

The Ongoing Grief of Boglands Re-Interpreting Ecological Grief with Lessons in Symptoiesis and Wetland Ecology

Moss Berke

Independent researcher

Abstract This article ventures to boglands to reimagine ecological grief. Thinking with bogs points to an alternative way of imagining ecological grief as symptoiesis with the dead which disrupts capitalist temporalities and integrates what is 'past' into futures of multispecies livability. Acknowledging that previous scholarship has succeeded in establishing an understanding that nature is grievable, The Author contends that establishing the grievability of nature does not sufficiently intervene in patterns of ecological destruction, if current paradigms for experiencing grief itself are not also troubled. Thus this article asks how ecological grief can be informed by ecologies themselves, so that chrononormative regimes can be disrupted and the dead can be recognized as agential participants in the crafting of alternative futures.

Keywords Boglands. Symptoiesis. Ecological grief. Relationality. Wetland ecology.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Submersion; Meeting the Bog. – 3 Ecological Grief as Symptoiesis: Methods for Relational and Resistant Grieving. – 4 Unending Conclusions.



Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2024-08-05
Accepted 2024-10-30
Published 2024-12-06

Open access

© 2024 Berke | 4.0



Citation Berke, M. (2024). "The Ongoing Grief of Boglands. Re-Interpreting Ecological Grief with Lessons in Symptoiesis and Wetland Ecology". *Lagoonscapes*, 4(2), 339-358.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2024/02/005

1 Introduction

As planetary scale ecological death and destruction proliferates, grief often feels too small or too human a word to describe the feeling of witnessing, experiencing, or being an accomplice to environmental destruction. Thus far, scholarship regarding the phenomenon of ecological grief has been effective in pushing forward Judith Butler's call to trouble the normative differential distribution of grievability that has previously dictated what kind of subject is grievable, and what kind of subject is not (Butler 2004, xvi). Yet, troubling the question of the subject of grief is no longer enough. Even as the phenomenon of ecological grief provides a much needed expansion of the possible *subjects* of grief, if the framework for understanding, discussing, and living through ecological grief remains informed by other normative limitations (such as those regarding acceptable timelines for grief) that are routinely applied to humanist definitions of grief, the phenomenon will remain not only misunderstood, but politically impotent.

Despite the varied and expansive contributions of previous scholarship,¹ in mainstream Western discourses feelings of ecological grief tend to remain defined through, and thereby constricted by, neoliberal medicalization apparatuses.² This constriction via pathologization ends up imposing temporal limitations on ecological grieving experiences by discursively shaping ecological grief along a path of mythic temporal linearity. It is framed as a process that one moves through; a process that comes with an ideal end result wherein the griever overcomes environmental losses. How one could overcome losses, when it is these losses and environmental destruction that shape our present and construct our future is left largely unaddressed in normative literature; literature that siloes ecological grieving experience in the field of 'mental health'. In the United States of America and the Industrialized Global North more generally, this leaves ecological grief defanged. It is relegated into being

1 For example see Cunsolo 2012; Cunsolo, Landman 2017; Craps 2020.

2 For example of this well-intentioned yet constrictive framework see Anderson 2001; Clayton et al. 2017; Comtesse et al. 2021; Esposito, Perez 2014. The phenomenon of ecological grief being siloed into normative mental health institutions is perhaps best illustrated by the report *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications and Guidance*, published by the American Psychological Association in 2017. This report pathologizes ecological grief and frames it as analogous to other mental health struggles. Seeking resolutions for ecological grief, this report encourages individuals to "build resiliency" and foster a sense of "optimism" (Clayton et al. 2017, 7). It does not mention or encourage environmental activism or collective action. This point is similarly evidenced by the plethora of online resources which frame ecological grief as a process of mourning and overcoming, using the traditional 5 stages of grief model to describe it, and thereby ultimately encouraging 'acceptance' as a token of health.

a process of overcoming the emotional effects of witnessing environmental destruction (see Clayton et al. 2017). So long as humanistic and medicalized understandings of grief as a *process of overcoming loss*³ continue to influence mainstream understandings of ecological grief, there will remain an implied directive to resolve these feelings in order to restore a normative sense of 'health'. This flattens ecological grief into being most readily understood as a mental health response to climate change, rather than an affect that could be mobilized to resist the forces underpinning such climate change. Within this flattening the disruptive potential of ecological grief is lost to a culture that prioritizes a neoliberal, capitalist vision of health and wellness that is dependent on adhering to narrow norms of behavior that do not disrupt the market economy (Lykke 2022). If we remain contained by these neoliberal regimes of health, ecological grief will remain stalled with a potentiality unrealized. It will remain largely reduced to an injunction to mourn for, and overcome environmental losses. This, the Author fears, sets up a permission structure to ultimately naturalize environmental losses through grieving for them and thereby accepting the natural world as *ruined*,⁴ which further cements the concept of nature in general, (or whatever specific ecology is being mourned) as inert, passive, and already lost. In these instances, ecological grief further cements Modernity's victory, and reasserts a hierarchy of Man over nature by reaffirming – through the very act of grieving – the death of nature (Sandilands 2010, 337). Herein, rather than being a vehicle for interrupting environmental exploitation, ecological grieving may approach a “nostalgic, sentimental or utilitarian *process* – a *process* that does not challenge or change the intersecting necropowers that cause planetary-scale death and destruction” (Radomska et al. 2020, 95; emphasis added).

Scholarship in environmental humanities has contributed greatly to the understanding of ecological grief as a phenomenon that makes

3 Scholars such as Nina Lykke, Ida Hillerup Hansen, Marietta Radomska and others, especially in the Queer Death Studies network have recently made helpful contributions to theoretical work that aims to disturb the notion that grief is a process one can engage in and come out of 'healed' from the experience of loss. Scholars in the emerging field of Queer Death Studies contend that framing grief as a process in and of itself imposes a linear temporality that does not leave room for alternative, long lasting, or temporally diffusive experiences of grief. For an especially instructive example and introduction to the field of Queer Death Studies, see Radomska et al. 2020.

4 Building from the foundational work of anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'ruin' should be seen as the binaristic opposition to 'progress'. This dualism frames progress as a force that orients individuals always ahead, and frames 'ruin' as a site of complete destruction; a place to move away from, to leave in order to find a new site for progress. This dualism does not encourage curiosity regarding what is 'ruined' and does not see ruins as potentially informative or instructive. For an in depth explanation of the many failures of the relationship between notions of progress and ruin consult Tsing's 2015 book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

clear that humans grieve for the more-than-human world.⁵ Therefore, the question no longer needs to be, *is nature grievable?* As we have collectively come to understand that, whether a normative subject or not, humans around the world are grieving ecologies, cultures, and ancestral ways of life interrupted by planetary ecocide. If we no longer need to question the grievability of nature, we must turn towards the question of the ecological equitability of our present paradigms and methods for grieving. Could an ecologically informed re-formulation of ecological grief de-center humanism while rejecting the processual implications that remain stubbornly attached to normative understandings of the phenomenon? Could this reformulation instead serve to push the feeling of ecological grief towards being an effective mode of resistance to environmental destruction?

The question no longer needs to be *is nature grievable*, but instead it must be: can we learn from ecologies how to grieve differently? Or: can we learn to grieve with ecological methods; ones that integrate the dead as agential partners in the building of futures?

This article takes the power of grief seriously, and in so doing proposes an alternative way to approach the phenomenon of ecological grieving that refuses pathologization as well as stubbornly lingering Cartesian dualisms and their attendant hierarchies, such as active/passive, and past/present. This article sets out to begin a reformulation of ecological grief that does not inadvertently re-establish nature as passive, inert, or dead, through the grieving process itself. Building from the work of Donna Haraway, the emerging field of Queer Death Studies, wetland ecology, and remaining situated within ecological epistemologies, this article presents an ecologically based account of the generative possibilities for the phenomenon of ecological grief that displaces humanism and regimes of temporal linearity. This account may be interpreted as posthuman as it refuses to reaffirm Man as the singular actor who can form, or is at the center of onto-epistemologies of grief, or for that matter, experiences of loss. Yet, this article mobilizes a relational and ecological onto-epistemology, where humans, although not at the center, are necessary players in the game and are tasked with “response-ability” rather than displacement (Haraway 2008). This article seeks lessons in grieving differently from non-human teachers. It attempts to offer a reformulation of ecological grief useful for humans that is devised from the examples provided by the more-than-human world, therefore it travels along more-than-human lines.

This article started with the presumption that the widely felt affect of ecological grief has already demonstrated that nature is grievable, but that establishing nature as grievable does not ensure that the

⁵ For example see Tsing et al. 2017; Cunsolo, Landman 2017; MacCormack et al. 2021.

unnecessary destruction of nature is adequately resisted or even put into question. With this presupposition the crucial question raised by this article is how we may come to an alternative framing of ecological grief that is informed by ecologies themselves. To answer this question, this piece ventures into an oft-misunderstood, vital yet vulnerable ecology whose wellbeing is dependent on living within the tangle of life and death. This ecological adventure generates an understanding of grief that is outside frameworks of human exceptionalism and resistant to “chrononormative”⁶ standards (Freeman 2010). Once outside the confines of temporal linearity, this article will conclude by reframing grief as an act of sympoietic relationality with the dead that tasks humans with the response-ability to carry forth the dead as active participants in the project of crafting futures defined by interdependent multi-species livability rather than rampant exploitation at the service of globalized capitalism. This reframing conceptualizes ecological grief as a force that may contribute to fostering “ongoingness”: that is, nurturing, or inventing, or discovering, or somehow cobbling together ways for living and dying well with each other in the tissues of an earth whose very habitability is threatened” (Haraway 2016, 132). In this vision, by disturbing temporal distinctions between past, present, and future, ecological grief may offer a way to remain “attached to ongoing pasts” in order to bring the dead “forward in thick presents and still possible futures” (133). This presents a framework for attending to the overwhelming volume of loss in the Anthropocene that does not prioritize overcoming these losses, but instead gives due attention to the agential

6 ‘Chrononormativity’ is a term coined by Elizabeth Freeman in her 2010 book, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* as a way to describe capitalism’s temporal logics. Simply put, Freeman describes chrononormativity as “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (Freeman 2010, 3). Chrononormativity functions on multiple registers from the individual to the institutional, though it is naturalized through institutions in order to make it largely unquestionable. On an individual level adhering to chrononormative standards is taken as a measure of good health and morality, and comes to feel ‘natural’ though it is implemented with the goal of producing norm-adhering and productive subjects (3). Ensuring that this imposed time feels natural works to confirm the fiction that what is natural for individuals is to “serve a nation’s economic interests” so that experiencing something along an alternative temporal schema is not only negatively associated as not contributing to “movement” or “change” but is easily pathologized (4). Crucially, Freeman asserts that in chrononormative regimes, “the past seems useless unless it predicts and becomes material for the future” (5). The predictive function of the past is particularly important for this paper, as this formulation ensures that the future stretches forward as a continuation of time, which eliminates the possibility for the future to be ruptured by the past. Further, in this paper specifically, we can understand the predictive function of the past as ensuring that grieving can only exist along a linear path, where one may reminisce on the past only while remaining oriented towards a preconstructed future. Other interpretations of grief are pathologized, such as suggesting that what is brought forward through grief may constitute the present or disrupt the future.

presence of the dead and destructed as equal players in the project of constructing alternative futures.

In the forthcoming section, this article wanders past muddy borders and slowly submerges itself into boglands, to wonder how we may think differently about grief when learning from ecologies who already live within atmospheres saturated by death. As a careful study of bogland ecology will show, bogs are sites that are constituted through a dynamic unfolding of more-than-human relationality, a relationality that defies imposed borders between life and death. Bogs live in defiance of temporal linearity, instead occupying a tentacular temporal zone of multiplicity and heterogeneity that arises when the lines between past, present and future are recognized as fictitious. Intimacy with a bog's ecology provides an epistemological foundation from which we can move towards a re-formulation of ecological grief. It is the Author's hope that this reformulation may serve to demonstrate that affect could be mobilized as a disruptive force into the ongoingness of capitalist temporal regimes, rather than weaponized to ultimately support the continuation of capitalist linear time. The capitalist temporality the Author aims to disrupt through this re-reading of ecological grief is one that continuously re-establishes the future as a singular and non-disrupted continuation of the present that one moves towards by always and only moving forward through time. This temporal regime is astonishingly under equipped to address the challenges of the Anthropocene, as ecological destruction has extended to the farthest corners of the globe, and there is, quite literally, no undisturbed future to look towards (Tsing 2015, 3). But bogs, when examined closely, when submerged into, may show their human interlocutors another way to approach death, another side of grief, and one possible alternative to the confines of the "chrononormativity" that is capitalist time (Freeman 2010). If we listen closely, look carefully and move slowly, bogs may reveal an alternative method for grieving, where ecological grief need no longer be how humans process through environmental losses, but may instead exist as a way for individuals to live alongside and with ongoing death. Boglands may give us instructive examples for how to refuse to abandon "the past in an ongoing search for new cathexes" and instead allow all that has been lost to inform the construction of a future(s) defined by interdependent multi-species livability (Sandilands 2010, 340).

In the final section, the Author brings the lessons gleaned from an intimate submersion into bogland ecologies to meet Donna Haraway's call for sym-poietic relationality as a method for living, dying and grieving through the era of mass death that is the Anthropocene. Building from Haraway's science fiction storytelling in her 2016 book *Staying With the Trouble*, the Author demonstrates that boglands are presently enacting the relational, temporally heterogeneous grieving methods she advocates for, as bogs themselves reject processual mourning

in favor of bringing the dead into an “ongoing presence” in the present (Haraway 2016, 166). It is the Author’s hope that this final section melds theoretical fabulation with evidence from the natural sciences in order to demonstrate that alternative ways of living with loss are already modeled for us, if we are willing to look for them ecologically. Using Haraway’s vocabulary of sympoietic relationality as a way to understand the alternative method of grieving offered by boglands encourages a theoretical and ecologically grounded assertion that there are ways to experience the loss and destruction of climate crises that trouble the very possibility for this destruction to continue uninterrupted. These boggy, sympoietic alternatives refuse to prioritize ‘getting over’ such losses and returning to norm adhering, future oriented productivity, and instead see the absolute necessity of bringing the voices and ongoing presences of all that has been destroyed into any conversation that aims to address such uncertain futures as ours.

2 Submersion; Meeting the Bog

Staring at a bog, the Author’s sense of scale and order is immediately distorted. The landscape feels empty, yet abundant. Rolling fog lapping low over an endless ground calls forth imagined scenes of future wreckage. Without knowing better, the landscape can seem like a wasteland; the thick air ominous, the seeping ground sinister. Yet, something generous and slow bubbles up through the cracks in the Author’s perception, the bog feels more ancient than apocalyptic, it is a witness to timescales that humans cannot grasp. It is not timeless, but timefull. Spending time with a bog is to become intimate with indeterminacy. It is to witness an ecology that is neither land, nor water, but an indecipherable mixture of the two (Emory 2021). It is to witness an ecology that is neither alive, nor dead, but an inextricable mixture of death and life. It is to accept the invitation to “radically imagine worlds that are possible because *they are already here*” (Tsing et al. 2017, G9; emphasis added). But why journey to the bog to think and learn about grief? What can the ecology and temporalities encompassed by boglands have to show us about living (and dying) in the Anthropocene? With a closer look, the unique ecological features of boglands may have much to say about alternative ways to live through and with abundant loss.

Bogs, often called mires, moors, peatlands or muskegs are found typically in cool, northern climates (Evers 2022). Raised bogs, the most common type of bogs, are ancient landscapes that can take upwards of ten thousand years to reach maturity (Gewin 2020, 205). Most bogs throughout Europe began their long process of formation at the end of the last Ice Age, when retreating glaciers tore through land and left scars in the form of basins, which collected water and soon became shallow lakes (Egli et al. 2021). But, due to the method

of their formation, these basins often lacked the drainage and filtration abilities characteristic of non-glacial lakes, and instead became sites where deposited water grew stagnant (Robichaud, Bégin 2009). Stagnant water has very low levels of oxygen and high levels of acidity, because if water does not move, oxygen cannot permeate (Evers 2022). Therefore, aerobic bacteria that depend on the presence of oxygen cannot flourish, and it is this same bacteria that is needed for decomposition to occur (Evers 2022). And so, year after year, as the organic matter that grew on the perimeter of the bog-in-formation died and fell into the body of water, it was never able to complete processes of decomposition. Rather, deposited organic material remained inside the bog and compressed upon itself, forever only partially decomposed (Gearey, Everett 2021; Rolston 2000, 596). Dead, yes, but present in the fullest sense of the word.

The ancient conditions that shaped the emergence of boglands still characterize the ecosystem in the present. The continual deposition of organic material without typical processes of bacterial decomposition slowly transformed the water of the basin towards its state of present indeterminacy. The water of the would-be-lake instead became *not just water*, but not quite solid land either, it became the unfixable, boundary defiant body of the bog. By never arriving at the stage of complete decay – by never *processing*⁷ what is lost – the bog preserves that which is dead within its watery body so that the dead composes its watery body. For the bog, the ongoing presence of death is the material agent that transforms a bog-in-progress towards an ecologically mature complex system. Over thousands of years, with neither aeration nor aerobic bacteria to engage in decomposition and filtration, all deposited materials slowly stack up in the body of the bog, eventually forming what we know as peat (Moore 1989, 89).

To submerge farther, let's sink into this suctioning peat, the deep-time mud that composes the majority of the internal bog. Peat itself is mostly made up of dead plant material (Malmer, Wallén 1993, 194). The heavy, waterlogged, muddish substance seems to be structurally sound, though if you linger too long you are often slowly, though noticeably, drawn deeper into the bog. Sinking deeper into layers of peat is an act of traveling backwards through time; because with an accumulation

⁷ The analogous relationship between the terms 'decomposition' and 'process' are interesting to note in the case of bog ecology and discussions of grief. Understanding the decomposition of dead organic matter as a process similar to what one might go through in a normative understanding of grief underlines Author's thesis in the introduction to this article: that framing grief as a process encourages the complete decomposition of the dead so that they disappear from life in the present and can be abandoned and overcome in order to move towards a future that is temporally severed from the past. Boglands' inability to ever fully decompose the dead is an ecological example of a resistance to 'processing', one that reveals alternative lifeways and alternative ways of forming relationships with what is dead.

rate of only one half to two millimeters a year, boglands can take thousands of years to develop just a few meters of peat (Lindsay et al. 2014, 3). Falling deeper into the bog is to be met with peat from times far exceeding human lifespans, it is to physically touch a past that has proven itself to be uncontainable. A past that is present in this present moment.

Broadly speaking, bogs are categorized as peatlands (International Peatlands Society 2019). To be characterized as a peatland the production of organic matter must exceed the rate of its decomposition, which is quite a feat considering how slowly layers of peat form (Lindsay et al. 2014). To do justice to our ecological instructor, when speaking about the bog, word choice is of crucial importance. In much scientific literature on boglands, peat is referred to as ‘growing’ or ‘producing’ very slowly (Bonn et al. 2016, 40; Clymo 1978, 195). Yet terms like growth and production do not adequately address the temporal heterogeneity of boglands, and the Author contends that a more accurate way of understanding peat formation can be found within the term ‘accumulation’. On the surface, this distinction may be small, but below the surface, it is crucially important if we are to adequately recognize the relations and intermeshment of many ongoing temporalities as they exist simultaneously within the bog. Recognizing peat growth instead as peat accumulation

troubles a chrononormative organizational schema which offers a singular vision of the present as a distinguishable and separate moment from the past. (Berke 2023, 90)

As peat accumulates over times that far exceed the human, we are offered a more accurate vision of the ways that the past is materially constitutive of the present. Bogs offer a different conception of time itself, revealing that time itself “does not pass, it accumulates” (Baucom 2005, 24). Sinking deeper into peat brings humans into contact with materials from a deep past, reminding us, quite literally, that what is relegated to the past makes up the present: the past is *here, is now*. Peat troubles the very possibility that the past can exist as a bounded category because it is the retention and continuation of the past. The very existence of peat demonstrates that chrononormative temporal boundaries cannot, and do not hold. As Stephen Dillon asserts, “the past and present are not ontologically discrete categories... The present is not a quarantined, autonomous thing” (Dillon 2013, 42).

Whereas a humanistic and neoliberal vision of grief sees it as a process of reflecting on what is made inaccessible by death,⁸ if we

⁸ For those seeking more information regarding the limitations of normative and neoliberal definitions of grief, see Hansen, Lukić 2017; MacCormack et al. 2021; Mozessohn, Hoskin 2022.

allow layer upon layer of peat to influence our relationship to time past, we may see that we need not relegate the dead into inaccessibility in order to prove our health and wellness, but rather, that for some more-than-human others, healthy existence is defined by bringing the past into the present. Peats' relationship with the dead, its very dependence upon the dead for materiality in the present, unfolds "within the frame of an ongoing mutuality and embodied relationality" that defeats any notion that death creates a final divide between those who live in the present and those who do not (Hazekamp, Lykke 2022, 34). Recognizing peat on its own terms gives students of the boglands "a sense of deep time" that troubles the notion of a bounded present, past, or future (Rolston 2000, 595). Peat asks us to

recognize that we are living in a present that cannot be cordoned away from the past, because this present is the accumulation of every leaf that has fallen into the mouth of the bog (Berke 2023, 90)

every reed that has fallen from the basin's edge. Peat reminds us that the separation between past and present is but a myth.

As peat forms within the body of the bog, eventually it meets the surface of the surrounding ground. Slowly mosses and grasses grow across its surface, making outcrops for vegetation in some areas and leaving pools of exposed muckish water in others. This surface is neither land, nor water; it is born from a substance that is neither solely part of the past or entirely of the present. It undulates in indeterminacy, and is able to reach the surface of the basin only because of the structural support provided by the ongoing presence of the dead.

For a second example of how the ecological makeup of the bog points towards an alternative framework for relations with the dead, let us look closely at the most prominent plant that grows across its surface. As we slowly rise back to the surface of this muddy time capsule, we can see a variety of vegetation covering the outermost layer of accumulated peat, perhaps a blueberry bush, an orchid, a pitcher plant, or the even more commonly found sedges and purple heather (Lyons, Jordan 1989). In an environment as nutrient poor and anaerobic as a bog, "higher classes" of vegetation - vascular plants with tissues capable of easily transporting water and other nutrients throughout the body of the organism - are rare, but so called "lower classes" of plants - that is bryophytes and other plants without root systems or true leaves - abound (Kimmerer 2021, 114). And nestled right within, or perhaps just under an intermittent canopy of grasses, lingers the most notable plant in the bog, the sphagnum moss, which is often referred to as the "architect" of the bog (112). Sphagnum, just like peat, may have an enormous amount to teach human students about ways to live alongside death. And despite its designation as a low class of vegetation, sphagnum moss has a complex nature

of its own. It takes a special plant to be able to build a surface over an indeterminate foundation, and sphagnum is the main plant comprising the spongy surface of the bog. Much like peat, sphagnum is neither simply aquatic nor terrestrial. In fact, by weight, the majority of sphagnum is water (112). Sphagnum doesn't grow despite indeterminacy, but it requires indeterminacy in order to extend its surface covering across the bog. The surface covering provides ground for other plants to grow. Without it, the ecosystem itself could not develop (112-14).

Interestingly, in the case of sphagnum, the majority of the plant is dead, only one out of twenty cells are alive (113). Sphagnum, like other mosses, is a bryophyte, meaning the plant itself cannot transport water from one part to another, but can only absorb water across its surface area (Crooks 2021). And here is where the dead cells of sphagnum find their ultimate utility. When discussing sphagnum, it is not useful to impose distinctions between alive and dead, as the dead cells of sphagnum are vital for the health of the entire plant; they are water retention cells (Kimmerer 2021, 114). It is these dead cells which make up the majority of the structure of sphagnum, as well as provide storehouses of water for the 'living' sections of the plant to draw from (114). The water retention abilities of dead sphagnum is what provides surface area and nutrients for new mosses to grow from; a cycle of life dependent on intimate comingling with the dead. Dead cells of sphagnum are as much a part of the 'living' plant as the cells which undergo photosynthesis. Although it does not serve us to make distinctions between the living and dead cells, it does serve us to recognize that, once again, sphagnum itself is "embodied relationality" between the dead and the living (Hazekamp, Lykke 2022, 34). As sphagnum dies, it too becomes incorporated into peat, extending the relationship between peat and sphagnum forward in time, through the preservation of what is 'past'.

Boglands demonstrate that ecologies recognize, value and depend upon the dead as agential players in the constitution of the present and future. In the bog, dead matter doesn't just co-mingle with the living, but provides the necessary conditions for life to be sustained. The Author suggests that this may point towards an alternative way for humans to experience ecological grief, where rather than overcoming loss and searching onwards for a new attachment, the lost object quite literally comes to "constitute(s) the self" acting "as an ongoing psychic reminder of the fact of death in the midst of creation" (Sandilands 2010, 333). Boglands do not just experience death, rather the bog as well as its possibility for ongoingness in the future depend on intimacy with the dead, continued presence of death, and the integration of what is lost into the core of the self. Bogs provide ample examples of other ways to remain in relation to death rather than seeing death as something to overcome or process through

grieving. Bogs push us to think of alternative frameworks for relating to the dead that do not cast the dead into a past made accessible only through memory. Bogs ask us to recognize that the dead are co-constitutors of the present and of any ecologically equitable future. They ask us to imagine an alternative to humanistic grief; a boggy revisioning, where the opacity of indeterminate terrain defies easy categorization and illuminates many possible alternatives for ongoingness that lurk underneath uncertain surfaces.

3 Ecological Grief as Sympoiesis: Methods for Relational and Resistant Grieving

In her 2016 book *Staying with the Trouble*, multi-species feminist scholar Donna Haraway contends that a sympoietic approach is needed if we are to move towards multi-species *resurgence*,⁹ if we are to continue to develop the “arts of living on a damaged planet”, a phrase Haraway borrows from anthropologist Anna Tsing (Tsing et al. 2017). For Haraway, sympoiesis is the act of “making-with” (Haraway 2016, 58). She explains, “Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing” (58). Sympoiesis is not necessarily a willful act, more so it is a way of understanding and recognizing the collaborative nature of the emergence of all creatures and phenomenon: it is a rejection of the very notion of bounded autonomy or the fiction that anything is autopoietic, that is, self made. Once recognized, we are left with the response-ability to develop the onto-epistemological tools to continue to reveal to ourselves the sympoietic relationality of the world, as well as a response-ability to stand in defiance of regimes and histories of solipsism and mythologies of bounded autonomy. We are beckoned to work, create, fabulate and imagine in sympoietic fashions as “approaches tuned to ‘multi-species becoming-with’ better sustain us” as we take up the task ahead: to live and die well on and with troubled and threatened terrain (63). A refusal of individuality, sympoiesis is needed now more than ever if we are to reconcile with the vast interdependent networks made abundantly clear by the crises laden Anthropocene. In fact, Haraway contends that the conditions of the Anthropocene “demand sympoietic thinking and action” (67). This section will elaborate upon boglands’ ecological characteristics through the lens of sympoiesis and relationality in order to elucidate boggy lessons for an alternative way

⁹ “Resurgence” is Haraway’s term for the planetary task ahead of us as we live and die within the Anthropocene. Resurgence is shorthand for the quest for multi-species, interdependent, non-exploitative livability for all the earth’s creatures, human and more-than-human, past, present and yet to come.

to experience ecological grief. Taking up sympoiesis rather than autopoiesis decenters the human from our onto-epistemological foundations, a much needed task in order to adequately learn from and with ecologies.

Haraway provides readers with examples of sympoiesis ranging from crochet to bacteria, from camels to ornithologists and indigenous artists (58-98). Here, the Author wants to extend her theory to boglands. In this present case, sympoiesis can be read as a call to think and theorize in boggy methods; always in relation, as boglands themselves “render rigid delineation impossible” (Garibaldi 2024, 86). In the previous section, we recognized that bogs are not just sites where the dead have a chance to mingle with the living, but that the bog itself is the encounter; an ecology of life and death in dynamic relationality. After this recognition was made possible with the aid of natural sciences, this section ventures a few steps further. It moves towards Haraway’s invitation to engage in “speculative fabulation for flourishing” (81). This section asks how human students of boglands can imaginatively enter this sympoietic web in search of alternative grieving methods. How can humans learn grief differently from thinking with the life and death sympoiesis of bog ecosystems?

Rather than assuming that the task of resurgence that stands before us requires “starting over and beginning anew”, Haraway contends that moving towards resurgence “requires inheriting hard histories, for everybody, but not equally and not in the same ways” (150, 89). Resurgence requires an intimate relation with the past, as climate change itself is largely a question of how to deal with the past as it makes itself known in the present, and future. As Irish writer and researcher on grief Molly Furey asserts:

The climate crisis is the result of past actions and thus, as much as it puts the future at stake, it necessarily demands a certain conceptualization of history and memory – as ongoing, incomplete. (Furey 2024, 241)

The climate crises demands that we recognize that history is incomplete, that the past *cannot* be put behind us. But without ecological examples, our methods for accessing this past – namely grief and memory – may inadvertently continue to repeat the patterns that confirm the past as over and gone. Our methods of grieving in the Anthropocene must take on a similar quality of incompleteness, of *ongoingness*. For as Furey continues:

the ongoing failure to respond adequately to the generational challenge posed by the climate crisis is rooted in our failure to recognize it as a temporally diffuse one. (Furey 2024, 241)

With boggy methods in mind, we may be able to see the potentiality of ecological grief for how it may function as an affective step towards acknowledging the utter incompleteness of the past, its material and agential presence in the present and its role in the shaping of futures. If the unforeseeable consequences and impacts of climate change are communications with humanity's past actions, then perhaps our ways of grieving for this destruction can also be a way of communicating with humanity's past. Bogs may serve as a figure to remind us, in times of mass planetary death, how to "stay with the ragged joy of ordinary living and dying", by providing a lived and present ecological example of "sympoiesis with the dead" (Haraway 2016, 167, 157). To recognize the bog as a relational emergence between ecological life and death provides a pathway for understanding grief differently. Rather than a process of dealing with and overcoming loss, bogs invite us to reimagine grief as a vital and necessary task for living through the Anthropocene. Bogs asks us to reimagine grief as a way to take up the response-ability of ensuring that the dead are heard, seen and collaborated with as future spaces of multispecies resurgence come into being. Bogs encourage us to imagine the ways that what is lost or degraded may act agentially in the present and future, rather than disappearing and becoming that for which we mourn and therefore can come to abandon.

Boglands provide an ecological answer to Haraway's question regarding what we will do with our troubled inheritances by showing us that an alternative way of living alongside the dead already exists, and that for some, life itself depends on it. By so stubbornly refusing to abandon the dead, and instead integrating this dead into a heterogenous and expansive self, the bog lives in a time that may seem far from our contemporary moment, a time "of interspecies interrelationalities before hierarchical conceptions of human exceptionalism" (Delany 2024, 149). But going even further, the interspecies interrelationalities of boglands are extended past the imposed threshold between life and death. They provide an example of how we may live similarly as we are steeped in crises today. The approach requires creativity, imagination, and a willingness to resist ontological predeterminism. It asks us to remain curious regarding what internalized, intimate and ongoing relationships with the dead could look like for human beings. Bogs demonstrate a relational ontology that stretches tentacularly through time, one that offers humans a method for re-thinking, and re-experiencing grief as similarly relational. This may construct a future(s) defined by interruptions by the past, rather than a future of simple and uninterrupted continuation. The bog asks us how grief may be an act of carrying with rather than processing through. Whereas we may live in a fiction that imagines easy divisions between past, present and future, a temporal organization that will always encourage the renouncing of the

past in the ongoing search for a site for future conquest, boglands demonstrate a present liveliness that is constituted by a never-over past. As a landscape that lives only through ongoing relations with the dead, the bog becomes a site that demands an imaginative re-thinking of death itself.

In the last chapter of *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway crafts an SF¹⁰ story entitled “Children of the Compost” (Haraway 2016, 134-68). This story imagines the lives of future communities who are living and dying through the mass extinctions of the Anthropocene. As a strategy for multispecies resurgence, some community members engage in material sympoietic bonding with endangered or precarious animal species. This means that specific humans are biologically altered so that they take on certain characteristics and abilities of their chosen more-than-human partner. These humans are materially altered by the integration of molecular and cellular materials from other species and kinds into themselves and are referred to as “syms” (140). The aim of this deliberate sympoietic biologic altering is to build a lineage of interwoven relationalities between human and non-human others in order to “recraft conditions of living and dying to enable flourishing in the present and in times to come” (137). Yet, these sympoietic beings cannot alone stop the mass death of the Anthropocene, and as extinctions proliferate around the globe, some of the syms transition from being sympoietically interwoven with their animals, to being sympoietically interwoven with the dead, as the entire species of their animal mate became extinct. This transition gives syms a new response-ability, and turns them into “speakers for the dead” (164).

“Children of the Compost” is a tale that uses science fiction to imagine ways that we humans may live and die differently through crises unfolding and still yet to come. In Haraway’s vision for the future, speakers for the dead play a vital and indispensable part. Each speaker for the dead is tasked with

bringing critters who had been irretrievably lost into potent presence for giving knowledge and heart to all of those continuing to work for the still diverse earth’s robust and partial recuperation. (164)

Speakers for the dead bring these lost lifeways into “ongoing presence” by practicing “vital memory” (166). That is, they refuse to allow extinction to mean erasure and instead they move from “mourning

10 ‘SF’ is a term Haraway uses as an acronym that describes a multiplicity of terms, tools and concepts. SF is “science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far” (Haraway 2016, 2). But it is also a method for tracing the unknowable, a “dangerous true tale of adventure...a practice...a figure for ongoingness” (3).

to representing” (166). Speakers for the dead do not renounce grief, but they refuse to experience grief as a pathway towards overcoming loss. Instead, their grief is the work of not forgetting, it is the work of always carrying forth that which is lost. As Haraway explains, a crucial responsibility for speakers for the dead is

not to forget the stink in the air from the burning of the witches, not to forget the murders of human and nonhuman beings in the Great Catastrophes named the Plantationocene, Anthropocene, Capitalocene. (166)

4 Unending Conclusions

The vision that Haraway gives of a future where humans are inextricably bound to lost species and take on the response-ability for carrying them into the present is a tale of science fiction. Yet, it is also a story already ecologically lived. Much like Haraway’s “Children of the Compost”, boglands provide pathways for thinking about the role of the dead and the uses of grief outside of present paradigms. Boglands gesture towards a different type of livability, one that is instructive as we occupy Anthropocene scenes of mass death. By providing material examples of ecologies that already exist in sympoiesis with the dead, boglands are Haraway’s science fiction in present reality. They ask us to stop outrunning deathly realities, and instead learn to harness grief as a method for sympoietic more-than-human continuation. They ask us to re-imagine grief as the vital work of bringing the voices of the dead into the project of crafting a future defined by multi-species healing rather than continued exploitation. Following boggy examples and learning with Haraway’s vocabulary of sympoiesis and relationality, we are left with a different understanding of the utility of ecological grief. Rather than the pathway to overcoming the emotional distress that accompanies the Anthropocene, by looking closely at a bogland’s way of life, by recognizing its sympoietic intimacy with death, we may re-imagine the role of ecological grief as an affect that integrates histories and continuations of environmental destruction into the construction of alternative futures. Learning with boglands pushes humans into a recognition of grief not as a process of overcoming death, but as a method for sympoietic relations with the dead that may better equip us as we live and die together in the Anthropocene.

Bibliography

- Anderson, R.B. (2001). "The World Is Dying – and So Are You". *Los Angeles Times*, January 7.
<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-jan-07-op-9312-story.html>
- Baucom, I. (2005). *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham: Duke University Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12101wp>
- Berke, M. (2023). *Weathering Grief: Alternative Temporalities, Undone Senses and Melancholy Ecologies in Times of Planetary Ecocide* [Master Dissertation]. Utrecht: Utrecht University.
- Bonn, A. et al. (eds) (2016). *Peatland Restoration and Ecosystem Services: Science, Policy and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139177788.002>
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York City: Verso.
- Clayton, S.; Manning, C.; Krygsmann, K.; Speiser, M. (2017). *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications and Guidance*. Edited by A. Cunsolo, V. Derr, T. Doherty, P. Ferry, E. Haase, J. Kotcher, L. Silka, L. Van Susteren and J. Tabola. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/e503122017-001>
- Clymo, R.S. (1978). "A Model of Peat Bog Growth". *Production Ecology of British Moors and Montane Grasslands*. Berlin; Heidelberg: Springer, 187-223.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-66760-2_9
- Comtesse, H. et al. (2021). "Ecological Grief as a Response to Environmental Change: A Mental Health Risk or Functional Response?". *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(2), 734.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18020734>
- Cunsolo, A. (2012). "Climate Change as the Work of Mourning". *Ethics & the Environment*, 17(2), 137-64.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.2979/ethicsenviro.17.2.137>
- Cunsolo, A.; Landman, K. (eds) (2017). *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1w6t9hg>
- Craps, S. (2020). "Introduction: Ecological Grief". *American Imago*, 77(1), 1-7.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/aim.2020.0000>
- Crooks, V. (2021). *Bryophytes*. Panama City: Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute.
<https://stri.si.edu/story/bryophytes>
- Delany, S. (2024). "Black Fugitive Territories and the Un-Gendering of the Captive: Lessons from the Rougarou, Chupacabra and Boohag". *Soapbox. Journal for Cultural Analysis*, 5(1), 129-56.
- Dillon, S. (2013). "'It's Here, It's that Time': Race, Queer Futurity, and the Temporality of Violence in Born in Flames". *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 23(1), 38-51.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0740770x.2013.786277>
- Egli, M. et al. (2021). "Formation and Decay of Peat Bogs in the Vegetable Belt of Switzerland". *Swiss Journal of Geosciences*, 114, 1-16.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/s00015-020-00376-0>
- Emory, S. (2021). "Must Love Bogs". *The Baffler*, April 10.
<https://thebaffler.com/latest/must-love-bogs-emory>
- Esposito, L.; Perez, F.M. (2014). "Neoliberalism and the Commodification of Mental Health". *Humanity & Society*, 38(4), 414-42.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0160597614544958>

- Evers, J. (ed.) (2022). "Bog". *National Geographic Education*.
<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/bog/>
- Freeman, E. (2010). *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham: Duke University Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/9780822393184>
- Furey, M. (2024). "Remembering for the Future in the Irish Bog: Reckoning with Ghosts of the Anthropocene in Ireland's Peatland Policy". *Soapbox. Journal for Cultural Analysis*, 5(1), 231-57.
- Garibaldi, E. (2024). "The Unstable Ground". *Soapbox. Journal for Cultural Analysis*, 5(1), 83-11.
- Gearey, B.; Everett, R. (2021). "Running Out of Time? Peatland Rehabilitation, Archaeology and Cultural Ecosystem Services". *Mires and Peat*, 27(31), 6.
<https://doi.org/10.19189/MaP.2021.KHR.StA.2195>
- Gewin, V. (2020). "Bringing Back the Bogs". *Nature*, 578(7794), 204-8.
- Haraway, D. (2008). *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Posthumanities 3.
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/rf.2017.017>
- Hansen, I.H.; Lukić, J. (2017). *Reading Textures of Grief: Developing an Anti-Essentializing and Affectively Entangled Framework for Exploring Grief* [Master Dissertation]. Vienna: Central European University.
- Hazekamp, R.; Lykke, N. (2022). "Ancestral Conviviality. How I Fell in Love with Queer Critters". *Forum+*, 29(3), 30-6.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5117/forum2022.3.008.haze>
- IPS, International Peatland Society (2019). *Peatlands*.
<https://peatlands.org/peatlands/>
- Kimmerer, R.W. (2021). *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*. London: Penguin UK.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book7316>
- Lindsay, R.; Birnie, R.; Clough, J. (2014). "Peat Bog Ecosystems: Key Definitions". IUCN UK Committee Peatland Programme Briefing Note No. 1.
<https://www.iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/1%20Definitions%20final%20-%205th%20November%202014.pdf>
- Lykke, N. (2022). *Vibrant Death: A Posthuman Phenomenology of Mourning*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Lyons, J.; Jordan, S. (1989). *Walking the Wetlands: A Hiker's Guide to Common Plants and Animals of Marshes, Bogs, and Swamps*. New York City: Wiley.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5962/p.356484>
- MacCormack, P. et al. (2021). "What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Queer Death? Theories and Definitions". *Whatever. A Transdisciplinary Journal of Queer Theories and Studies*, 4, 573-98.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.13131/2611-657X.whatever.v4i1.147>
- Malmer, N.; Wallén, B. (1993). "Accumulation and Release of Organic Matter in Ombrotrophic Bog Hummocks. Processes and Regional Variation". *Ecography*, 16(3), 193-211.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0587.1993.tb00210.x>
- Mozessohn, K.; Hoskin, R.A. (2022). "Vibrant Death: A Posthuman Phenomenology of Mourning, by Nina Lykke". *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 26(4), 474-8.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2022.2088051>
- Moore, P.D. (1989). "The Ecology of Peat-forming Processes: A Review". *International Journal of Coal Geology*, 12(1-4), 89-103.
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0166-5162\(89\)90048-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0166-5162(89)90048-7)

- Radomska, M. et al. (2020). "Queer Death Studies: Death, Dying and Mourning from a Queerfeminist Perspective". *Australian Feminist Studies*, 35(104), 81-100.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2020.1811952>
- Robichaud, A.; Bégin, Y. (2009). "Development of a Raised Bog Over 9000 Years in Atlantic Canada". *Mires & Peat*, 5, 1-19.
- Rolston, H. (2000). "Aesthetics in the Swamps". *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 43(4), 584-97.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/pbm.2000.0052>
- Sandilands, C. (2010). "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies". Mortimer-Sandilands, C.; Erickson, B. (eds), *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 331-58.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2012.01265.x>
- Tsing, A.L. (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4000/lhomme.30449>
- Tsing, A.L. et al. (2017). *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s2753906700003077>

