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**Title:** Vulnerability, Mourning and Religious Compassion: A Cross-Species Perspective

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**Citation style:** Mitek-Dziemba Alina. (2018). Vulnerability, Mourning and Religious Compassion: A Cross-Species Perspective. "The Polish Journal of Aesthetics" Nr 4 (2018), s. 113-129. DOI: 10.19205/51.18.7



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## **Vulnerability, Mourning and Religious Compassion: A Cross-Species Perspective**

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss the notion of vulnerability and suffering as an aspect of animal bodily existence that, despite its negative connotations, is a highly interesting point of convergence for human-animal studies and the branch of aesthetics concerned with the interplay of individual and collective affectivities in the works of art. Arguing for the existence of a cross-species community of affect, the author bases her analyses on Judith Butler's ontology of precariousness and seeks to establish a vital connection between the political and social experience of vulnerability on the one hand, and rituals of mourning inspired by compassion on the other. The argument points to the possibility of charting new trajectories of affect in political praxis and art which do not only establish a cross-species community of suffering, but also bridge the gap between humans and animals as religious subjects, which is conceived here as a profoundly emancipatory gesture.

### Keywords

Vulnerability, Aesthetic of Affect, Religion, Animals, Mourning

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## **Introduction: The Aesthetics of Affect and Animal Vulnerability**

We are all seen by animals. Individual animals with their own biographies and sufferings and desires [...]. This is a basic datum, a naked fact, a fact shared among the sentient: we look at each other. We are naked, vulnerable, exposed, suffering, and we can communicate this to each other. [...]

We are born into our own vulnerability among vulnerable others, and a basic restraint—the seed of what we are here calling compassion—must be present for the world to continue [...] The realization that “yes, [animals] suffer” cannot be doubted because it is prior to the subject who asks questions—it is in a sense the origin of questioning.

Aaron S. Gross, *The Question of the Animal and Religion*

Being in pain, suffering, feeling vulnerable and susceptible to violence are all modes of experience available to both human and non-human agents as they are endowed with flesh and share the faculty of sentience. The community of suffering, vulnerability and finitude is merely “a basic datum, a naked fact” (Gross 2014, 127) that precedes all reasoning and philosophical speculation: something so plain and obvious to see that it becomes conspicuous and shaming. Even so, it is also conspicuously absent from the aesthetics and ethics of quotidian human existence, which has its own notion of bodily susceptibility and physical distress that in most cases serves simply to underscore human exceptionalism. Narratives of pain and illness transform the human body into a site of communicable experience that attracts attention and triggers sympathy. Thus, even the most monstrous display of physical degeneration can be rendered back to the image of the individual, highly precious intelligent life-form that it used to be prior to its period of malfunctioning, and which it still is, despite signs to the contrary. In asking for the response of compassion, human beings more often than not insist on being treated as individual beings, temporarily locked in physical distress and betrayed by their bodies, yet still proudly asserting their belonging to the “healthy” part of the human species. In this way, bodily suffering becomes disavowed rather than lived: a private problem to be overcome by technical (or medical) means, a purely negative episode which is most often to be erased from an individual biography once it is gone.

Discourses of human ill-being are therefore commonly buttressed by individualist ontologies, ones that focus their efforts on reintegrating illness and suffering into the structure of moral subjectivity. This essay wishes to argue, however, that there is much more to vulnerability than the celebration of individual injuriousness. Vulnerability and suffering are affective positions that can be widely shared, intensely social facts and political opportunities that help us make connections with other beings, and are even capable of crossing the boundaries of species. As such, they have an emancipatory potential that should not be overlooked; one which is indeed not overlooked in acts and works of compassionate imagination. Literature and art provide ample space and means to promote and share these politically potent affects.

In the article that follows I will address the notion of vulnerability as an aspect of bodily existence that most often remains socially ostracised, yet is still a highly interesting point of convergence for human-animal studies and the branch of aesthetics interested in the way individual and collective affectivities surface in works of art and literature. Importantly, the claim the essay makes is that animal susceptibility to injury, violence and death is closely linked to the erasure of the presence of non-human beings in communal living, which serves to justify their exploitation on a massive scale. Their fate is sealed by radical ungrievability, a stance of not being (even potentially) mourned. Animal suffering and deprivation is thus aggravated as it is not accompanied by publically recognised acts of mourning. Even more private than human illness and passing away, the recognition of animals' capacity for pain and for being subjects of life that can be lost sadly remains a subjective decision for human beings. The fact of their being "naked, vulnerable, exposed, suffering" (Gross 2014, 127) and precarious, or at every point threatened with decay and non-existence, is rarely recognised as the shared condition of embodiment. To paraphrase the description from the quotation above, the most frequent response of the human being looking at an animal is to avert their gaze from, rather than to exchange it with, the afflicted creature.

The discussion of animals in terms of "unmournable lives" obviously owes much to Judith Butler's social ontology of precariousness, which views all living things as radically interdependent and acknowledges that their chance of surviving relies on the cultural and historical image of what constitutes a life worthy of protection and sustenance. According to Butler, together with the production of the social knowledge of what life and death is, whole categories or groups of beings emerge who are under-recognised

as constructions of life. Their bodies, vulnerable by definition, stand at the boundaries of the socially accepted notions of humanity and subjecthood, a fact that renders the loss of their lives insignificant, or not worthy of sympathy, contemplation and symbolic prolongation in political or religious gestures of remembrance. Hence, to cross the threshold of mourning, to become politically visible as subjects of grief and compassion, as it became all too evident in the media images of dead refugees on European shores, may ironically be the only way of symbolic appreciation available to these marginalised human lives. Mourning depends on the interpretative frameworks that delimit what we apprehend as living and grievable, but it is an affective structure that may also call the frameworks into question. Thus, extending the range of beings identified as the bodies of suffering, and enabling “a new trajectory of affect” (Butler 2009, 11) which is endowed with political and moral significance seems to be intertwined with establishing new practices and rituals of grieving.

Mourning can thus be seen as emancipatory whenever it becomes a radical gesture of identification with and recognition of a singular being whose life has lost its legitimacy. It is a celebration of the unprecedented relationship to the bearer of that life which is capable of transgressing the social norm of who is to be grieved and what it means to grieve. Yet the question remains whether the relationship can be even more transgressive than in the case mentioned above, that of the underprivileged and dehumanised victims of war and oppression. Can the acknowledgment and commemoration of the loss of a living creature, a symbolic and religious act, and one that demonstrates the mourner’s political resistance to previously committed acts of violence, refer to other-than-human existence? This article will respond in the affirmative, suggesting that some complex ideas, including vulnerability, mourning and compassion, read against the background of politics, ethics and theology, can sensibly be applied to the task of depicting the relationship of human animals to other sentient beings. Moreover, the role of religion is far from negligible in this respect, even if the conventional aim of religious discourse has been to liberate the human self from its supposedly embarrassing animal origins.

Viewed from the perspective of philosophy and religion, mourning and compassion can thus be conceived as radical gestures, which are potentially emancipatory to non-human agents. My intention is not only to point to the constitution of the interspecies community of vulnerability and suffering as something that undermines anthropocentric privilege, but also to present religious experience, which includes celebration of some of the most signifi-

cant moments of physical existence, as a realm of social affect and bodily response that is common to different species. The case some political campaigns and works of art make for the actual engagement of animals in human rites of passage—the way animals become a mournable presence, awarded political and aesthetic/symbolic recognition—reflects a more general tendency among humanities scholars to reconsider the notion of human exceptionality based on the religious and metaphysical view of what constitutes personhood, and to bridge the gap between humans and animals as both philosophical and religious subjects.

### **Precariousness and Suffering/Mournable Lives**

The notion of precariousness has been a constant presence in Judith Butler's work for more than a decade now (Butler 2000, 2004, 2009, 2012 and 2015), marking her interest in what can be identified as the basis of social solidarity among various vulnerable subjects, including those that do not automatically belong to a community bound by immediate moral obligations. What makes us respond ethically to suffering and to be overwhelmed with affects such as horror and outrage at its sight if there is no obvious connection—no close relationship of blood and ideology—binding us to the body in pain? And why is the situation that in the first place renders the body unrecognisable as a socially respectable form of life also productive of an emotion that may inspire acts of ethical and political significance in defence of that life? To answer these questions, as Butler has striven to do, it is essential to think of a vulnerable body as not just an individual organism affected by unfavourable conditions in its immediate environment but as crucially located in the network of relations that it has to rely on for its preservation and well-being. Bodily life is universally precarious, or exposed to both pleasure and suffering precisely because of its being social, and being social means "being bound to one another and to living processes that exceed human form" (Butler 2012, 141). A individual life form is distinct and yet its boundary provides not only the limit of its being but also a site of adjacency which is often, in political terms, a zone of "unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation" (145), resulting in diverse forms of interaction that can both sustain and destroy an individual. Precariousness or vulnerability is thus the foundation of the ontology of the body which points to interdependency as both an ethical/existential fact and a point of departure for social and political considerations.

The relationship between sociality, vulnerability and death or mourning is also of vital significance to the post-deconstruction interventions of Jean-Luc Nancy, especially when he elaborates on the notions of exposure and finitude, drawing on the Heideggerian discussion of *Mitsein* (being-with) in *Sein und Zeit*. The topic is discussed at length in Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (1988). Having asserted the closure of the modern philosophical project as it fantasises about the individual self-constitution in a social void—since “death irremediably exceeds the resources of a metaphysics of the subject” (Nancy 1991, 14)—the French thinker turns to the examination of singularity that is always already grounded in relation to other singularities by referring to beings other than itself. This relation or openness is originary, in that *Dasein* (the notion of an individual self which points to a peculiarly human way of existing) is a being for whom engagement with being “there” or being exposed to whatever there is outside of the self is part of its ontological definition. Nancy thus dwells on the impossibility of immanence conceived as isolation or communion understood as fusion (29), pointing out that being-in-common (being in community) is about offering and sharing between singularities, and what must be exposed and shared is the experience of mortality/finitude. In fact, that which defines community, communication, is best described as the event of the co-appearance of finitude because a “finite being always presents itself *together*”, in “the *between* as such: you and I” (28–29; emphasis in the original). In the subsequent passages of Nancy's work, the presentation of finitude is revealed as that of “the triple mourning I must go through: that of the death of the other, that of my birth, and that of my death” (30). The importance of the death of the other is not to be overlooked here: Nancy follows Bataille and Blanchot in suggesting that going beyond oneself or discovering the possibility of community is primarily found through exposure to the painful epiphany of someone else's utmost vulnerability (Blanchot 1988, 9 and 25). And, quite significantly, Nancy also signals at one point that this sharing of finitude may pertain to beings other than human, though the possibility is never analysed in much detail (1991, 28).

Butler's work is similarly anchored in existential-ontological considerations; these are however properly counterbalanced by social contextualisation. In her view, being fragile and susceptible to injury can be very specific through its connection to unequal political and economic conditions, which is referred to as precarity. It is thus imperative to recognise the distribution of precarity as a basic fact of social living and to strive for its more egalitarian character, starting from the premise of universal bodily precariousness. Vulnerability, exposure to injury, violence and death, erasure of social pres-

ence or stigmatisation all belong to the same narrative referring to the lot of individuals and groups of individuals who live their precarious lives literally on the fraying edges of the communal fabric. The examination of their spectral existence, an aim of the discourse of social solidarity the American thinker has consistently been developing in recent years, starts from the premise that it is haunted by an acute sense of loss. The loss stems from the fact that their disgrace and deprivation is hardly ever accompanied by any public acts of recognition. In Butler's words, an unrecognised existence is not a grievable life, i.e., life in the fully human sense, one deserving sympathy, reflection, political gestures of emotional identification and, finally, mourning and grief, as a celebration of the ultimate departure from the community of the living. "Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters" (Butler 2009, 14). And there is certainly a lot to be said about this uncomfortable proximity between vulnerability and erasure of mourning, especially as the juxtaposition seems to be vibrating with ethical, political and religious overtones. The practice of mourning and remembrance is the staple of human culture: that humans have evolved the need for respecting and paying homage to their deceased is most often treated as the ultimate proof of the intellectual integrity and self-reflexivity of the species. Hence its absence always remains conspicuous.

This spectacle of vulnerability and impossible grieving brings to mind Sophocles' old story, painstakingly analysed in one of Butler's books. Antigone, who insists on the absolute singularity or irreplaceability of the event of her brother's death regardless of the political circumstances, enforces her right to mourn the exposed body, naked and vulnerable, already rotting, the body of the dearest family member, in the name of compassion and religious devotion, and in defiance of the law. The burial rites are here performed twice, even though they are obviously and "fatally criminal" (Butler 2000, 79). Antigone's insistence on the official act of mourning can thus be read as a radical gesture of identification with and recognition of a singular being whose life has long lost its legitimacy, as well as a celebration of her unprecedented relationship to the bearer of that life which transgresses the social norm of what it means to grieve. The nature of the transgression is contemplated in Butler's work by pointing to the incestuous legacy behind Antigone's actions. Yet, one may ask, can the relationship be even more transgressive? Can the acknowledgment and commemoration of the loss of a living creature, a political and religious act, and one that demonstrates the mourner's resistance to violence, vulnerability and suffering, extend beyond the human realm?



The starting point for this discussion is the claim that Butler's notion of precariousness, viewed as the basic somatic condition of individual and collective living, is what apparently spills over boundaries between species, at times rendering them irrelevant. Judith Butler's argument has indeed been interpreted in non-anthropocentric terms.<sup>1</sup> Sentient lives are universally precarious simply because their bodily being can be affected in a variety of ways: regardless of the species, they are vulnerable to suffering and destruction caused by others since they "depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance" and are thus at risk from different forms of abuse "under unjust and unequal political conditions" (Butler 2012, 148). The interdependence of living creatures is ontological and existential (it belongs to the dimension of "shared finitude"), while the degree of their precarity follows from a given historical configuration of social and economic forces that pertain both to human culture and the natural environment. For Butler, politics is about managing populations (and these populations, we hasten to add, are both human and non-human, as they are impossible to disentangle). This takes place through the tactical and unequal distribution of precarity, on the basis of "dominant norms regarding whose life is grievable and worth protecting, and whose life is ungrievable or marginally or episodically grievable [...], and thus less worthy of protection and sustenance" (Butler 2012, 148). An individual body may thus persist and flourish or, contrariwise, may be subject to violence and destruction, depending on whether it is recognised as a life and a subject to the same extent as are others. It seems, however, that the normative conditions of recognisability operate first and foremost on the collective level: as already pointed out, in the social world there emerge whole categories or groups of beings who are under-recognised as constructions of life. These bodies, vulnerable by definition, with a highly insecure ontological constitution, stand at the boundaries of the socially accepted notions of livability, grievability and subjecthood, and are threatened to be blurred or erased.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of a non-anthropocentric argument in Butler's work, see this passage from her discussion of the ethical philosophies of Arendt and Levinas: "In my view, some ethical claims emerge from bodily life and perhaps all ethical claims presuppose a bodily life, understood as injurable, one that is not restrictively human. After all, the life that is worth preserving and safeguarding, who should be protected from murder (Levinas) and genocide (Arendt), is connected to, and dependent upon, nonhuman life in essential ways; this follows from the idea of the human animal, as Derrida has articulated it, which becomes a different point of departure for thinking about politics" (Butler 2012, 147). See also Stanescu 2012, 567–582.

<sup>2</sup> Butler's narrative underscores the liminal and spectral quality of these lives, as a ghostly presence that keeps haunting social ontology. Her argument seems to owe much

Realising that precariousness is a universal condition describing the common lot of various sentient creatures is however not sufficient for any political action to take place, just as the incessant flow of media images of lost lives is hardly ever enough to make one stage one's opposition to suffering and violence. Precisely, we may ask, how and why do we become moved by a loss of life to the point that we start to grieve for it, questioning its exclusion from the community of mournable lives? Butler makes it clear that precariousness translates into a sense of existential obligation towards others, also those "we cannot name and do not know" or those who "may not bear traits of familiarity to an established sense of who 'we' are" (Butler 2009, 14). This cosmopolitan obligation may however be difficult to explicate on other than philosophical or religious grounds. As some of Butler's critics note, she "appears to rest her hopes for practicing ethics in precaritized situations on the abstract potentiality for ethical openness", which may not be enough to spur individuals and societies to action (Lloyd 2015, 230). What is needed is both the ability to recognise precarious lives as worth protecting and, in the final instance, grieving for, and a socially heterodox affect responding to their miserable condition, a sort of transgressive compassion arising from the realisation of similitude. The lesson of sympathetic imagination comes with the imminence of grief within a felt community of the living, and the community becomes all the more tangible in extreme circumstances such as war or natural disasters. Facing loss and participating in mourning, reacting with sadness, horror and guilt to the suffering and demise of others, though a disheartening experience, can also be valuable in that it enables the perception of all living beings as vulnerable, dependent on others and the environment, radically contingent and "exposed to non-life from the start" (Butler 2009, 15). Whether these forms of affect lead to political action is a different matter but they evidently make possible new forms of connectedness, which may also cross the species barrier.

In her recent essays, Judith Butler provides numerous examples of circumstances and conditions that contribute to the making of vulnerable and ungrievable bodies: these are situations connected with war, imprisonment, forced migration, unemployment, a failing system of social support, or the use of arbitrary violence by the state. She does not extend her argument any

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to the Derridean dialectic of the inside and outside: "What is this spectre that gnaws at the norms of recognition, an intensified figure vacillating as its inside and its outside? As inside, it must be expelled to purify the norm; as outside, it threatens to undo the boundaries that limn the self" (Butler 2009, 12). See also Derrida 1987, 18 ff.

further, but the systematic sanctioning of violence against some human lives, their disposability and anonymity, their progressive extermination, may bring to mind the immense scale of the exploitation and annihilation of animals in human industry, taking place in ways that would be judged monstrous by people in previous ages. The notion of precariousness seems to be exceptionally well-suited to the discussion of the lot of animal bodies—nameless, ignored, produced as redundant objects and killed without a second thought. If there is a clear instance of an ungrievable life, disavowed as a living and suffering creature and made disposable beyond hope, it is the existence of animals, especially the ones bred for consumption. It is cruelly ironic that in relation to other sentient beings, some of them qualifying as close human relatives, the narrative of shared embodiment, vulnerability and finitude seems to the majority of people far-fetched. From the perspective of the social ontology based on the idea of physical persistence, however, humans and animals are all alike: permeable bodies, bound to others and at threat from external intervention. Butler herself invites the inter-species application of her theory by stating that it is not possible to draw a firm distinction between the bios of the animal and the bios of the human in a way that would demonstrate the distinctive features of the latter (Butler 2009, 19). In many passages she is also explicit about the anti-anthropocentric thrust of her argument. Still, to draw the final consequences from the analogy is to admit that there are a large number of precarious lives beyond the human realm that are still unmourned and that deserve to be mourned in order to recognise and reduce their precarity.

Admittedly, the thought of caring for anonymous animals sacrificing their lives for the sake of satisfying human needs, of finding animal beings grievable, may appear radical and unthought-of to the point of risking sense. There is, however, an enormous potential in the gesture which imparts visibility to the animal condition by linking it to so many spheres of human life, whether public or private, political or religious. As James Stanescu remarks, mourning is a way of making connections, of establishing or recognising kinship; who gets to mourn and who is mournable shows which bodies matter socially and politically (Stanescu 2012, 568). To be in mourning, to demonstrate one's grief, is not only to overcome the feeling of shame connected with the public display of emotion, but also to point to a mourned existence as worthy of being celebrated, as a subject of remembrance and, possibly, of philosophical or religious reference. Mourning is essentially private, yet it may also create a sense of community, not only with those who are lost and grieved for but also among those who are stricken by grief.

It may thus become a promise of the common effort to minimise suffering and the loss of lives. With regard to animals, the recognition of their embodiment and fragility as something essentially shared with humans not only inspires com-*passion* (Latin *compassio* is “the ability to suffer with”) but also emancipates them as agents, as social subjects, those who can participate in rites of passage and are even themselves capable of mourning their relatives. The last argument has often been cited in support of the notion of animal religion, and it is the religious quality of animal living that will be discussed next, apparently the most interesting result of the application of Butler’s ontology beyond the narrow confines of anthropocentrism.

Grieving for animals is an exercise in human sympathetic imagination which may or may not be grounded in religious sentiment. Animal grief, a response to the death of close companions that cannot be reduced to merely instinctual behaviour, is a different matter, making one ponder whether the human definition of religion is expansive enough to account for this individual and social experience apparently involving elements of ritual. Cognitive ethology researching “the emotional lives of animals”, to remember Mark Bekoff’s famous title (Bekoff 2007, 62–69), has long provided evidence of the quasi-religious behaviour of some species when they are confronted by the passing away of their fellows, including what seems to be both affective and symbolic reactions. Elephants, wolves, dogs, foxes, baboons, llamas, magpies and other animals show signs of suffering and dependency, withdrawing into solitude or collectively behaving in an unusual manner, walking, howling, staring into space, losing interest in food and normal activities, sometimes resorting to desperately trying to revive the dead, staying with the carcass for many days or burying it in the ground (Bekoff 2007; King 2013). Some of the animals perform what appear to be elaborate rituals to demonstrate their grief and stage a farewell to their dear companions. These instances of animal behaviour, clearly proving there is a capacity for mourning and compassion in a number of non-human species, have also been adduced by researchers to support a more controversial view that in order to behave in this manner, animals must have evolved their own morality (Bekoff and Pierce 2009).

Rather than continuing with a discussion on animal morality, I will cling to the expanded notion of religion as capable of embracing other-than-human rites of passage. To the observers of the aforementioned activities it is evident that the animals respond to the loss of life of a close companion, demonstrating a complex array of behaviours that affect their bodies and lives in individual ways. Their grief is a puzzle because it has no explainable

value in terms of the evolution of the species or its reproductive success. Some of the responses, like elephants' funeral gatherings and gorillas' wakes, apparently overlap with corresponding human forms which tend to be described as having a religious character. Researchers have also noted instances of ritual behaviour in animals other than humans in situations involving natural phenomena like rain or fire (Goodall 2006).<sup>3</sup> Supposing there is a line of biological and cultural continuity between human and non-human animals, it is perhaps legitimate to draw the conclusion, as Donovan O. Schaefer does, that higher animals "are participating in the same affectively driven ritual actions that led pre-linguistic humans to develop *codified religion*" (Schaefer 2012, 185; emphasis in the original). Animal religion, if we allow for its existence, may not be a question of articulating beliefs or monitoring moral behaviour as in the case of a human cult; yet it can still denote a corporeal, deeply felt experience (such as compassion, horror, fascination and awe) stemming probably from the perception of mystery and inexplicable loss, power and beauty in the surrounding world.<sup>4</sup>

Attributing grievability and grief to animal beings thus turns out to be a profoundly emancipatory gesture in both political and theological terms. It means not only including animals in the community of suffering, vulnerability and finitude that has been the starting point of so much existential

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<sup>3</sup> I am alluding here to a famous account of the chimpanzees' ritual behaviour at the waterfall at Kakombe, presented in Jane Goodall's book *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey* (1999), which she called "the dance of awe" (188–189). While discussing the passage, Kimberley Patton, who conducts an interview with Goodall, commented on its use of remarkably religious diction in the following way: "What is so amazing to me about what you describe [...] is that so often theorists and scientists, particularly sociobiologists, will try to reduce human religious ritual, saying, 'Well, it's like animal ritual; animals have ritual too'. But what you suggest to me is that maybe we're thinking about it backwards. It's rather that ritual action is a natural response to living in a world of mystery and beauty and divinity. It is a response that is shared by animals with human beings. So it's not that we can reduce human ritual behaviour to instinct 'because animals do it too', but rather that animals need to be brought conceptually into the sphere of human religious experience; animal ritual action might be 'elevated' to the world of human ritual action" (Goodall 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Labelling animal practices of grieving and other rituals as religious may sound controversial both to scholars of religion and to believers of most institutional churches. I do not want to embark here upon very complex considerations of what religion is; eschewing metaphysical declarations, I wish to point simply to the fact, as many ethologists do, that there is a clear overlap between some animal reactions to natural wonders or death and religious rituals as practiced by humans across history. Therefore, it seems justifiable to construe animal religion as a shared bodily (and emotional) response to what is beautiful, strange and inexplicable in nature.

reflection, but also turning them into ethical and religious subjects whose existence and affliction has clear ethical implications for the lives of their human companions. If they do mourn and are mourned by others, participating in rituals that fix their connection to culture (even if these ways of behaviour are highly specific, varying in content between different species), it becomes all the more plausible to view the social presence of animals as capable of producing a shared affect, as inviting new forms of solidarity and identification. As Stanescu remarks, “vulnerability and mourning are active forces that have been confused as passive and negative” (2012, 577). In humans, naming one’s vulnerability means recognising one’s capacity for being wounded and dependent on others, which has the potential to bring an individual back into a community for care and sustenance or to find out one deserves this form of communal support. In other sentient creatures, it is much more than that: credited with the ability to suffer and mourn, and found grievable (even if there is a high risk of anthropomorphising), animals become reinscribed into the community of living beings and awarded social value as subjects and moral patients. Adding religious quality to their existence is still more interesting, not only making their lives theologically respectable and precious but also expanding the human understanding of religion in quite unpredictable ways. To think with Judith Butler’s notion of precariousness and to radicalise its consequences for the human-animal relations is thus to look for the new possibilities of implementing a social ethic that finds it impossible to disregard the fact that animal bodies are subject to omnipresent violence such as being universally slaughtered and utilised for human consumption.

What still requires an explanation, however, is the question of political praxis and the chances of animal grievability entering the field of social perception. How can we make animal bodies a truly mournable presence if their precarity and suffering is hardly visible to the majority of world populations? How can the interpretative frames of what counts as a life be expanded to encompass the existence of an individual animal? These questions are not easily answered but one possibility is again provided by Butler’s discussion of precarity when she refers to the notion of political performativity (Butler 2015, 75). Making precarious and illegitimate lives visible in the public, in her view, entails embodied political resistance, or “the gathering of the un-grievable in public space” to demand recognition (Butler 2012, 18; Lloyd 2015, 220). Obviously, for animals themselves there is no way to exercise any political agency; yet their public appearance as vulnerable subjects is possible as part of human demonstrations highlighting

the problem of their affliction. Therefore, political actions such as animal rights rallies featuring dead animals over whose bodies people grieve may be one opportunity for animals to lay claim to public space (see photograph accompanying this essay).<sup>5</sup> The staging of grief by activists alludes both to the solemnity of a funeral procession as the ultimate gesture of symbolic recognition and to the religious iconography of the *pietà*, which has its transgressive and emancipatory potential.

Another option that Butler does not in fact mention is an aesthetics of affect in art and literature. Importantly, the imagery based on bodily vulnerability and mourning, with its philosophical and religious implications, can provide a powerful tool to innovative artists and writers who are concerned with imparting social visibility and ethical significance to animals. Cross-species communities of affect can in fact be achieved not only by sympathising with the suffering, dying or dead animal but also, more significantly, through gestures of grieving that go beyond the species barrier by inscribing the animal affective experience in the framework of religious meanings. I have attempted to trace the subversive displacements of the sacred in literary and artistic works elsewhere;<sup>6</sup> here, it seems sufficient to state that the poetic or dramatic representation of an animal as a fragile, precious and mournable being, one whose death is worthy of religious celebration, can be deeply empowering as it not only awards the creature with sentience and an affective experience of its own but also transforms it into a religious subject, a position long monopolised by human beings. Hence, it is an aesthetic intervention that may disturb the social image of spirituality and religiosity by questioning its distinctly anthropocentric contours.

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<sup>5</sup> One prominent example is the National Animal Rights Day established in 2011 and now celebrated in many countries. Its organisers state that the event, remembering the animal victims of ever-growing human consumption, “was created to give a voice to these billions and billions of anonymous nameless beings. On this day, we stop everything else, and remember them. We mourn their loss, express their pain through ours, and reach out on their behalf to anyone who has a heart to listen” (qtd. on the NARD website: [www.thenard.org](http://www.thenard.org) [accessed: 15 July 2018]).

<sup>6</sup> This essay complements a previous article where I discuss a number of literary works featuring animal vulnerability and mourning, located in a clearly religious context. See Mitek-Dziemba 2019.

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**Conclusion**

In its lengthy discussion of theoretical concepts, the present article has sought to provide a new perspective on the critical importance of vulnerability, mourning and compassion. Arguing for the existence of a cross-species community of affect, I have based my analyses on Judith Butler's ontology of precariousness in its possible non-anthropocentric applications. Being naked, susceptible to injury and harm, vulnerable and fragile, experiencing both pain and desire can all be treated as common to all forms of sentient living. Precariousness is thus a universal condition whose occurrence remains closely connected with the distribution of political and social precarity. Vulnerability and precariousness pertain to both human and animal lives, and their negative impact is made evident in the absence of social recognition. Being unrecognisable as a life, however, as Butler makes it abundantly clear, means also being ungrievable: a bodily existence which matters not at all or is totally insignificant and invisible to the public eye. Therefore, unworthy of symbolic appreciation, it can be made redundant and disposed of. To prevent such treatment of precarious beings, it is necessary to search for new forms of recognition and celebration, ones which also involve compassion and grief. This article argues that non-human animals can be recognised as political and religious subjects by means of new rituals of mourning which commemorate their death as the loss of living creatures. The argument points to the possibility of charting new trajectories of affect which succeed not only in establishing a cross-species community of vulnerability and suffering but also in bridging the gap between human and non-human animals as religious subjects. The specific strategies used to mourn animals are then sought in political praxis, art and literature. In conclusion, it can be said that the aesthetic of affect, especially one exploiting the political and religious potential of grief and compassion, is a powerful means of imparting social visibility to bodies in suffering which may also contribute to the ongoing redefinition of the human-animal divide.





Photo:JoAnneMcArthur



Photo:JoAnneMcArthur

2015 National Animal Rights Day in Toronto, Canada.  
Photo by Jo Anne McArthur, courtesy of Their Turn  
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