



## Transgressing boundaries of grievability: Ambiguous emotions at pet cemeteries

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### 1. Introduction

Companion animals are striking in their ambiguity. Bred on an industrial scale, bought, sold and sometimes abandoned, they are also seen as beloved family members and friends. They belong to the cultural realm, mostly live in the home, have individual names and, instead of being eaten, receive caring attention from humans (Howell, 2018). They participate in their owners' everyday lives and various joint activities. Nevertheless, they also belong to the realm of nature, the non-human world whose ontology and epistemology have been defined for centuries by the scientific discourses of biology. Companion animals are liminal creatures: they pass between and blur binary opposites such as nature and culture, object and subject, and commodity and companion (Sanders, 1995).

As Brandes (2009, 100) argues, however, "it is in the domain of death [...] that the human–animal bond often manifests itself most overtly." It is when we lose a pet that we understand how the creature has made us who we are (Redmalm, 2015; Schuurman, 2017). Dell'Aversano (2010, 104) points out that "animals make the presence of death much more intensely and frequently perceptible". Living with companion animals brings a heightened sense of the fragility of life. Yet, bereaved pet owners are often wary about expressing their grief in fear of social sanctions – of being dismissed as overly sentimental, or of anthropomorphizing their pets (Woods, 2000; Morley and Fook, 2005). According to Butler (2009), publicly grieving beings for which grief is not normally expressed openly makes it possible to redefine the limits of grievability and grant these beings 'humanity'. By extension, grief for non-human animals can challenge and modify the normative frameworks that define which lives matter (Redmalm, 2015).

The present study focuses on public performance of grief for non-human animals in pet cemeteries – spaces that are devoted to the mourning of animal death. Our interest is in what it means to grieve an ambiguous being, or a liminal creature. Drawing on photographic material, we explore the visible traces of mourning in pet cemeteries in Scandinavia (Finland and Sweden), where cats, dogs, guinea pigs, hamsters, birds, rabbits, horses and other animals lie buried. We use these traces, the 'emotional sedimentation' (Hallam and Hockey, 2001),

to theorize the implication of pet cemeteries as spaces for the negotiation of grievability and for working the boundary between humans and animals.

Pet cemeteries are growing in popularity; however, previous studies on pet cemeteries have been sparse, and viewpoints have been mostly historical (Brandes, 2009; Howell, 2002; Kean, 2013; Thorsen, 2001), although a few studies focus on contemporary pet cemeteries (Chalfen, 2003; Witt, 2003; PREGOWSKI, 2016). Many of the latter are rather descriptive in style, and what is lacking is a more thorough theoretical consideration of what it means that some animals are buried in specific spaces devoted to animal death. Thus, as Kean (2013) suggests, pet cemeteries might be viewed as places worth thinking of more carefully. Pet cemeteries are 'good to think with' (cf. Fudge, 2008) because public expressions of grief for beings existing at the limits of grievability can shed light on the normative framework that allows for some lives to be grieved, while other lives are automatically rendered ungrievable – such as wild animals as well as animals in the food and clothing industry.

Theoretically, the paper derives from both death studies and the growing field of animal geographies. Emerging in the mid-nineties (Wolch and Emel, 1995), the new animal geographies "allow us a privileged viewpoint on the nature of culture and the culture of nature" (Howell, 2002, 6). The field has gained increasing attention (see Buller, 2014), with several volumes published (e.g. Urbanik, 2012; Gillespie and Collard, 2015; Nyman and Schuurman, 2016a; Wilcox and Rutherford, 2018; Bull et al., 2018). Recent work has focused on human–animal encounters as spatially situated (Buller, 2014), highlighting the fact that the site of the encounter, the space where it takes place, influences the ways in which animals are understood and appreciated. Attention has been paid to the embodiment of human–animal relationality and, especially, the agency of animals as they co-produce space with – or without – humans (Bull and Holmberg, 2018).

Informed by work conducted within studies of the geography of death (Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Desmond, 2016; Maddrell, 2016; Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010; Stevenson et al., 2016), we approach pet cemeteries as 'deathscapes': material and metaphorical places and spaces that are "associated with death and for the dead" and that are

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central to the reproduction of personal identities and communities (Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010, 4). Pet cemeteries are also ‘animal spaces’, that is, physical spaces where human and/or non-human bodies are present and where the distinction between humans and other animals is subjected to a symbolic struggle (see Philo, 1995; Philo and Wilbert, 2000, 7–11; Buller, 2014; Nyman and Schuurman, 2016b; Redmalm, 2018; Bull and Holmberg, 2018). We therefore consider the pet cemetery a ‘more-than-human deathscapes’ (cf. Whatmore, 2004) – a place that transforms human–pet relations through death, mourning and remembrance, “a site where the dead are put to work, cohabiting with the living” (Lorimer, 2018, 2).

We suggest that more-than-human cemetery deathscapes are material spaces where humans are allowed to mourn animals, both living and deceased, in a ritualistic but flexible and creative manner that manifests the emotional connection with and knowing of the non-human other. Further, we propose that mourning across species boundaries may pose a challenge to the notion of humanity itself. Finally, since the study focuses on Scandinavian pet cemeteries, we argue that the specific form taken by pet cemeteries, and how grief is expressed there, must be understood in light of the distinction between nature and culture that is central to Western modernity. Consequently, the present study is also situated within the field of ‘critical pet studies’ (Nast, 2006a), recognizing that pet love must be understood in the light of “larger social, political, economic and material-geographical processes” (Nast, 2006a, 897).

## 2. Theorising grief for non-human animals

It has been argued that the modernisation process has transformed how we relate to death, making it a silenced issue, and that grieving a person's death has become a private process (Bauman, 1992). In the 21st century, however, there are signs of a new visibility of death and a willingness to share the emotions of grief in novel contexts, such as social media (Walter et al., 2012; Howarth, 2007). Part of this development is an intensified preoccupation with the death of and grief for pets. The practices and rituals surrounding human death, such as burials, headstones and graveside remembrance, have been increasingly incorporated into the cultures of pet-keeping (Kean, 2013), and grief for humans and non-human animals are partly regulated by the same cultural norms and practices (Morrow, 1998; Turner and Stets, 2005, 26–36). Nonetheless, there are differences between grieving a human being and grieving a non-human animal. Grief for loss of a non-human animal is less widely accepted than grief for human significant others. It would, for example, be unthinkable to demand a day off work to grieve a deceased pet, while doing so to grieve a human being is not only accepted but expected.

Butler (2004, 2009) explains how normative frameworks distinguish between beings that can be openly grieved in a society and those defined as un-grievable. Losing someone important to us, Butler argues, sheds light on our existential dependence on others: we become who we are through our relationships with others. Our identity is relational in that we attain understanding of ourselves in interaction with others. Similarly, our embodied existence is relational because we depend on others for our survival. We grieve people because, for us, they are essentially irreplaceable – losing them ends the reciprocal process of becoming, and we lose part of ourselves. Nonetheless, Butler emphasises the existence of an extensive normative framework that renders some losses un-grievable to ensure a community or a shared identity – a grievable ‘us’. Pets are often framed as both grievable and un-grievable: their irreplaceability can be both emphasised and downplayed in one and the same account, and the impact of pet loss may be described as both unpredictable and manageable (Redmalm, 2015; Schuurman, 2018). Furthermore, although there is little doubt that many non-human animals can experience feelings similar to human grief, humans often deny other animals such emotional or existential precariousness (Bekoff, 2009). Thus, different understandings of the human–animal

boundary and nature–culture relations inform human emotions towards pets, as well as pet-keeping culture generally.

Desmond (2016, 82) describes contemporary pet cemetery rituals as “creative, improvisatory cultural practices enabled in large part by their marginality.” The fundamental indeterminacy of deathscapes such as cemeteries may enable ways to mourn liminal beings. Deathscapes are liminal spaces, thresholds between the living and the dead, between memory and oblivion, where collective meanings pass into private reflections and vice versa (Maddrell, 2016; Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010). In a state of liminality, cultural norms and behaviours give way to uncertainty (Shortt, 2015), but this may also result in new rituals and practices that can challenge the framework of grievability. More-than-human deathscapes are thus spaces that “make a difference to the very constitution of the relations in play” (Philo and Wilbert, 2000, 5) and may open up for subversive expressions of grief that may further transform how humans relate to the loss of non-human animals.

## 3. Pet cemeteries as spaces of human–pet relationships

Desmond writes that we find, in the pet cemetery, “a social history and politics written in stone” (2016, 105). Burying animals who have performed functions other than serving as food is an ancient custom, dating back at least 12 millennia to the first sedentary societies (McHugh, 2004; Collier, 2016). However, archaeologists have observed a decline in animal burial in the medieval and post-medieval periods (1050–1900 CE), and this is probably connected with the Christianisation of Europe (Morris, 2016). During the early modern era animal death became the subject of grief among the Western upper classes, with memorial stones erected for pets (Thorsen, 2001, 218). However, the contemporary kind of animal companionship called pet keeping, including the practice of burying pets, did not become a wider cultural phenomenon in the West until the 19th century (Howell, 2018). It is thus interesting to note that, although a strict distinction between nature and culture has been central to the worldview of “the moderns” (see Latour, 1993), mourning for some non-human animals is a phenomenon with a longer history, epitomising their liminal status between nature and culture (Redmalm, 2019).

Pet cemeteries resembling human graveyards were established around Europe and the US towards the end of the 19th century, when pets entered the domestic sphere, initially as a privilege of the wealthy (Howell, 2002; Witt, 2003). As Howell (2002, 10) notes concerning the changes in cultural practices related to death in this period, “[t]he depth of the Victorians’ investment in domestic ideology was so great, we may say, that even death itself was potentially domesticable, and the lives and deaths of animals played a small but significant role in that process.” Pet cemeteries of the time not only highlight the ways in which pets were included in the domestic sphere; they also manifest resentment of scientific progress and the cruel practices of vivisection, a way of dying abhorred by pet owners, many of whom believed in the immortality of animal souls (Howell, 2002). Pet cemeteries also presented an alternative to the common practices of stuffing deceased pets or simply dumping them in the rubbish heap (Howell, 2002; Thorsen, 2001, 232).

As a distinctively urban phenomenon, pet cemeteries became increasingly popular in the 1970s and 1980s, alongside growing interest in pet-keeping and acceptance of emotional human–pet relationships (Pręgowski, 2016; Brandes, 2009). During the past two decades, this development has been accompanied by an intensified commercialization of the human–pet relationship, including a growing market of services for bereaved pet owners such as grief counselling especially addressing pet bereavement, self-help books on pet loss and grief, and condolence cards for bereaved owners (Witt, 2003; Nast, 2006b; Morris, 2012; Redmalm, 2016).

Today, not all pets are buried at pet cemeteries. Many owners have their companion animals cremated and scatter their ashes in nature, or bury their pets on private land. These practices resemble the form of

‘natural burial’ that is increasingly popular for human burials (see Gittings and Walter, 2010). Pets are also disposed of through mass cremation. Burying one’s pet in a cemetery means actively choosing to make one’s grief public and seek inclusion in a mourners’ collective (Witt, 2003). These cemeteries may therefore be regarded as specific spaces of pet-keeping cultures where remembrance and material and visual expressions of grief for the death of a companion animal are allowed, encouraged and shared.

Yet, as Kean (2013) points out, a pet cemetery is not public in the sense of being open for anyone but instead, it is a specific ‘animal space’ in which, unlike anywhere else, mourning for animals is allowed. This makes pet cemeteries distinctive in terms of how they bring into the open, and celebrate, human–pet relationships. Limiting the expression of grief for a dead pet in such semi-public spaces accentuates the ambivalence in human–pet relations. Although loved and cared for, pets are also subjected to human power, an ambivalence that embodies the close connection between dominance, affection and love (Tuan, 1984; Nast, 2006b).

Pets’ movements in urban space are subject to fairly strict regulation. They cannot move around freely: they must be controlled by their human owners and restricted to specific spaces, such as dog parks and training grounds (Holmberg, 2015). In contrast, pet cemeteries usually allow human visitors to bring their companion animals, most often dogs. Here, deceased pets are also recognised as members of a family or a social community where they are missed. With individualised graves, a pet cemetery serves as an extension of the more-than-human family home and thus, grants pets a presence as well as a palpable ‘absence-presence’ (Maddrell, 2013) that they lack in many other contexts. The lack of privacy at the graveside, however, shifts attention to the cultural practices shared by mourners at the cemetery and the ways in which these practices attest to the ambiguity of human–pet relations in death. Following Desmond, these practices and ambiguities enable “a new politics of value articulated through the geographies of death and burial that occasionally even crosses the species line dividing humans and nonhumans” (Desmond, 2016, 102). In the following section, we explain how pet cemeteries can be studied not only as places for expressions of pet-keeping cultures, but also as political and relational spaces where both individual grievability and the normative frameworks of grief are at stake.

#### 4. Studying pet cemeteries as more-than-human deathscapes

Deathscapes are sites where “the personal and public intersect” (Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010, 4). At the cemetery, mourners negotiate how to express grief for non-human animals – a grief that elsewhere risks being dismissed (Kean, 2013). There, the tension between the concepts of human and animal is addressed personally – “What did my pet mean to me?” – as well as collectively – “What does it mean to grieve a non-human being?” These personal and collective struggles are inscribed in the landscape, in the placement and design of the cemetery. Exploring the pet cemetery as a more-than-human deathscape means to explore how relationships across species boundaries and the distinction between humans and animals are constituted, reflected and reproduced through the spatial ordering of practices and artefacts of mourning.

The material for this paper consists of photographs taken at four pet cemeteries and one memorial site in Finland and Sweden in 2015 and 2016. Recognizing that deathscapes emerge through embodied engagement (Maddrell, 2016), we made ethnographic visits to the cemeteries, in order to study the cemeteries as they appear to the visitor. Therefore, we photographed the individual graves of one or more pets at each site, as well as overall views of the cemeteries (n = 908). The images depict the design and materials of the graves, including stones with inscriptions and pictures, and other decorations such as statues and stone arrangements. The photographs also show other expressive materials of a more temporal nature, indicative of recent visits, such as flowers and candles brought to the grave.

The focus on the “emotional sedimentation” (Hallam and Hockey, 2001, 11) enables us to study the meanings the cemeteries evoke by their very existence as geographical sites. Cemeteries are often visibly shaped by cultural categorisations and, in human cemeteries, ethnic and religious divisions can usually be traced in the organisation of graves. We therefore photographed the general appearance and layout of the cemeteries, and studied plans of the cemeteries and maps of their surroundings. This method excluded human-to-human interaction, such as ceremonies surrounding burial and memorial visits – the embodied and practiced aspects of deathscapes (see Maddrell, 2013, 2016; Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010). However, our approach takes a wider stance to practice and conceptualizes “memory as a social and cultural practice, located in social space and mobilizing a range of material forms or objects” (Hallam and Hockey, 2001, 77). Our approach allows us to study how the cemetery ‘speaks’ to the visitor through its sedimented performance of memory and grief. To be able to reflect on our own embodied engagement in the cemeteries, we took ethnographic notes, focusing on our observations of the design of the cemeteries, their location in relation to the surrounding environment and their use by animal owners and other visitors. We also studied the cemeteries’ websites to compare the respective rules and instructions about their practices given to animal owners, to get an insight into the cemeteries’ overlapping with the abstract spaces of social networks.

We visited three cemeteries in Finland (Helsinki, Joensuu and Tampere) and two in Sweden (Stockholm and Uppsala). The two oldest ones are in Stockholm and Helsinki, the first one dating from 1872, closed in the 1940s and reopened in 1993, and the latter established in 1927 and moved to another location twenty years later. Both are situated in city parks. The Joensuu and Tampere cemeteries are more recent, epitomising the increasing concern for pets in late 1900s, and both are located on the outskirts of the city. The memorial site called *Djurens minneslund* (“Animals’ memorial grove”) in Uppsala, north of Stockholm, was only established in the early 2000s. The design and management of all cemeteries take into account the natural surroundings and changing seasons.

The cemeteries are all owned by NGOs or city councils, and they commonly have rules concerning the markings and mementoes on the graves. At the Joensuu cemetery, these must be in “good taste” but preferably not religious, whereas in Stockholm, Christian symbols are common. At the Uppsala memorial grove, ashes can be spread widely across the grove, but no individual mementoes of animals are allowed – no gravestones, crosses or toys. Flowers and candles are permitted, as are tiny memorial stones bearing the animals’ names. The tending of the graves is a task that is shared between owners, volunteers, a caretaker (Stockholm) and a private company (Tampere).

We thematised the data according to the principles of qualitative content analysis (Krippendorf, 2013). First, we categorised the photographs in terms of the style, choice and origin of materials used at the grave and of visual imagery, such as ornaments, photographs of the animal and religious pictures. Other categories were linked to messages attached to the grave, referring to an emotional relationship between the human and the animal, the pet’s position in the family or its societal status, and messages addressed to the pet itself. From the 11 categories created, we then developed four themes: animals as persons and objects, animals in the family and home, animals and the afterlife, and representations of nature.

##### 4.1. Animals as persons and objects

The graves at the pet cemeteries are almost always individually marked, usually with a name or nickname; the dates of birth and death; and, in some cases, the owners’ first names. There are often a few words of remembrance on the stone, and a personal item such as a chewing toy, stuffed animal or collar is sometimes left on the grave (Fig. 1). This has not always been the case. As Brandes (2009) points out, in the first half of the 20th century, pet graves did not generally carry the name of





Fig. 1. A stuffed toy at a grave.

the pet, and pet names were rarely gendered. Since the Second World War, headstones for pets have become increasingly individualised. Nonetheless, as we shall argue, there is also a tendency to de-individualise animals at the cemetery by framing them as objects or possessions.

Examples of phrases used are “Our friend”, “Our best friend”, “Loved and missed”, “You remain in our heart forever” and “Everyone loved you, you loved everyone.” According to Zeigler (2015, 653), “[t]he post-modern cemetery is essentially a biographical (and sometimes autobiographical) space where stories are spun to keep people ‘alive’ for further generations.” For pets, the stories told reveal a human–animal relationality, but also cultural conceptions of what is valuable in a pet.

Monuments at the cemeteries are highly variable, ranging from an expensive marble stone with engraved gold lettering to a child’s scribble on a piece of wood, which underlines the unpretentious atmosphere of the cemeteries. Many stones and crosses are handmade and hand-painted, but this does not necessarily make the notes on these stones any less heartfelt. Rather, the handmade messages appear more personal, reflecting the relationship as it is experienced in the everyday. Like every message in the graveyard, they are public displays, but instead of signalling social status, they appear to perform an attitude to the deceased pet as a person.

Placing photographs on graves can serve to console the bereaved owner (Chalfen, 2003). We found several framed pictures of pets at the cemeteries. Some stones bear enamelled pictures and photographs, sometimes of the deceased animal standing in a pedigree pose. These photographs enable the deceased pet – and thus the relationship – to persist in material form long after the non-human animal’s death (Walter et al., 2012). Photographs, however, simultaneously tend to reproduce ideals associated with breed, and the notion that breeds, as such, represent beauty. Moreover, some stones highlight the deceased animal’s kennel and prizes the animal has won (Fig. 2). Zeigler (2015) notes that gravestone photographs tend to show the deceased at their best – never ill or unhappy. According to Chalfen (2003), pets are photographed in much the same way as human family members – as young, healthy, playing or sometimes posed. The difference to family albums is that in the photographs at pets’ graves the animals are alone, making them the object of human gaze.

The focus on animals’ appearance and status tends to accentuate their role as possessions rather than as persons. Here, it becomes palpable that pets are both property and unique individuals. The tension between person and object, companion and possession is summed up on one of the older stones, which is dedicated to “My friend who never let me down”. This inscription appears to pay tribute not so much to the departed individual being than to the specific role played by the animal in the owner’s life. Similarly, the notes referring to the deceased



Fig. 2. Headstone for a dog, with a kennel name and a specific title that can be earned at dog shows in Finland.

animals as pets or companion animals tend to somewhat downplay the personhood and uniqueness of the departed non-human animal. Some stones describe dogs as “faithful” and as “best friends”, reproducing a perception of dogs both as participants in an emotional relationship and as emotional servants of a kind to humans, available to help them fill the emptiness in their lives and enable them to feel needed (see Brandes, 2009). Such language reveals the dependency of pets on their owners, but also a mutual human–pet relationality, the equivalent of which is not visible in human cemetery culture. References to the emotional relationship between pet and owner can also be interpreted as indicating the owner’s active management of a continued relationship with the animal after death, suggesting that “relationships between the living and the dead are being rediscovered” (Howarth, 2007, 19). We will return to the belief in an afterlife for the pet after first discussing representations of family and home at the pet cemeteries we visited.

#### 4.2. Animals in the family and home

References to the notion of family on the gravestones are common. The word ‘family’ is used on several stones, and sometimes the owners are referred to as “Mum” and “Dad”, placing the animal in a filial position but also expressing strong social and emotional ties between humans and animals. Brandes (2009) notes that family affiliations became common on pet graves around the 1980s, along with other information about the pet, such as species and breed, while the owner’s name – the most important information in the pre-WWII era – was left out. Affectionate inscriptions underline the familial aspect of the relationship: “Our little darling”, “Little dog angel” and “Goodbye little ones”.

According to Palmer (2006), it is commonly understood that domesticated animals, especially pets, have been ‘created’ by humans through breeding, and humans are therefore believed to have a specific duty of care towards them. Not only is it the owners’ task to care for their pets, but many owners are also responsible for giving them life. It is in this light that the affectionate epithets gain meaning: the parental attitude of many owners towards their pets is reflected in the headstone inscriptions. These expressions manifest a view of pets as the “innocent’ dead” (Desmond, 2016, 92).

In both Sweden and Finland, there are so-called intergenerational family graves, where a single owner may bury animals who may not have coexisted in life or be biologically related (Fig. 3). Apart from often being of the same species or breed, the deceased animals shared their human owner(s) and the household where they lived. Charles (2014) and Franklin (2006) have used the terms ‘post-human’ or ‘hybrid families’ to describe the inclusion of companion animals in the family, making them integral to its structure and its members’ identity formation. Living with companion animals is what Haraway (2008)



Fig. 3. An intergenerational tombstone, addressing the deceased pets as “My dear cats”.

terms ‘becoming with’ significant animal others, and ‘significant otherness’, over time. The intergenerational graves can be seen as a testament to a ‘becoming with’ that extends beyond the lifespan of an individual being – a memorialization of a group of beings of whom many did not live at the same time, but who all shared the same home with the same human, as members of the same ‘posthuman’ family. Davies (2002; see also Petersson et al., 2018) observes that when someone who has lost a human significant other also loses a companion animal they shared, the original “human” grief can be revived. The non-human intergenerational graves suggest that a similar chain of grief exist in human-animal relationships: the grief for each new burial is connected to past losses.

The intergenerational tombstones can be seen as performing an alternative narrative of the owners’ life course, and the whole cemetery, similarly, as performing an alternative form of togetherness – a community bound together by acknowledgement of a more-than-human relationality that transgresses categorical boundaries related to kin and kind (Charles, 2014). Nonetheless, human burial is not allowed at the pet cemeteries and vice versa – a fact that underlines that the ideal of the truly post-human family has yet to be achieved. Analogously, Charles (2016, 10) argues that although some practices of the ‘post-human family’ blur the human-animal divide, these practices “exist alongside others which reinforce it.”

Although burying a pet in a pet cemetery is a voluntary choice involving relative visibility and social relations with other pet owners, the choice does not include the members of the community. In other words, animal death brings people together in an essentially random way. Chalfen (2003, 149) notes that the grave of a pet “takes the form of a mini-home environment, a kind of home-away-from-home,” which also resonates with Howell’s (2002) observation that the Victorian emphasis on the domestic characterizes pet cemeteries. Some graves are decorated at Halloween and Christmas, which accentuates the cemetery as an extension of the home. But the pet cemetery is also a wider social community, a semi-public space for

grieving. In this way, while the grave of a deceased pet can be seen as an extension of the home, the cemetery as a whole constitutes a microcosm of a town, with identifiable, albeit lifeless, residents represented in the community by their families. The fact that living dogs are allowed at the cemetery emphasises the dog’s place in the family: in this cemetery town, canine and human visitors belong together. It is in this sense, too, that the pet cemetery becomes a relational space, a “geography of nearby”, an interlinking chain of “spatial, emotional, behavioural, taxonomic, and ecological connections” (Bull, 2014, 74) comprising relations with humans and animals outside the cemetery, the home and the family, as well as the community within the cemetery.

The space of the pet cemetery as a miniature town or community may be seen as an alternative to the human-centred society outside, where pets have little room for manoeuvre, and where grief for deceased pets is a marginalised emotion. Yet, the ‘geography of nearby’ has its own normative expectations: the focus on pets’ grievability excludes animals that are placed at a greater distance from humans, that is animals that are not usually considered companion animals (snakes, fishes, insects) and those not living in the home (laboratory animals, farm animals).

#### 4.3. Animals and the afterlife

According to Brandes (2009, 101), owners who bury their animals at pet cemeteries “attribute to the creatures a degree of sacredness not accorded to other beasts”. At most of the cemeteries we have visited, religious and spiritual symbols and messages are common. There are symbols associated with Christianity, such as crosses, that suggest a belief in non-human souls. Hope for a reunion with one’s pet in the afterlife is not new as such, since already in Victorian times, pet owners cherished the idea of their pets having immortal souls (Howell, 2002). In contemporary cemeteries, references to an animal afterlife, immortal souls and eventual reunion with the owner in heaven became more common in the 1990s (Brandes, 2009). As part of such religious practices, candles are regularly brought and lit on many graves at the cemeteries we visited, especially on All Saints’ Day and Christmas Eve.

Another indication of the notion of an animal afterlife is that messages on the headstones often address the deceased pet, implying that the animal is seen as capable of receiving the written message, either metaphorically or literally. Several stones carry religious or spiritual messages: “You’re in God’s hands”, “We’ll see you later”, and “See you in Nangijala” (the name of the afterworld in the children’s novel *The Brothers Lionheart* by Astrid Lindgren). Some stones bear references to the ‘rainbow bridge’, a symbol featured in a Christian poem by an unknown author that became popular in the 1980s. The poem suggests that non-human animals owned by humans will be reunited with their owners in heaven, a wish strikingly familiar to that of the pet owners of the late 19th century London (Howell, 2002; see also DeMello, 2016). The mass-produced paraphernalia such as figurines and lanterns left at the graves, together with the elaborately inscribed stones, as well as the clash of Christianity, folk religion and fantasy in the inscriptions, create a blend of tradition and consumption culture common for pet cemeteries, something that Lorimer (2018, 5) describes as “pop art” and “avant-garde.” The decorations seem to be not only displays of mourning, but also attempts at making the afterlife friendly and comfortable for the animal (see Chalfen, 2003). The fact that these attempts take such different forms is testimony to the difficulty of placing the mourned pets on the continuum of replaceable animals and grievable human-like companions.

At the cemeteries studied, crosses are mainly found in early graves but are still sometimes used. Religious symbols seem to be a loaded issue in some places, and animals’ religious status is fairly ambivalent. Some cemetery organisations attempt to distinguish their cemetery





Fig. 4. An angel figure at a grave.



Fig. 5. Headstone for a dog.

from a human one by restricting the use of these symbols, but where to draw the line is not always clear. The Finnish cemetery in Joensuu, for example, advises owners not to use crosses or other religious symbols on the graves, yet holds an annual Christmas service for bereaved pet owners. This illustrates the difficulty of entirely excluding religion from social practice.

On contemporary pet graves, crosses have been increasingly replaced by the use of the angel figure – a feature common to grieving for humans and pets (Fig. 4). The popularity of angels has been interpreted in the context of the new religiosity or spirituality, especially the rise of New Age thinking and the idea that angels exist all around us and regularly intervene in our lives (Gustavsson, 2013; Utriainen, 2014). The latter two phenomena have been seen as substitutes for traditional Christianity, while offering alternatives to contemporary secularism in the modern world. According to Walter (2011), however, angels represent neither phenomenon in the context of mourning but are, rather, an element in popular religion that enables the deceased to stay in contact with the living in the heavenly afterlife.

In contrast to souls, which are perceived as passively waiting for a reunion in heaven, angels are believed to act as intermediaries between heaven and earth with whom communication is possible, and who may even watch over and take care of the living. The messages left for deceased pets may serve this purpose: thus, in the form of angels, dead pets are believed to have agency in their relationships with their living families. In folk beliefs, animals such as dogs and horses have had the role of intermediaries between earthly life and the afterlife (Howell, 2002, 18–19), and the messages found at contemporary pet graves seem to exploit this notion. In the example below, as depicted in Fig. 5, the deceased dog is addressed as an “angel”, and this also illustrates the role

of the pet as a person and family member:

Dear Niki

Rest in peace

little dog angel

My longing is great and endless

But your happiness is all that really matters

You'll stay with us

forever in our thoughts!

The frequent use of candles also reveals the persistence of the ‘continuing bonds’ with deceased companion animals and their persistent ‘absence presence’ (Jonsson and Walter, 2017; Maddrell, 2013). In some instances, candles are lit on graves as old as 20 years. Howarth (2007) discusses emergent views in death studies that, instead of promoting a grieving process with the aim of restoring independence to the bereaved, suggest that priorities are interdependence and a transformation of the relationship and the self of the mourner. Instead of resolving grief, the recommendation is for bereavement to be “perceived as an ongoing process of negotiation and meaning making in which the place of the deceased person is continually renegotiated as feelings lessen or intensify” (Howarth, 2007, 25). As for graves that are tended for decades, this may be a matter not only of past memories but also of a dynamic relationship that, in the owners' personal experience, connects them with their dead pets.





Fig. 6. A dog walking off-leash across the Stockholm pet cemetery.

#### 4.5. Representations of nature

At pet cemeteries, natural and recyclable materials are often used to decorate the graves. The use of wood instead of stone in crosses and even headstones is comparable to human forest burials and memorial grounds, and popular in current green burial initiatives (Clayden et al., 2010). Some pet cemeteries, such as the one in Joensuu, also provide biodegradable caskets. Apart from land-use pressures in inner city areas (Thorsen, 2001, 225), the location of these graveyards in green, peri-urban areas and the fact that most ceremonies and gatherings are held outdoors may themselves be viewed as ways of emphasising an association between the deceased non-human animals and nature.

The Stockholm cemetery, lacking clear boundaries, merges into the surrounding forest. Compared with the other, newer cemeteries, the graves are somewhat chaotically placed, so that people walking around the cemetery risk stepping on them. In autumn, the leaves are left on the ground; come winter, no one clears the snow. The landscape architect responsible for the cemetery's present form states in a newspaper interview that these practices are a way to emphasise the circle of life to which the deceased animals belong (cf. Thorsen, 2001, 220). His intention was for the design to symbolise the animals' return to nature, and for the cemetery to blend into the surrounding forest (Borg, 2012). Thus, the deathscape as "taskscape" (Clayden et al., 2010, 132) reproduces a cyclical view of nature and animal life and death. The very location of the cemetery also enables a blurring of the boundary between the cemetery and the recreational forest area. Dog owners walking their dogs in the woods pass by casually, and dogs are often unleashed (Fig. 6). A dog walking over graves at a human cemetery would be an unusual sight – dogs are often banned from human cemeteries, or only allowed if kept on a leash (Pettersson et al., 2018). Here, dogs and humans on a shared recreational walk highlight the cemetery as part of the natural landscape.

While framing the buried animals as belonging to the natural realm may be regarded as a way of reinstating the distinction between humans and other animals, it may also reflect more complex spiritual or religious notions. The idea of a return to nature at burial is part of Christian tradition ('ashes to ashes'), but Gittings and Walter (2010) suggest that the increasingly popular forest burials or green burials for humans combine ideas of privacy and home with a holistic understanding of nature that is typically associated with pantheistic pagan beliefs. Accordingly, while the bodies of the deceased are symbolically returned to nature, the idea of an individual afterlife, typical of world religions like Christianity and Islam, is preserved.

A similar approach is discernible at pet cemeteries, albeit with slightly different implications. Instead of categorising companion animals as either individuals with unique souls, or soulless beasts, pet cemeteries embrace pets' ambiguous status both as human-like persons

and as creatures of the natural, non-human world – the world that they, as animals, 'belong' to. In death, they become one with nature, but as pets, they still retain the possibility to continue living in a spiritual sense, depending on the beliefs of the owner. Instead of being solely conceptualised as nature, they transgress the human–animal boundary not only in life, but also in death, thus embodying the liminality of the pet cemetery as a space. Here, an alternative, post-human understanding of non-human animals takes shape – an understanding in which individuality presupposes no strict distinction between culture and nature, or humanity and animality. By extension, this understanding also implies a modified notion of what it means to be human – in contrast to the widely accepted conception of the human as a cultural being who has transcended the state of nature.

#### 5. Conclusions: ambiguous emotions in more-than-human deathscapes

Witt (2003) observes that at pet cemeteries, "people are allowed great latitude in their behavior [...] that would be considered quite abnormal in other settings" (Witt, 2003, 765). Our analysis indeed shows that personal, non-traditional, "improvisatory" (Desmond, 2016, 82) or "avant-garde" (Lorimer, 2018, 5) gestures are welcome at pet cemeteries, indicating that the normative frameworks applying here allow for greater creativity and variation than human cemeteries commonly accept. However, norms are not entirely absent at pet cemeteries. Instead, an alternative, informal set of rules, values and rituals can be identified, together shaping a more-than-human deathscape. The trend towards more personal and creative expression identified in previous research (Brandes, 2009; Zeigler, 2015) is obvious at the pet cemeteries we have analysed. The cemeteries also reflect the rise of new spirituality through the use of angel figures and references to holistic belief in an afterlife for pets and an eventual reunion between pets and their owners – curiously resembling the beliefs of Victorian pet owners struggling between orthodox Christianity and the cruelties of scientific progress (Howell, 2002).

Gustavsson (2013) notes that in Sweden, decorations at pet graves generally express a blurring of the human–animal boundary, in that pets are addressed in much the same way as humans, including religious discourse. Our study supports this interpretation, and we suggest that the same applies to pet cemeteries in Finland. In Norway, on the contrary, pet cemeteries are few and modest in appearance, and a strict hierarchy between humans and pets is supported (Thorsen, 2001, 259–265). In the pet cemeteries we studied, however, pet graves are substantially more expressive than what we usually see in human graves, illustrating the continuing transformation of human–animal relationships, including the various practices and meanings attached to pet-keeping. Here, the comparisons between human and non-human mourning can only be tentative – we suggest that future research explores similarities and differences through comparative studies of human and animal cemeteries.

The particular way the boundary between life and death is managed in the pet cemetery deathscape has consequences for the way the distinction between nature and culture is conceptualised. In spite of the holistic understanding of nature visible in pet cemeteries, the deceased pets are remembered in the mementoes as unique individuals, sometimes imagined as angels. It is therefore possible to imagine that at death, pets return to non-human nature, while still maintaining a view of them as grievable. As a more-than-human deathscape, the pet cemetery is thus a liminal posthumously posthuman space – a kind of messy 'natureculture' (Haraway, 2008) that reaches beyond the nature–culture and animal–human divides and problematizes the position of the non-human dead. This implies a creative stance to the distinction between nature and culture typical for Western modernity, also increasingly visible in human 'green' burial practices. If pet cemeteries and green burial at least partially disconnect grievability from traditional views of individuality, culture and human identity, it not only

means that humans begin to see the death of companion animals in a new light – it also means that humans are finding new ways of understanding their own transience. To reach insights into if and how humans connect their engagement in their deceased companions' gravesites to their human identity, and their companion animals' animality, further research is needed – research that goes beyond the focus of this study, to explore the embodied and psychological spaces of the mourners through in-depth interviews and 'emotional-affective mapping' (Maddrell, 2016; Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010).

The materiality, symbolism and landscape design of the pet cemetery deathscapes facilitate creation and reproduction of the post-human family in which non-human animals have a relatively elevated status. While it should be underlined that humans and animals are not usually buried together, this may be changing in the UK and US where, in the past few decades, some cemeteries have begun offering burials of humans alongside their pets, and this form of burial seems to be in demand (Maddrell, 2011; Desmond, 2016, 120). Moreover, remains of pets are sometimes secretly buried with their deceased owners at human cemeteries by bereaved friends or family members (Pettersson et al., 2018). Interestingly, however, official joint human-animal burial takes place in pet cemeteries rather than human graveyards. At the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery in New York State, humans have been buried alongside pets since the 1920s (Brandes, 2009; Thorsen, 2001, 268), and at the Tarn Moor Memorial Woodland in the UK, there is a special area for people who want to be buried together with their pets, separated from the strictly human burial grounds (Maddrell, 2011). This suggests that it is easier to imagine an animal-like human than a human-like pet. Humans can afford to recognise their own animal features but, as Desmond (2016, 122) points out, inclusion of a non-human animal within the walls of the human cemetery may pose a challenge to the notion of humanity itself. Therefore, in the liminal space of pets, it is easier to bend rules and transgress boundaries than in the more stable cultural realm of humans. Nevertheless, blurring the lines between human and animal in pet cemetery practices reminds us that humans, too, are animals. Joint interment may be regarded as symbolising the fundamental precariousness of biological life – a condition humans share with other animals.

Contemporary pet cemeteries do not appear as manifestations of the inclusion of animals in the moral community of humans as they did in Victorian times (Howell, 2002). Instead, they epitomise the way pet keeping has become everyday life, with the acceptance of pets as part of the family in the West. However, at pet cemeteries we find memorializations of companion animals who were loved, unlike the great number of pets who are abandoned or euthanized because they are considered superfluous, and unlike the even greater number of non-human animals rendered ungrievable and made available for humans to eat or wear. We therefore suggest that pet cemeteries are spaces well suited to critical examination of the normative frameworks that define the limits of grievability, and to critical reconsideration of anthropocentric notions of life and death.

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