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A funeral for a glacier: Mourning the more-than-human on the edges of modernity

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Abstract

Many have argued that contemporary western societies, broadly conceived, are moving towards a greater openness towards death and the public display of grief. While this development does perhaps not constitute a return to the "tame death" that Ariès spoke of, it certainly points to a situation at some remove from the "taboo" around death, the "wild death" that Gorer (1965) and Ariès (1974a; 1974b), respectively, argued had overtaken "modern" western societies. The point has been made, that examples of this new (alleged) openness towards death, include the emerging possibilities to mourn losses that until recently remained hidden. In many contemporary western contexts, for example, aborted foetuses and stillborn babies, that not so long ago would have been disposed of privately, are now publicly mourned. Similarly, pets, whose non-humanity until recently removed them from processes of public mourning, are now legitimate objects of the public expression of grief. In this paper we focus on the mourning of the glacier Ok in Iceland, as an example of how this trend is now extending to the loss of natural phenomena. Drawing on Cunsolo Willox's work and bringing together the recent literature on the more-than-human and the new materialisms, on one hand, and literature that speaks of the links between "modernity", mourning and loss, on the other, we ask if the trends hinted at above signal a

change, a rupture, or the continuation of mourning that has always been part of the modernity experience.

Introduction: the expanding scope of death (and the study thereof)

In this article we ask what recent examples of mourning the more-than-human can tell us about the history of death and the history of the study of death. Over the last thirty years or so, an interdisciplinary field of death studies has carved out a place for itself in the academic landscape. Bringing together expertise from the humanities and the social sciences, nursing, medicine, and the psy-disciplines, death studies approaches death, dying and bereavement, and its associated experiences and management, as cultural and social phenomena. Indeed, it might be argued that death studies emerged out of a sense of loss—the loss of a closeness with death—that the field, as an academic endeavour, attempts to respond to. Rooted as death studies is in reflections on the place of death in western societies, its founding observation was the alleged denial of death's reality in the Western world,[1] evident, amongst other things, in the disappearance of dying, death rituals and mourning from public life in the course of the twentieth century in particular. Since the ground-breaking work of Geoffrey Gorer (1965) and Philippe Ariès (1974a, 1974b, and 1981)—the evocation of whose work readers will of course have recognised in the account above—many have travelled down the same path. Ariès spoke of a history of death mentalities, "transformations in the very collective and cultural psychology of a given historical epoch" (Jacobsen 2016, 2) in relation to death and grief. Ariès wrote about a shift from a *familiarity* with death, a "tame death" (1974b, 25) as he called it, to a *mentality* in which death is denied. Ariès's work has had significant impact even outside the narrow academic circles most scholars usually move in. Indeed, the taboo around death in the Western world has long-since become something of a publicly accepted

[1] Western is of course a vague and loaded term. Roughly speaking, we mean by this the societies of north/western Europe and North America, as is usually the reference point of western in the death studies literature. Western here is of course a term that constitutes the very reality it speaks of.

truism, discussed in television and radio programmes regularly, denounced as unhealthy in newspaper columns nearly every week. Death is still described as taboo in the western world, despite Michael Simpson's (1987 [1979] see Walter 1991 and 1994) old observation that so frequently exposed a taboo is surely a curious thing. One is reminded of Michel Foucault's (1979) remarks about the repressive hypothesis on sexuality, or the obsessive discussion of the very thing that was supposedly repressed.

While death is still often proclaimed a taboo in general public discussions, over some thirty years now, scholars writing on the place of death in society have come to suggest a different story. Already in the mid-1990s Tony Walter (1994) spoke of the "revival of death," noting the way in which the development of the hospice movement and bereavement counselling, amongst other things, suggested a more open engagement with death in the public domain. Michael Hviid Jacobsen (2016) has recently revisited Ariès's history of mentalities of death to suggest that we are now in an epoch of "spectacular death." Jacobsen points out that "forbidden death," the mentality that marked the endpoint of Ariès's history, is clearly not an accurate description of the state of death in the contemporary western world. Death can hardly be forbidden given the strong sense of "a revival of interest in death, dying and bereavement, professionally, politically, publicly and personally, which renders problematic the notions of taboo, denial and disappearance of death that was so characteristic of Ariès's 'forbidden death'" (Jacobsen 2016, 2). Jacobsen evokes Benjamin Noys's acute observation that the question to be asked now is not whether death as such is invisible or taboo, but rather what are the forces that variably expose us to death or, possibly, hide it away from us (Jacobsen 2016, 10).

It seems clear that people in the contemporary western world are less likely to witness death first-hand than their predecessors were (see Walter 2019), while representations of death in the media abound. It is important to note that these representations often take the form of markedly melodramatic images of horrific deaths that form parts of news stories or works of art or entertainment. Jacobsen advances the idea of spectacular death to capture how contemporary death mentality in Western

society is shaped by the way in which "death, dying and mourning have increasingly become spectacles" (Jacobsen 2016, 1). The notion of the spectacle that Jacobsen mobilises here is drawn from the work of Guy Debord and the idea of the "society of the spectacle." Inspired by Debord, Jacobsen explains that:

> "spectacular death" is a death that has for all practical intents and purposes been transformed into a spectacle. It is something that we witness at a safe distance but hardly ever experience upfront. ... "Spectacular death" thus inaugurates an obsessive interest in appearances that simultaneously draws death near and keeps it at arm's length—it is something that we witness at a safe distance with equal amounts of fascination and abhorrence... (Jacobsen 2016, 10).

Spectacular death thus speaks of a situation in which death is not—or is no longer—a taboo, while it does not have the same direct familiarity for people as it once had. Walter (2019) has spoken of what he refers to as the "pervasive" dead. Taking on the long-standing sociological idea of the sequestration of death in contemporary western societies (see Mellor and Shilling 1993; see also Lawton 2000), Walter argues that while *the dying* are still sequestered in hospitals and hospices, in contemporary western societies *the dead* are all around us—in a word, "pervasive"—through evocation of their memory, through public monuments dedicated to them, statues and "spontaneous shrines" (Santano 2006).

Examples offered in evidence of greater "openness" towards death include the ways in which those who were previously not publicly mourned are now subject to elaborate public memorialisation. In many contemporary western contexts, for example, aborted foetuses and stillborn babies, that not so long ago would have been disposed of without much public ceremony, are now very publicly and openly mourned (Christensen and Sandvik 2014; see Faro, in press). Similarly, pets, whose non-humanity until recently made their deaths a cause of more private grief, are now more readily objects of public expression of grief (Redmalm 2015; see Eckerd, Barnett and Jett-Dias 2016). It is important to note that the grieving of pets often exists alongside intensive exploitation and slaughter of animals, sometimes alongside the industrialised destruction of animals

in response to the outbreak of disease (see Bush, Phillimore, Pless-Mullioli and Thompson 2005). Thus, while recent trends may suggest that the boundaries around the beings whose loss is to be mourned are extending, it remains the case that some beings, some lives, human and non-human, are clearly still placed outside the boundaries of the "grievable" (Butler 2004 and 2009). This may be the occasion to shift Noys's astute observation slightly: the question is not only how and why we are variously exposed to death but also and importantly whose death is it we are exposed to, how and why, and whose death is it we are sheltered from.

The point of departure for this article is the present history of death in the western world. In this moment, as we see it, the engagement with death is frequently, almost invariably, mediated and this mediation, this journey through *representation*, through spectacle (Jacobsen 2016), shapes our wider engagement with death in profound ways. Even if the dead are pervasive, as Walter (2019) has it, it is the dead as memory, as monument, as shrine. The dying, Walter (2019) reminds us, are still largely absent from our lives. The materiality of dying, if not death itself with the feel, the sight, and the smell of decaying human flesh—the putrescence that remains an important theme in the academic or at least the anthropological literature on death (see Engelk 2019)—is surely still largely sequestered from everyday life in the western world, located in medical settings: hospitals, hospices and morgues. At the same time, the possibility of mourning is being extended to *beings*—we want to mark the use of the term—that until recently would have been characterised precisely by their complete materiality, by their inability of speech, by their lack of representational capacity and by all that they are lacking in personhood and in "humanity." That personhood is now being extended into the animal kingdom and even into the material world when it comes to death and mourning, is in keeping with developments in social and cultural theory over the last thirty years or so. References abound and we will only mention here, as main examples among others, Donna Haraway (1991), Bruno Latour (1993) and Tim Ingold (2000). Indeed, arguments for the need to move away from social and cultural theory premised on the social construction of reality through processes of signification and symbolic

representation abound, often expressed in terms of new materialisms (see Cole and Frost 2010; Lettow 2017; Blok and Jensen 2019; Holbraad 2011). Such arguments are made on numerous grounds: theoretical, practical, ethical, and political. The possibility of coming to terms with and addressing issues of catastrophic climate change, is one reason frequently cited for such a move.

The work of Ashlee Cunsolo Willox (2012) and Renee Lertzman (2012) is particularly important and relevant here. Lertzman (2012) has mobilised insights from psychoanalysis to highlight the internal conflicts and ambivalent relations that may complicate turning private "ecological grief" into public action to counteract climate change. Cunsolo Willox, meanwhile, has noted that the loss of habitat, of landscapes, of flora and fauna, clearly evokes responses in humans that should rightly be called grief. The responses are not materially different from the grief humans exhibit at the death of another human being. Still, Cunsolo Willox continues, there is a huge reluctance, it seems, to speak about the effect of the destruction of habitats, about the effects of the catastrophe of climate change, as grief or mourning. Cunsolo Willox argues for such a response (see also Randall 2009). Drawing on Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida, she claims that grief draws our attention to shared vulnerability and as such mourning can bring about ethical and politically effective responses to climate change. Indeed, we s*hould* work through our "ecological grief" and mourn the death of natural phenomena, since such mourning can be mobilised to extend protection to other natural phenomena.

Here is located the example we want to take in this paper, an example that appears to be inspired by the call for the work of mourning around climate change issued by Cunsolo Willox. Describing briefly the recent mourning of the glacier Ok in Iceland, we ask what the mourning of Ok can tell us about the present history of death. Drawing on the links established between modernity, mourning and melancholia, in particular in Jonathan Flatley's (2008) recent reading of Sigmund Freud's (1957 [1917]) classic text, we wonder to what extent this present history of death signals something new and to what extent it represents a continuation of already well-established concerns. On the one hand the mourning of the more-than-human may signal new developments in the history of

death; on the other it may simply extend the compulsion to mourn that Flatley reads as inherent in the experience of modernity.

Ok: or how to mourn a glacier

An extensive report into climate change and its effects in Iceland, published by the Meteorology Office of Iceland in 2018, notes that Icelandic glaciers were at their most expansive towards the end of the 19th century (Björnsson, Sigurðsson, Davíðsdóttir, Ólafsson, Ástþórsson, Ólafsdóttir, Baldursson and Jónsson 2018, 9). Since then, glaciers have "fled," as the Icelandic frames it, their coverage shrunk a total of some 2000 km^2, 500 km^2 of which has happened during this century. If the scenarios that have been drawn up about climate change are accurate, the report continues, by the end of the century, Langjökull glacier might have lost 85% of its size, and Hofsjökull glacier and Vatnajökull glacier about 60% each. These are the third, the second and the biggest glaciers in Iceland, respectively. If the most pessimistic scenarios turn out to be accurate, then glaciers will disappear entirely from the Icelandic landscape over the coming centuries (Björnsson et al. 2018, 9).

Disappearing glaciers have, to some extent, become the most visible sign of the effects of climate change in Iceland. While deforestation, desertification, wildfires, heatwaves and more powerful hurricanes serve as evidence of climate change in many places, in Iceland, it would seem, the fate of glaciers signals most glaringly the progression of climate change. A few years ago, the National Museum of Iceland invited its visitors to reflect on their experience of and express their views on climate change. This was not a survey or any other systematic form of evidence gathering. Visitors to the Museum were simply offered the opportunity to write down their experience of climate change. The disappearance of glaciers was prominent here. In some ways this is an example of the more general way in which many people in Iceland reflect on the weather by comparing one year—a particular season of the year more usually—to another. The amount of snow lying in fields or in the mountains is something that many people comment on frequently to offer evidence of how the spring or the summer is progressing

or to reflect back on how mild or hard the winter was. It would appear that out of this, glaciers, in fact changes to glaciers, have emerged as the face of climate change in Iceland.

In the aforementioned report (Björnsson et al. 2018) there is a photograph of Ok Jökull glacier. The text accompanying the photograph explains that at the turn of the twentieth century, OK was roughly 15km^2 in size. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the glacier had shrunk down to about 4km^2. In 2012 Ok was 0.7km^2 and in 2014 it was deregistered as a glacier. Over the last few years, the text concludes, many small glaciers in Iceland have shrunk significantly or even disappeared (Björnsson et al. 2018, 10), it would seem, without much public notice. Why was Ok singled out, readers might ask? Why has attention been focused on this particular glacier?

Ok is an unusual name for a glacier, even if the word means a hill or a small mountain. It is a name that many people in Iceland will instantly recognise, in a way that they might not so immediately with many other small glaciers. Ok, like many other glaciers in Iceland, is a shield volcano. It is located in the west of Iceland, close to the much bigger Langjökull glacier, mentioned before. Ok stands at 1198 meters above sea level and was topped by a glacier for about 700 years. On September 21, 2014, Icelandic National Television spoke with the glaciologist Oddur Sigurðsson who said that the ice on Ok no longer met the criteria for thickness for Ok to be regarded as glacier. The newsreport, stated that "this small but well-known glacier has lost the title of glacier."[2] While reports of Ok's demise were, thus, seemingly accurate and its loss of status was a news item in September 2014, Ok's disappearance did not seem to provoke much reaction initially. This changed when two anthropologists from the United States, researching energy and climate change, entered the scene. In 2018, Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer made a documentary film called *Not OK* about the disappearance of the glacier. The title of the film is of course a play on the name of the glacier juxtaposed with one of the most common refrains in the English language. The film is introduced in the following way on the accompanying website:

[2] https://www.ruv.is/frett/jokullinn-ok-er-ekki-lengur-jokull

> Glaciers have been distinctive features of the Icelandic landscape ever since human settlement on the island 1200 years ago. But since the early 20th century Iceland's 400+ glaciers have been melting steadily, now losing roughly 11 billion tons of ice every year; scientists predict that all of Iceland's glaciers will be gone by 2200. One of Iceland's smallest known glaciers is named "Ok." *Not Ok* is its story. This is not a tale of spectacular, collapsing ice. Instead, it is a little film about a small glacier on a low mountain—a mountain who has been observing humans for a long time and has a few things to say to us.[3]

We want to note here the steering away from spectacle that the text seeks to bring about. The dramatic story of collapsing Arctic or Antarctic ice is not the story of Ok. Ok, a small glacier on a low mountain, is disappearing slowly and undramatically in comparison to the collapsing icebergs of the polar regions, its fate as no longer qualifying as a glacier certified by such unspectacular a measurement as its thickness. Still, Ok is treated here as a person, a being of awareness, one that has over a long time been observing humans and that has, as a consequence of those observations, a few things to say to "us."

The film is part of a further reversal of established routines and tropes. Noting the role of glaciers in Iceland's blooming tourism industry—an industry that of course fuels carbon emissions and with that climate change—the anthropologists established what they refer to as an Un-Glacier Tour to the top of Ok. The introductory page of the website that houses the film says:

> Many tourists in Iceland are enchanted by the opportunity to walk across glaciers or thrilled to snowmobile across them. The Un-glacier Tour—the only one in the world—is different. It is a guided hike to the top of Ok mountain and an opportunity to see the glacial remains of Okjökull (Ok glacier). As anthropogenic climate change drives glaciers toward extinction, the Un-glacier Tour is meant to be a reckoning with glacial demise as well as a celebration of glacial life.[4]

[3] https://www.notokmovie.com/
[4] https://www.notokmovie.com/

The UnTour takes visitors to "remains," remains of a glacier lost in the march towards the extinction of glaciers. Species, languages and sometimes cultures have of course been said to have become extinct. Indeed anthropology, social science and the humanities more generally, have often mourned the extinction of languages and cultures; salvage ethnography was once the attempt to counteract such losses. Even so, at this stage, the Un-Glacier Tour is presented as "a reckoning with glacial demise," a celebration of glacial life, rather than a work of mourning as such. Still, having made the documentary film and established the Un-Glacier Tour, the anthropologists decided they needed to have a clearer "sense of closure" and install a memorial plaque on the top of the former glacier (Johnson 2019). The Not Ok page explains:

> Anthropologists Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer developed the Un-Glacier Tour in 2018 and in 2019 they created a memorial marker to be placed atop Ok mountain in commemoration of Ok glacier: the first of Iceland's major glaciers to be lost to climate change. The memorial marker, with words authored by one of Iceland's most prominent writers, Andri Snær Magnason, is the world's first monument to a glacier-that-was: a modest recognition of a body of ice that once moved, but that now exists only in the form of what the Icelandic glaciologist Oddur Sigurdsson calls "dead ice".[5]

That Ok is now only "dead ice", "glacial remains" clearly stands in contrast with a prior stage of Ok having been alive, of having moved. The description enacts the anthropomorphising of the glacier in noting the importance of his[6] passing. Anthropologists have documented numerous instances of glaciers as beings, alive and afforded personhood (see Cruikshank 2005; Gagné, Rasmussen and Orlove 2014). The description above highlights the transformation of Ok, its transition into a living glacier that watches humans and that has things to tell them, even as he loses its life and becomes "dead ice." The possibility of mourning Ok, following Cunsolo Willox's (2012) call, is, it seems, secured through this transformation.

[5] https://www.notokmovie.com/

[6] Jökull, the word for glacier in Icelandic is a masculine noun, all nouns in Icelandic being gendered.

In a press interview, Cymene Howe explained the choice of a plaque as the memorial marker for Ok:

> We could have done a kind of headstone or a grave marker and that would have sent a certain message of loss and memorial. We also could have done a more scientific plaque like you might find in a national park with all the details about Ok. We decided to do a memorial very specifically because if we look around the world, we can see that memorials everywhere stand for either human accomplishments, like the deeds of historic figures, or the losses and deaths that we recognize as important, like on a battlefield memorial.[7]

Here the point is no longer simply to reckon with the demise of Ok and what that demise suggests for the fate of glaciers in Iceland, and indeed the world, more generally. Rather, now Ok is to be mourned, remembered as it disappears. And Ok is to be mourned not simply as any loss, but as an important loss, a significant death.

The plaque was unveiled during a ceremony in the summer of 2019. On August 18 of that year, around a hundred scientists, environmental activists, politicians, and others, from Iceland and abroad, gathered around an otherwise unremarkable stone in the middle of the former glacier after a two hour hike up the mountain on a rather windy day. A "lasting memorial"[8] plaque with an inscription in Icelandic and English was erected.[9] The inscription reads:

> A letter to the future. Ok is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as a glacier. In the next 200 years all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it.

The "letter" is in effect an address from the past. The "you" brought into dialogue here with "us," is a future you; a you that does not as yet exist and will not for another two

[7] https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2019/08/16/dead-icelandic-glacier-lost-to-climate-change
[8] McCaig, Amy. 2019. "Lost glacier to be honoured with memorial monument." Rice News. July 18. https://news.rice.edu/2019/07/18/lost-glacier-to-be-honored-with-memorial-monument/.
[9] O'Dowd, Peter. 2019. "Researchers Memorialize First Major Icelandic Glacier Lost To Climate Change." WBUR. August 16. https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2019/08/16/dead-icelandic-glacier-lost-to-climate-change?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr&utm_term=nprnews&utm_content=20190818&fbclid=IwAR1saTp5KslMIEnKxOA_O0haAU9fD8CGDE01G42ik4F1LTXRYFQB-f8Ffns

hundred years or so. We speak to the you as if (already) from beyond the grave. As such the letter is an example of "prosopopoeia, the fiction of a voice from beyond the grave" (Johnson 1994, 20). Barbara Johnson noted the "reversibility that in seeming to bring the dead back to life, threatens to strike the living dead" (1994, 20) which characterises prosopopoeia. Johnson evoked Paul de Man on how in reversibility of life and death in prosopopoeia, "the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death" (de Man 1984, 75–78; quoted in Johnson 1994, 20–21).

The letter is a declaration of responsibility and an invitation to judgement: "only you will know if we did it." Still, the event was to allow people to "say goodbye" to Ok by participating in a "mock funeral" that would "help people address climate grief" and "spur them to take action on the climate crisis."[10] Here clearly, and surely not coincidentally, there are strong echoes of Cunsolo Willox's (2012) call: to mourn the loss of Ok and to mobilise the mourning to combat climate change. One of the organisers of the event stated in a press interview that:

> By marking Ok's passing, we hope to draw attention to what is being lost as Earth's glaciers expire. These bodies of ice are the largest freshwater reserves on the planet and frozen within them are histories of the atmosphere. They are also often important cultural forms that are full of significance.[11]

This passage speaks to the complexity of mourning; it highlights that what is mourned through ecological grief can be a "multitude," as framed by Lertzman (2012; see also Gagné et al. 2014). In part, what is being mourned is something that might be considered largely of practical concern: glaciers are reserves of water, the disappearance of which endangers other lives. Perhaps here we deal with grief that anticipates further future losses as much as it responds to the current loss (see Lertzman 2012). At the same time the glaciers' disappearance is being mourned as the loss of the very particular histories

[10] Burton, Nylah. 2019. "Iceland's Glacier Funeral Helped Activits Manage Their Climate Grief." *Bustle*. August 19. (https://www.bustle.com/p/icelands-glacier-funeral-helped-activists-manage-their-climate-grief-18667800.). See also Johnson. 2019. "How to mourn a glacier." *The New Yorker*. (https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/how-to-mourn-a-glacier)

[11] https://weather.com/science/environment/news/2019-08-18-iceland-unveils-plaque-to-okjokull-first-glacier-killed-by

that are archived within the glaciers—histories of atmospheric changes for example—and, finally, glaciers are mourned as important cultural forms. And yet, the mourning is more complicated still. A few days before the event at Ok, the Icelandic writer and environmental activist, Andri Snær Magnason, published an article in the English newspaper *The Guardian* that served as a supplemental piece to the ceremony. There he said that previously the glaciers of Iceland seemed eternal but now "a country mourns their loss."[12] The glaciers had seemed eternal, in other words, *immortal*. It is as if, through their cumulated action that has resulted in climate change, humans have managed to turn the immortal and 'god-like' into something much more like themselves–hence mortal. It is the disappearance of eternity, of the glaciers as eternal, that is being mourned, making the glaciers mournable. Magnason's account is simultaneously deeply personal. He recounts his travels with his grandparents as they hiked glaciers in Iceland measuring their changing spa—a volunteer activity that a number of people have participated in. Thus eternity, long-term historical change and intimate family saga, all fall within the same view. An accompanying book that Magnason published the same year, titled *On Time and Water* (*Um tímann og vatnið*), expands this story. The book presents the effects of climate change as a fate completed, as if speaking already from beyond the grave. The nature of water on Earth, it says, *will* change fundamentally over the next hundred years, glaciers *will* melt. Magnason dedicates the book to his children, his grandchildren and his great grandchildren, that last of which, at least, are surely yet to be born. The ambivalences and the internal conflicts that can surface as nature is mourned, which Lertzman (2012) speaks about so powerfully, would appear to be at play in Magnason's book. The book serves as a call to arms while the battle is declared as already lost. The view is from a future already moving into eternity, as the eternity of the glaciers is lost.

[12] Magnason, Andri Snær. 2019. "The glaciers of Iceland seemed eternal. Now a country mourns their loss." *The Guardian*. August 14. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/14/glaciers-iceland-country-loss-plaque-climate-crisis

At the start of the walk up to Ok for the memorial ceremony, participants were asked to show "reverance and humility"[13] while they walked towards their destination.[14] When participants reached the disappearing Ok, they observed a "moment of silence." A glaciologist brought "a death certificate [...] noting [Ok's] [...] passing."[15] Eulogies to the "dead" glacier were read and Iceland's Minister of the Environment and Prime Minister both spoke.

The PM's speech had been published the day before in *The New York Times* with the melancholic title "The Ice is Leaving". In her article, the prime minister characterised the Ok event as a "local ceremony" but a "global story."[16] Indeed, news about the event swept through the international media, which framed the event even more firmly within discourses of death, loss and mourning. Some of the headlines in the media read: "Glacier is dead",[17] "Iceland glacier dies, so people hold a funeral for ice",[18] "Iceland holds funeral for giant glacier that melted after record heatwave",[19] "Iceland to Unveil a Plaque Dedicated to Okjökull, the First Glacier Killed by Climate Change",[20] "Iceland is mourning a dead glacier – how grieving over ecological destruction can help

[13] McCaig, Amy. 2019. "Lost glacier to be honoured with memorial monument." Rice News. July 18. https://news.rice.edu/2019/07/18/lost-glacier-to-be-honored-with-memorial-monument/.
[14] Johnson, Lacy M. 2019. "How to mourn a glacier." *The New Yorker*, October 20. (https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/how-to-mourn-a-glacier)
[15] Quiroz, Vanna. 2019. "Scientists bid farewell to first Icelandic glacier lost to climate change." August 18. CBS News. (https://www.cbsnews.com/news/scientists-bid-farewell-to-first-icelandic-glacier-lost-to-climate-change-today-2019-08-18/?fbclid=IwAR3NetB7qrSv3zQBcIBdtnzJQXFf8lL1JjDo4RfsjHymA51pZmtTRECz7fI). The "death certificate" was, however, several years old, issued in 2014 and part of a scientific monitoring of the statuses of natural phenomena like glaciers. The Meterological Office had already issued a list of 57 glaciers that had vanished. See also https://www.icelandreview.com/news/nasa-highlights-ok-glacier-disappearance-on-satellite-photos/?fbclid=IwAR3gla521rouOfLt_5EtEIjeYRBAhLuolvhhO8JbjrAZnJfd6nZs9MxpYlo
[16] Jakobsdóttir, Katrín. 2019. "The Ice is Leaving." *The New York Times*, August 17. (https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/17/opinion/iceland-glacier-climate-change.html).
[17] *Washington Post* (https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?destination=%2Fclimate-environment%2F2019%2F07%2F25%2Fglacier-is-dead-now-monument-tells-future-visitors-whose-fault-it-was%2F%3Ftid%3Dss_fb%26utm_term%3D.a721a1b39bcc%26fbclid%3DIwAR1Pqqka8Gc1VVt-ubF7C_ddyOXtrh0EFX9LnR4682iYmxMn1K6TAADkvyg&fbclid=IwAR1Pqqka8Gc1VVt-ubF7C_ddyOXtrh0EFX9LnR4682iYmxMn1K6TAADkvyg).
[18] Borenstein, Seth. 2019. "Iceland glacier dies, so people hold a funeral for ice." August 19. *Stuff* (https://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/climate-news/115097076/iceland-glacier-dies-so-people-hold-a-funeral-for-ice).
[19] Perrone, Alessio. 2019. "Iceland holds funeral for giant glacier that melted after record heatwave." August 19. *The Independent* (https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/iceland-glacier-funeral-memorial-climate-change-arctic-okjokull-a9064916.html)
[20] Pirnia, Garin. 2019. "Iceland to Unveil a Plaque Dedicated to Okjökull, the First Glacier Killer by Climate Change." August 1, Mental Floss. (http://mentalfloss.com/article/590874/plaque-for-okjokull-first-glacier-killed-by-climate-change-iceland).

us face the climate crisis."[21] The language used here clearly personifies Ok: Ok dies, or is killed, and he is mourned. In the process, at times Ok comes to stand in for all other glaciers, it seems, and other losses brought about by climate change. At other times Ok specifically is placed amongst the "grievable" in contrast to the ungrievable (Butler 2004 and 2009). The glaciologist Helgi Björnsson articulated the distinction between named victims and the nameless collateral damage that serves to dramatise Butler's notion so clearly. He said: "Several other small glaciers on mountains just reaching above the snowline have disappeared, most of them had no name ... but Ok was known to everyone, and therefore we miss it."[22]

Ecological grief and *solastalgia*: or the unappeased yearning for a return

The event at Ok inspired another similar event in the Glarus Alps, Switzerland, when in September 2019 dozens of people participated in a commemorative "funeral march" for the disappearing Pizol glacier.[23] It would appear that people are responding to Cunsolo Willox's (2012) call and starting to publicly mourn their ecological losses. The importance of mourning ecological losses has recently found expression in public discussions in Iceland.[24] Indeed, the notion of ecological grief has emerged as a key term in the literature on climate change and society. Ecological grief refers to the emotional reactions people may have as a consequence of the losses in their environment brought about by climate change (Cunsolo Willox 2012; Cunsolo Willox and Ellis 2018, 275; Randall 2009). Cunsolo Willox and Ellis suggest that it remains an understudied and unacknowledged phenomenon, a disenfranchised grief in other words. It is "the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species,

[21] Read, Rubert. 2019. "Iceland is mourning a dead glacier – how grieving over ecological destruction can help us face the climate crisis." August 21. *The Conversation* (http://theconversation.com/iceland-is-mourning-a-dead-glacier-how-grieving-over-ecological-destruction-can-help-us-face-the-climate-crisis-122071).

[22] Piccoli, Sean. 2019. "Iceland is Mourning The Death Of A Glacier With A Message To Earth's Future Inhabitants." *Medium*. August 22. (https://medium.com/@cleary_37690/iceland-is-mourning-the-death-of-a-glacier-with-a-message-to-earths-future-inhabitants-77f1e4889a6a).

[23] "Pizol glacier: Swiss hold funeral for ice lost to global warming." 2019. BBC News. September 22. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-49788483).

[24] Hjálmar S. Ásbjörnsson 3rd October 2019. "Óþægilegar upplýsingar." https://www.visir.is/g/2019191009531/othaegilegar-upplysingar

ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change" (Cunsolo Willox and Ellis 2018, 275). Similarly to Cunsolo Willox (2012), who seeks to mobilise the work of mourning for efforts to combat climate change, Randall (2009) stresses the need to acknowledge and work through ecological grief in the same way as any other grief. She suggests that reluctance to do so may hinder efforts to tackle climate change so that the refusal to deal with ecological grief may serve to increase losses caused by climate change and hence ecological grief in turn. She says: "When loss remains unspoken, neither grieved nor worked through, then change and adjustment cannot follow" (2009, 3). Randall draws on Freud's "Mourning and melancholia" and the idea that mourning can involve the loss of many things and not just other humans. Randall (2009, 17) draws parallels between grief understood in relation to the loss of human life and ecological grief. The necessary tasks of grieving, she suggests, are the same, and only when they are carried out can climate change be dealt with "using all of our creativity, reason, feeling and strength."

While fully supportive of the efforts to combat climate change that the mourners of Ok, Randall and Cunsolo Willox and others have gone to, we want to draw on Lertzman's work (2012) which brings to light the psychological complexities that may complicate efforts to mobilise ecological grief to combat climate change. One source of such complication, Lertzman notes, is the many different things that are possibly mourned at the same time, the 'multitude' implicated in any loss. Here we want to establish a link, a debatable link to be sure, between ecological grief and the notion of 'solastalgia'. In 2005, the philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the term *solastalgia* to capture an experience that he saw as increasingly common while not adequately represented by existing theoretical vocabulary. The word might be familiar to readers of the recent scholarship in cultural memory. Bringing together, as it does, the Latin word *sōlācium*, comfort, and the Greek *-algia*, pain, *solastagia* resembles the now established English term nostalgia. In *Ignorance*, Milan Kundera (1993) noted that the "Greek word for '*return*' is nostos. *Algos* means 'suffering'. Nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return" (Kundera 1993, 3; see also Boym 2001). In current

English usage, nostalgia would be described as the unappeased longing for a return to the past, to home, or even homesickness. Drawing on but differing from this understanding, solastalgia can be described as a longing for a home that one has in fact not left. It is a yearning for a home changed beyond recognition by natural disasters or war. In particular, solastalgia refers to the pain experienced as the home in which one's livelihood and identity was rooted, or routed as some would have it, is transformed, even destroyed by environmental change brought on by climate catastrophes (Albrecht 2006, 35).

We want to dwell a little bit longer on the part played by the yearning for a return in solastalgia and nostalgia. Georges van den Abbeele (1991) has spoken of "the journey" as an important metaphor in western thought, evident, just to give one key example, in the place afforded to the epic of Odysseus as a foundational text in western civilisations. van den Abbeele says that in the western imaginary, the journey is construed as a transformative undertaking, an ordeal of sorts through which the traveller undergoes something like a rite of passage before returning home. This notion of the journey implies the idea of home, in particular of a home untransformed, home as it was when the journey began, home unchanged to underscore the transformation the traveller undergoes during their journey. It would appear that the assumption of an unchanged home is the necessary precondition for the yearning for that very home one has not left. If that is the case, then solastalgia, it might be suggested, starts to evoke melancholia rather than, or at least as much as, mourning—the refusal to accept the loss and to mourn it fully. That suggestion might be taken as an opportunity to examine the mourning of Ok more carefully in light of Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia.

Mourning, melancholia, modernity and the more than human

Jonathan Flatley (2008) has noted, in his recent reading of Freud, how modernity as an idea and an experience is fundamentally constituted by a sense of loss. Modernity signals a break with and the loss of the past. "Modernity", Flatley reminds us, comes from the word *modernus*, meaning "of today". Modernity implies a sense of anteriority, it suggests

a time consciousness that is "not oriented toward repeating cycles or the promises of divine eternity, but a temporality that was linear, sequential, irreversible" (Flatley 2008, 28). It is a temporality that rejects the possibility of a return. Thus "modernity signified an epochal shift, the sense that we live in a historical moment that in its totality is somehow categorically different from the periods that preceded it" (Flatley 2008, 28). Modernity also signalled "the subjective experience of such a difference: the feeling that one's own experience of the present is contingent, fugitive, and fleeting" (Flatley 2008, 28).

Flatley (2008, 29) points out that "modernity and loss would seem to be inextricably linked: to be 'modern' is to be separated from the past ... that modernity signals nothing more or less than the impulse to declare the difference of a present moment in respect to the moments that preceded it...". Flatley (2008, 2) argues in this context that Freud's work should not be seen as an attempt to improve our understanding of mourning and melancholia, as Freud surely presumed, but rather that it provides "an allegory for the experience of modernity, an experience [...] that is constitutively linked to loss".

What precisely is this link between mourning, melancholia and modernity? In "Mourning and Melancholia" Freud explains that mourning "is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (Freud 1957 [1917], 243). Mourning for Freud is natural, necessary, healthy. According to Freud (1957 [1917], 245), mourning is a long and laborious process of disattaching "each one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object"—object here signalling potentially anyone or anything outside the self, the subject—that has been lost, so that the attachments and the emotional energy they carry can be invested again in new relations. When that process is complete, the mourning is done but while the disattachment is being carried out, "the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged" (Freud 1957 [1917], 245). That is, the work of detachment requires a temporary "hallucinatory wishful psychosis" in which the mourner must pretend that the

object is still there. Only in that way can the mourner detach themselves from the loved object. This happens through identification, the process whereby I replace the departed other by identifying with that other, and thus replacing it from within. In this the departed other becomes a part of me, or as Diane Fuss (1995, 1) has put it: "By incorporating the spectral remains of the dearly departed love-object, the subject vampiristically comes to life". While situated specifically in mourning, identification is posited more generally in psychoanalysis as "the psychical mechanism that produces self-recognition. Identification inhabits, organizes, instantiates identity", it is "the detour through the other that defines a self" (Fuss 1995, 1).

People clearly mourned many different things when they mourned Ok. A general process of reverse identification has taken place whereby the glacier is constituted as a being of human-like qualities and is thus made grievable. For others, Ok clearly speaks to more specific aspects of identity, more distinct desires of return. But what of melancholia then?

Freud saw the *self-critical*, *self-deriding* aspect as the unique feature of melancholia. He said:

> The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment (Freud 1957 [1917], 244).

This "lowering of self-regard" happens because of a splitting in the self, the subject, whereby "one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object" (Freud 1957 [1917], 247). Crucially, Freud argues that the criticism of the self is really a criticism of the loved object that has been lost, criticism effectively for abandoning the ego, transferred to the ego. In mourning, as noted above, emotional energy is eventually withdrawn from the lost loved object and invested in another loved object. In melancholia, when the process of mourning has failed, the now free libido is not invested in another object but drawn into the ego (Freud 1957 [1917],

249). How does this happen? Freud argues that in mourning the emotional tie between self and the object is replaced by an identification with and internalization of the lost object. This is to allow the wish hallucination necessary for the ego to work through their memories of the loved one and should last only until the work of mourning is complete and the ego is able to invest emotional energy in another loved object. In melancholia, however, the emotional energy attaches to the ego itself. The identification that ego makes with the lost loved object is prolonged with the abandoned object effectively creating a split within the ego. Melancholia is thus mourning gone wrong. The shadow of the object falls upon the ego, and the internalised object sits in judgement of the ego. Thus "an object-loss is transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification" (Flatley 2008, 46). While Freud sees "mourning ... as a kind of libidinal decathection from the lost object," he suggests that "the melancholic internalizes the lost object into his or her very subjectivity as a way of refusing to let the loss go" (Flatley 2008, 46). Thus, as Eng and Kazanjian have put it, as "a psychic entity, the ego is composed of the residues of its accumulated losses" (Eng and Kazanjian 2003, 4).

What bearing may this reading of Freud have upon how we understand the mourning of Ok? The mourning of Ok is a complicated mourning for many things. It speaks to spectacular future losses and the most minute personal yearning. Is this mourning or melancholia? Is Ok a loss mourned in such a way that new attachment can then be formed? Our answer is that it would appear so, but what is melancholic, we suggest, is the ceaseless desire for mourning. We conclude by fleshing out our reasoning here.

Concluding remarks

Our intention in this paper has of course not been to question in any way the experiences of those who suffer from ecological grief. It has not been, either, to question or even assess the call to mobilise mourning to galvanise efforts to combat climate change in general or in relation to the mourning of Ok in particular. We have nothing but

admiration for the efforts we have documented so very briefly here. What we have hoped to do is to speculate on what the mourning of Ok tells us about the current history of death in the western world.

We began this paper with the suggestion that death studies themselves are founded in a moment of loss, in a process of mourning. The work of Gorer and Ariès is redolent with a longing for a closeness with death, dying and grief that they claim used to exist but does no longer. One could say that the foundational object of death studies is thus not death as such, but rather the absence of death, even its absent presence, death as a haunting. The impact of death studies in the western world has been to inform and mobilise efforts to establish greater closeness with death. We could go as far as suggesting that inherent in death studies has been a drive for the recognition of grief, whatever causes it and whatever form it takes. Mourning the loss of natural landscapes is a continuation of the extension of griveability that death studies has informed. That is explicitly the call issued by Cunsolo Willox (2012) and others. It is in this context that we place the mourning for Ok. However, there is another context here too. Theoretical shifts in philosophy, social sciences and the humanities more generally, happening over the last three decades or so, have worked against assumptions of human exceptionalism. In line with new materialisms and actor-network-theory, the argument is now oft the times that agency is not an exclusively human capacity. Most fundamentally, this theoretical development seeks to undermine the distinction between subject—essentially human—and object, understood to be a cornerstone of western ontological assumptions and epistemological practices at least since Descartes. Indeed, this distinction, this separation is understood as the founding moment of "modernity", the disenchantment of the world, the reduction of the world to a mechanism subject to natural laws, and the elevation of society or culture as the human sphere of singular agentive capacity (Holbraad 2011; Blok and Jense, 2019). Latour's (1993) claim that we have never been modern rests on the argument that the distinction between subject and object does not hold, has never held but for the very effort necessary to make it hold, effort that inevitably, at the same time, shows the impossibility of what it seeks to achieve. It is

significant that the mourning for Ok was instigated and organised by social scientists. The possibility of mourning Ok involves, as the examples we brought forward seem to show, the personification, the humanisation of the glacier.

Social sciences and the humanities have already mourned the loss of traditions, languages, cultures, and, in the narrower form of death studies, the death of death. These are the sciences that lately have sought to do away with the distinction between subject and object, human and non-human in part in order to combat the losses brought about by climate change. It is here that we find Flatley's (2008) reading of Freud particularly useful. Modernity is itself constituted by a sense of loss, by the sense of a past now inaccessible, by a yearning for that which has been irrevocably lost, that which cannot be returned to. Modernity is what makes a return impossible, and the timelessness of eternity all but unthinkable. That sense of loss, the incorporation of that which is understood to have been lost, is constitutive of contemporary subjectivities, Flatley argues. The mourning of Ok is clearly a complicated, multi-faceted mourning for many things. It is mourning that in some cases signals a yearning for a return. But is the mourning of Ok simply mourning or also melancholia? Is it a loss mourned in such a way that new attachment can then be formed, or is it loss that cannot be overcome? Our answer is that it would appear that Ok has been and is being mourned, but, following Flatley's reading, what is melancholic is the ceaseless mourning, the desire for further things to mourn. The mourning of Ok shows us its own particular moment in the present history of death: in claiming that we have never been modern by moving beyond the subject-object distinction, we are at our most modern in being subjects who mourn. We mourn, therefore we are. That is our melancholia.

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