely
sustainable individuals, there would be no need for society or culture. It is our very ability to be wounded, our very dependency, that brings us together. Mourning is a testament to such a shared embodiment, which is the source of its paradoxical productivity. It can bring us together in monuments, in rituals, in shared stories and memories, and sometimes in collective action.

We have a history we can draw upon for mourning as collective action. For Butler such a history begins with Antigone, and continues to this day. Perhaps it is because of the radical potential of grieving that so often mourning has been feminized and regulated to the private sphere. As we noted above, those activities associated with the reproduction of life—making food, sewing clothes, bearing and rearing children, and so on—are all feminized productions of labor. And just as there is a common tendency to see feminized labor as cut off from the bios of society rather than constitutive of the bios of society, there is a tendency to see mourning as private and unpolitical. As Butler points out in relation to Antigone's Greece, “mourning is not only women’s task but one that is ideally performed inside the boundaries of the home. When women’s mourning becomes public, a loss of self is threatened for the civic order” (Butler 2000, 84, n. 12). Mourning is stapled to womanhood, and womanhood to the home. Thus, the same politics of sexism that sought to isolate women also worked to isolate our feelings of grief. All of this was done for the reiteration of the civic order, so that the prevailing norms of what counts as mournable, as therefore heroic and livable, would not be challenged. The sense of shame associated with public mourning is connected with the maintenance and administration of the current civic order. It is produced in order to keep mourning at home, in the closet, and unspoken during our trip to the grocery store.

But we do not have to go all the way back to Greece and Antigone to find examples of public displays of loss leading to collective political action. The AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP), perhaps more than other organizations in the 1990s, sought to use public mourning as a way of drawing attention to the massive epidemic of AIDS. Its main vehicle for public mourning was the idea of the political funeral, inspired by the work of artist and activist David Wojnarowicz. Wojnarowicz believes that “[t]o turn our private grief for the loss of friends, family, lovers and strangers into something public would serve as another powerful dismantling tool” (Wojnarowicz 1990, 109). He envisions that public grief would change the world. Specifically:

I imagine what it would be like if friends had a demonstration each time a lover or a friend or a stranger died of AIDS. I imagine what it would be like if, each time a lover, friend or stranger died of this disease, their friends, lovers or neighbors would take the dead body and drive with it in a car a hundred miles an hour to washington d.c. and blast through the gates of the white house.
and come to a screeching halt before the entrance and dump their lifeless form on the front steps. (109)

Such a vision led ACT UP in 1992 to encourage people to bring the ashes of their loved ones who had died of AIDS to be dumped on the lawn of the White House. This was but one of many political funerals that ACT UP would sponsor, all dedicated to making private grief into public grief, all dedicated to dismantling the civic order that allowed the AIDS epidemic to progress without serious action. These political funerals are part of the history of “die-ins,” protest forms in which the protesters mimic being dead to draw attention to those bodies and lives whose passing may go unmarked and unmourned. These die-ins are not used just to protest negligence on AIDS issues, but have most recently been used as part of the mass protests against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As William Haver has argued in relation to the actions of queer movements in the face of AIDS, though it certainly also applies to antiwar demonstrations and pro-animal activism, these “actions are oriented toward a futurity substantially different than the present, a futurity to which consciousness is necessarily inadequate” (Haver 1996, 150). This is part of the “oddly fecund” nature of loss, that mourning does not have to stay oriented toward the past, but can instead reorient itself to our present in order to reorient our future. The feeling of being out of sync in time and the feeling of insubstantiality do not have to be negative forces. Rather, they can open pathways toward different futures and nudge us away from desires for immunity and atomistic individualism.

We have at our fingertips histories and traditions of mourning in the shadows, secret farewells given to loved ones that we are unable to make in public. We have these histories at our fingertips because at some point people took these ghostly connections and gave them weight, reality, and a voice. Such stances always risk social unintelligibility. Social unintelligibility is connected to, but not the same as, discrimination, oppression, or repression. It is, rather, a failure of recognition by others, a failure to code as reality what you know reality to be. It is an erasure of existence, an erasure of sense, and an erasure of relations. To have your grief for one you care about rendered unintelligible does not invite simple ridicule; it invites melancholia and madness. As Butler argues, “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 2004a, 46). Those of us who mourn animals, those of us who mourn the animals at the butcher counter at the beginning of this article, face a double burden. Not only is the mourning of animals something completely disavowed, but those animals we mourn are so often anonymous animals. They are the “nameless and faceless deaths” that come to constitute our world. We are, therefore, more likely to risk our own coherency, our own intelligibility, by mourning them.
Mourning is a practice that opposes disavowal. Mourning both celebrates and grieves our precarious lives. It seeks connections, discovers secret kinships, and recognizes intersubjective relations. A queer and feminist animal studies will be one that can open up our practices, paths, and protocols of mourning in ways that can escape the narrow confines of anthropocentrism, that can recognize our shared exposure. In so doing, we are confronted with a task: How do we move forward without disavowing animals and animality? What is the ethos, understood in its original sense as habit and habitat, that we can engage in that allows us to avow the reality of other animals while still functioning? In order to answer this question, we might have to risk our own coherency so that we can demand that certain lives be socially intelligible. We, therefore, have to stake a lot on a claim that a certain being whose existence we have been told not to mourn is grievable, and, therefore, a life. Such claims always carry with them great risks, but they also carry with them the chance that entire social orders might be overthrown, chances that we might discover new ways of being-together.

Mourning sets up connections. The most obvious one is toward the precarious life we are grieving. But mourning also has the possibility of introducing a community, a social reality of those who also mourn the passing of that life. We who mourn other animals, particularly those killed by humans for humans, are going to have to risk much for our recognition of that mourning. The first hope is the more we talk about it, the more we risk our social intelligibility, the more we will find others who mourn with us, we will find others who understand the loss of these others. As we strive to make our ghostly connections to slaughtered animals real, we will also make connections with others. In this sense, the social intelligibility of mourning is never permanent, but exists at every iteration of mourning. It can all be changed at any moment, and every time we iterate that grief is a possibility for that change.

CONCLUSION: SEEING AND HEARING WHILE GROCERY SHOPPING

This paper began at a butcher’s counter. It began at that moment when our disavowal of what is in front of us slips and for a moment we see really what is in front of us: corpses. Everyone around us manages to unsee the dead bodies of animals; they manage to unhear the echoes of suffering in those cut-up beings. We engage in our disavowal so that we may see and hear, and unsee and unhear, the same world as those around us. But yet, that moment of slippage, that moment when we suddenly see and hear in a different world, has all sorts of powers, potentialities, and potencies. Mourning is never just about grief, but it is also about celebrations, memories, and stories. Mourning doesn’t just bring with it moments of isolation, it also sets up connections and reaches out for relation. It is only if we stop practicing disavowal that we might start creating the
community of intelligibility of our shared precariousness; it is only if we mourn that we can start building against so much loss and devastation. It is only if we start admitting what we see and hear that we can bring part of our lives out of the shadows and start making a difference for those we grieve.

NOTES

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1. “The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal” (Kristeva 1982, 12). “From the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, the period that concerns us, the monster is essentially a mixture. It is the mixture of two realms, the animal and the human” (Foucault 2003, 63).


3. There is a certain degree of philological debate as to whether this distinction is actually found in the Greek. For one example of the objection, see Derrida 2009, 314–17.


5. For more on this connection, see Durantaye 2009, 202–05.

REFERENCES


