

Research Article

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Selfhood in Question: The Ontogenealogies of Bear Encounters

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Abstract: Recent years have witnessed an increase in bear sightings in Latvia, causing a change of tone in the country's media outlets, regarding the return of “wild” animals. The unease around bear reappearance leads me to investigate the affective side of relations with beings that show strength and resilience in more-than-human encounters in human-inhabited spaces. These relations are characterized by the contrasting human feelings of alienation *vis-à-vis* their environments today and a false sense of security, resulting in disbelief to encounter beings capable of challenging human exceptionalism. In a broader sense, the unease connects to human self-constitution and the fragility of the self, fueled by the domination of substance ontologies. This article considers bears as beings “in exile,” as potential threats to human self-pronounced exceptionality, and thus, examples of experienced abject (Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) regarding human subjectivity. The article aims to analyze the way the constitution of human selfhood is tied to the alienation of wildlife and its genealogical and biopolitical context and to question if a reconceptualization of the human/nonhuman relations via process, instead of substance ontology, is needed.

Keywords: ontogenealogy, wildlife, Latvia, abject, the self, bears, exile, space, borders

Despite their diversity and illustrious history, the state of bears today is sobering. These once abundant animals are now largely confined to areas with little or no human civilization.

Is it possible for humans and bears to share the same space at all?¹

1 Introduction: Thinking with bears

Cultural imaginaries of nature often cast it as a passive pool of resources or as a fragile “Garden of Eden,” spoiled by the devastating hand of humanity – cast as the most violent predator on the planet. Both cases represent a dialectical view of nature as alienated from human subjectivity – either angels or demons, humans are the subjects within this nature conceptualization. However, there are beings such as bears that visibly unsettle this dialectical view of nature by displaying agency of their own and thus endangering the human self-constitution that rests on the subject–object distinction. To demonstrate these exceptions as evidence for a broader mis-conceptualization of the human self that bears serious consequences to human relations with the environment, this article takes on *thinking with bears* to endeavor a more-than-human theorization of selfhood and its part in co-constituting lived materialities.

¹ Brunner, *Bears*, 6.

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The aim of the article is to analyze the link between the ontology of the self and the lived environments in the Global North and to demonstrate the necessity to rethink more-than-human ontologies via alternate understandings of the self for the facilitation of environmental awareness and future transformation of the environments we live by.

Thus, my task with this article is twofold. First, it is a search for a philosophical conceptualization of the societal understanding of bears as co-dwellers (or beings in exile) in the common living space. Simply put – bears matter, and the question of cohabiting and sharing human spaces with wildlife has become increasingly important, tracing the line of flight between a supposed wilderness and civilization as well as the political and the nonhuman space. Since it is a very real example of conflicting discourses of nature, ecology, and the environment that bring to light the influence of ideas on materiality and *vice versa*, it seemed fitting to investigate the deeper, ontological, and existential levels of human/bear interaction. What is it that underlays the biopolitics of bears and the communication processes about bears in the media? Second, it seems that an investigation of bears allows insight into the body–environment linkage in a broader sense. What does the exile of bears stand for in the context of the conceptualization of selfhood in the Global North? Moreover, within this philosophical context, the spatial relationship with bears can serve as an important example for the understanding of the environment as a co-dwelling place and a place of a perceived alienation from the lived materialities in a broader sense.

Thus, the choice of bears is coincidental and logical at the same time – inspired by the slow but steady return of bears to my homeland Latvia and the correlative sociopolitical conflicts and discussions, and it is also a prominent example that demonstrates the difficulties faced by human exceptionalist self-constitution of the Global North and is employed in this article to further the trail of new materialist subject conceptualization within the context of immanent process ontologies.² By *thinking with bears*, I endeavor a critical ontogenealogy of the human self-constitution in Global Northern contexts.

Genealogy is usually viewed as a methodological approach that seeks to reflect upon the “history of the present”³ by refusing to seek an “origin” (*Ursprung*) and instead – looking for strands of beginnings. My approach stems from a new materialist and posthumanist theorization of naturecultured⁴ immanence that allows repositioning genealogy within materiality, conceptualizing life itself as genealogical to theorize the link between ontologies we live by and the experienced materialities, and highlighting the link between experienced self-constitution, the cultural imaginaries of the environment, and the lived materialities that are co-constituted by the ontologies we live by. Thus, the concept of genealogy in my research is broadened with the concept of ontogenealogy that embeds genealogy in materiality,⁵ considering life as genealogical based on a nature–culture continuum, to consider the connection and interdependence of biopolitical and environmental processes in environmental humanities.

The ontogenealogical approach upholds the idea that concepts and ideologies co-constitute materialities and strives to trace the entanglement and interdependency of ontologies we live by and experienced materialities. As such, it enables employing the notions from various theoretical accounts concerning their explanatory value to facilitate an ontogenealogical account. This method is synthetic, in as far as I seek connections and congruencies between different theories that can be incongruous or even antithetical in their own right and reframe their respective concepts within the context of the ontogenealogical study; it does not however strive to reframe these concepts within their respective research fields.

A materially embedded genealogy presumes that the constitution of lived materialities is ontogenealogical in the sense that the ontologies we live by are reflected in material contexts both on the level of experience in the flesh – namely, how certain phenomena are perceived and understood (and thus acted upon), as well as on the level of their lived, envired materialities – namely, how phenomena are

² See Daigle and McDonald, “From Deleuze and Guattari to Posthumanism.”

³ See further Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*; Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History;” Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*; and Sauka, “The Nature of Our Becoming.”

⁴ See Haraway, “The Companion Species Manifesto.”

⁵ The possibility of the conceptualization of life as genealogical is already discussed in Sarasin, *Darwin und Foucault*.

constituted in the world. Both levels are materially embedded and entangled and are here discussed in their entanglement, in the context of the ontologies that facilitate the experiential and material worlding by being at the heart of both. Namely, ontogenealogy allows theorizing more-than-human genealogies as *inscriptions in the flesh*, both in the context of human experience and affection and in the context of their environmental and material consequence.

Within this approach, I will thus consider two key ontogenealogical factors that play into the biopolitical field and impact bear reception in Latvia, as well as the experience of space and its “proper” division between human and nonhuman agents:

- 1) The conceptual dynamics and dialectics of “the rule” and “the exception” in a biopolitical context of the understanding of nature and more-than-human processes and
- 2) The abjection of the environment in context with cases where more-than-human agency unsettles the dichotomy of the subject and object and creates a meta-exclusion of the dialectic of the “rule” and “exception” of nature perception.

These factors are linked since they both refer to the cultural imaginaries of more-than-human nature. With the conceptual dynamics and dialectics of the “rule” and “exception,” I demonstrate the dialectical understanding of nature that includes various viewpoints (nature as a resource, as fragile primordial beauty, etc.) that are all nevertheless based upon human-centered substance ontologies. Contextualizing this analysis with the affectual alienation, I demonstrate the parallels between embodied ontogenealogies of the self and the ontogenealogies of the environment, demonstrating both as *ingrained* in the flesh on an experienced first-person level and thus as influential toward the way environment is handled, lived, and co-constituted by human actors. Here, I argue that the Global Northern genealogies of the self facilitate an experiential alienation of nature/environment (that is already present in the distinction of nature and culture) that can be theorized with the concept of the abject. Alienation here refers to the felt sense of distinction and disidentification between self and other, both on the level of embodiment (as a perceived dualism between mind and body) and on the level of the embodied environment (as a perceived dichotomy of nature and culture). The notion of abject allows demonstrating these two levels of alienation as linked and co-constitutive expressions of human-centered substance ontology that disregards transcorporeality and processual entanglement and prevents their experience. Thus, the abject, as conceptualized by Julia Kristeva,⁶ is here understood as something or some process that arouses affectual rejection due to the thing or process laying outside of a comfortable subject–object distinction. The abject can thus be both used as a vehicle for reinstating the fragile boundaries of the self (via its rejection) and a powerful reminder of the fragility of the self within a human-centered substance ontology. Thus, while alienation refers to the experiential subject–object distinction, abjection plays into the process of distinction as a regulatory instance that can maintain and facilitate alienation of processes and phenomena that are experienced as more-than-human rather than nonhuman/objectifiable.

Both aspects tie in together with the understanding of body-environments and help understand why the rarity of bears is also tied with the affectual experience of bears as more dangerous than other potentially life-threatening hazards, and why the dangerousness of bears (and some other “natural dangers”) is mediated to the public as considerably more important and less acceptable than, for example, the risks of civilization threats such as driving, while all the evidence suggests the opposite is true. If dangers are expressed in numbers, humans in the Global North are endangered by various technologies much more often than by the threat of wild animals. In 2019 alone, 132 people⁷ in Latvia died in car crashes. However, there have been no bear attacks.⁸ In Romania, where the number of bears is at least 6,000, the year 2019

⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.

⁷ Data of Road Traffic Safety Directorate (CSDD) in Latvia, the year 2019.

⁸ During the preparation of this article, there has been one bear attack on a forester – possibly an attack by a bear mother – the bear bit the forester in the leg and then ran back into the woods. See Lvportals.lv. *Lācis uzbrūk cilvēkam meža masīvā pie Žiguriem*, 2022.

took 6 human lives, instigating a large uproar and calls for immediate hunts since between 2000 and 2015 the number of lethal cases was only 11.⁹

I will proceed by discussing these aspects in the following sections. First, I outline the background of the dialectics of the “rule” and “exception” regarding the genealogies of nature and provide context to discussing the question of bear reception in Latvia. I then turn to the philosophical aspects of human/bear relationships, conceptualized through a biopolitical discussion of the dialectics of the “rule” (understood as the norm) and “exception” and Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection.¹⁰ The discussion of the “rule” and the “exception” discusses the ontogenealogy of self-constitution in context with the societal context of self-other relations and the environment, while the discussion of abjection describes the experiential/affectual dimension of self-constitution *vis-à-vis* the environment, thus furthering the discussion of the “rule” and “exception” to demonstrate this dichotomy as itself a paradoxical yet experientially noncontradictory dialectics that upholds itself as the “rule” (i.e., dominating ontogenealogies) in human–nature relations and is unsettled by the emergence of a meta-exclusion (that in this case is a more-than-human agency). The third part of the article is then devoted to the exemplification of the functioning of these theoretical models in bear/human relations. Here, I use the notion of space as a place of conflict and co-dwelling, as the material counterpart of abject and alienation, to outline some of the lived consequences that the ontologies we live by create.

2 Our exiled co-dwellers

Recent years have seen an increase of bear (*Ursus arctos*) sightings in my home country Latvia, causing some societal concern, but mainly a change of tone in the country’s media outlets, regarding the return of “wild” animals in the forests. Citing data from 1999, a study on the status of the brown bear in Latvia¹¹ mentions that the bear count in Latvia circles around 10 bears, all of them most probably migrants between Estonia and Russia. Since then, the number of bears has slowly but steadily increased. In 2018, public media estimated the number of bears in the wild at around 23,¹² while in 2020, different news outlets cite from around 20 to 30¹³ to as many as 70 bears in the local forests.¹⁴ The vast difference in different accounts could also be connected with the complexity of bear monitoring,¹⁵ as well as the recency of constant bear presence. There is still no evidence of bear reproduction in Latvia,¹⁶ and the increase in bear populations is mostly associated with the efforts to expand the bear populations in Estonia. However, this year a bear mother with her cubs were sighted in the forests close to the Estonian border.¹⁷

Although the return of bears is mostly received positively or neutrally in official communication, the media does not widely explain the positive factors of the return of the large predators. In contrast, almost all articles devoted to bears in popular media cite their dangerousness and advise on how to avoid bear attacks

⁹ McGrath, *Brown Bear Attacks*.

¹⁰ See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*. Here, however, it must be noted that the concept of “abjection” is both employed and implicitly reinterpreted as possibly culturally conditional (namely, partly connected to the domination of substance ontology). The term fits well to describe the *third* element in the constitution of subjectivity against a backdrop of an objectified world, but is not to be interpreted directly in the way that it is used in Julia Kristeva’s writings, but rather in a broader meaning to denote the environmental elements that are ontogenealogically concealed to the selfhood as problematic in the sense of not easily classifiable as subject or object, and thus a reminder of the fragility of human exceptionalism.

¹¹ Pilāts and Ozoliņš, “Status of Brown Bear in Latvia.”

¹² LSM.lv, *Zināmais nezināmajā, Brūnais lācis; Zoologs Jānis Ozoliņš*.

¹³ Eng.LSM.lv, “Bears Return to Latvia. What should you do if You Meet One?”

¹⁴ Leta. *Eksperti: Latvijā varētu mitināties līdz 70 lāči*.

¹⁵ McLellan, “Dynamics of Grizzly Bear Population;” and Miller et al., “Brown and Black Bear Density Estimation in Alaska.”

¹⁶ Važnaja un Čigāne, *Latvijā ienākušie lāči uz dzīvi tomēr izvēlas nepalikāt*. LSM.lv, *Zināmais nezināmajā, Brūnais lācis; Zoologs Jānis Ozoliņš*.

¹⁷ LA.lv., *Soctiklotājus aizkustina milģie lācēni, kuri manīti Valkā*.

or encounters. The public commentaries on news platforms as well as the public Facebook group “Stop! Wolves and Bears Infest the Baltics,”¹⁸ respectively, reflect this lack of understanding, asking for the elimination of bears and expressing fear of future human attacks.

The brown bear is also thought to be a considerable threat to beekeepers. In 2020, the “VI international conference of the beekeepers of the Latgale region” (a region near the Russian border where bears migrate similarly to the Estonian border) was even entirely devoted to bears, with the title “Of Bears in Latvian Apiaries.”¹⁹ In contrast with the neighboring country of Estonia where bear numbers amount to at least 10 times of the bears living in Latvia, with sources citing from 700 to 800 specimens,²⁰ bear hunting in Latvia is prohibited. The main pragmatic concern regarding the return of the large predators is thus connected with the worry that the bears in Latvia will lack proper fear of humans and could therefore become dangerous. News outlets cite Estonian hunting practices²¹ as preventive measures against overtly bold attacks on livestock, bee apiaries, or even humans.²² These are also the main threats cited in the European Commission document “Key Actions for Large Carnivore populations in Europe.”²³

Public surveys in Latvia on the reception of large carnivores (wolves, bears, and lynx) have been carried out at least twice (in 2002²⁴ and 2017; discussion of results – LA.lv 2017²⁵) within the process of renewing the conservation policy for these animals. This policy was first approved in 2003, renewed in 2009,²⁶ and renewed again in 2018.²⁷ Both surveys reveal rather positive attitudes toward the presence of large carnivores in Latvia, although the attitudes toward bears were conflictual, and respondents from the demographic group of families (in contrast with respondents from the surveyed hunters) expressed fear for the safety of their families.²⁸ In the 2002 study, bears are also regarded as the most dangerous predator species by 61.7% of respondents.²⁹ The education on bears is also apparently lacking since only 0.8% of respondents answered that bears are omnivores.³⁰ Yet, the study was mostly distributed in schools, which could also skew the data on overall societal awareness. It is also likely that without implementing societal education on the importance of large predators in the forest and with further increase in bear populations, the societal concern might significantly increase.

The return of the large carnivores in Latvia is not surprising – large wildlife animals that were previously pressed out of their territories are returning to the whole of Europe.³¹ However, despite a largely positive reception of the return of the animals, the conflictual views expressed on public news platforms and on social media, as well as the lack of public representation of the necessity for these animals to return, present the matter of bears as conflictual.

Moreover, the real problem is revealed if one regards how the potential threat of the large carnivores is discussed in comparison with how other deathly threats present in everyday life are analyzed, allowing an assumption that what looms beyond the seemingly positive attitudes toward conservation policies of wildlife are the more complicated questions of body-environments. Namely, as the research of Andersone and Ozoliņš reveal, bears are discussed in the media considerably more than other large predatory animals that are more numerous and thus also present a greater threat:

18 Facebook, “Stop! Vilki un lāči pārņem Baltiju.”

19 Of Bears in Latvian Apiaries.

20 News.Err.ee, *Estonian Bears Still Recovering from a Century-Old Bottleneck*.

21 Valdmann et al., “The Brown Bear Population in Estonia.”

22 LSM.lv. *Lubānas novadā lācis izposta bišu dravu*.

23 European Commission, *Key Actions for Large Carnivore Populations in Europe*.

24 Andersone un Ozoliņš. *Sabiedrības viedoklis par trīs lielo plēsēju sugām*.

25 LA.lv. *Lielajiem plēsējiem mežā jābūt*.

26 Ozoliņš et al. *Brūnā lāča Ursus actus sugas aizsardzības plāns.*, 2009.

27 Ozoliņš et al. *Brūnā lāča Ursus actus sugas aizsardzības plāns.*, 2018.

28 LA.lv. *Lielajiem plēsējiem mežā jābūt*.

29 Andersone un Ozoliņš. *Sabiedrības viedoklis par trīs lielo plēsēju sugām.*, 25.

30 Ibid, 17.

31 Bateman, *The Return of Europe's Largest Beasts*.

Almost every record of the presence of bears is noted by the national mass media, whereas wolves and lynx usually are mentioned by journalists only when they cause damage or are shot in great numbers.³²

The most uncomplicated answer, of course, lies in the rarity of the animal – bears are the rarest mammals in Latvia,³³ and the societal interest in news about bears is, hence, unsurprising. While bear numbers have massively increased since 2004, this situation seems to be unchanged. Bears are still extensively (and perhaps increasingly) described by the national media, whether these are bear sightings in the form of photos or videos,³⁴ bee apiary destruction,³⁵ or attacks on animals.³⁶ However, bears have yet to attack any humans, and their presence is already warned against extensively, citing detailed accounts of their encounters. This fact particularly invites looking beyond pragmatic explanations.

The relations between humans and large predatory animals (and especially the bear) seem easy to grasp – they are characterized by fear, facing the “unknown” wilderness, as well a deep-seated perception of the nature/culture divide³⁷ that has undergone various transformations. Today, various dominating genealogies of nature function together and are characterized by the contradictory discourses of *nature* as the uncontrollable, “terrible,” and uncanny, and *nature* as the instrumental and objectifiable, as well as supplemented by a more recent, romanticist construction of the “fragility” of nature. Hence, there are at least three different yet coexisting perceptual modes of *nature* and *wilderness*,³⁸ and it is imagined as something to evade (it is the uncontrollable Other), to protect (it is fragile and naive beauty), or to use (it is a mechanistic resource). The three discourses overlap and work together in creating a seemingly consistent worldview where these radically different outlooks seem to be complementary and non-paradoxical even for a single moral agent. Whereas the beliefs propagated by these genealogies are often seemingly contradictory, they have connecting agents that allow them to function together. Thus, all three are congruent with the development of a linear understanding of time³⁹ and a dualist materiaphobic⁴⁰ worldview that is often associated with the proliferation of Christianity (yet – does not exhaust the factual variability of Christian praxes). Together, they instigate the destruction of a naturecultured human self-perception that comes from older, animistic notions of life processes.

Brunner writes:

Whatever the original form of these myths, it is clear that a worldview that considered humans to be one with nature is a thing of the past. Science’s progressive demystification of nature – a phenomenon of the last few hundred years – is partly responsible, but Christianity played an even greater role by driving out the old nature religions of pagan peoples. Being the animal that, perhaps more than any other, embodied the pagan concept of kinship between man and nature, the bear played a key role in early Christian legends. Saint Ursula, for example, received her name because she successfully defended eleven thousand virgins against bears – a feat that could represent the saving of these Christian innocents from the dangers of nature worship.⁴¹

The pre-Christian and prescientific views, briefly mentioned in this quotation, are also continuously present as a marginal contrast to the dominating genealogies and can be found in folk tales that talk of the bear as the “king of the forest” or demonstrate human–bear transformations, etc. from a time when the “terrible” nature was a dominating dialectical opposition to a still relevant animistic respect to the surrounding world, and before later transformations that saw the advent of mechanistic or pastoral views of naturality.

³² Andersone and Ozoliņš, “Public Perception of Large Carnivores in Latvia,” 185.

³³ Timm et al., “Mammals of the East Baltic.”

³⁴ La.lv. *Soctiklotājus aizkustina mīļie lācēni, kuri manīti Valkā.*

³⁵ LSM.lv. *Lubānas novadā lācis izposta bišu dravu.*

³⁶ Alukstnīsiem.lv. *Alūksnes novadā lācis uzbrūk govij.*

³⁷ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 2013.

³⁸ See, for example, Merchant, *The Death of Nature*.

³⁹ See Granjou and Salazar, “Future.”

⁴⁰ Keller and Rubenstein, “Tangled Matters.”

⁴¹ Brunner, *Bears*, 19–20.

The scholarly practice has a long-established research tradition exploring the parallels between the feminine and the natural⁴² – the vicious witches, cunning foxes, sly snakes, furious she-bears, and uncontrollable shrews opposed by weak but hysterical doves and ivory tower pastoral dolls, the *nature* of which predestines a weak tendency to “civilize” themselves.⁴³ A trimmed garden and a groomed lady – a hard-to-come-by but desired result. In more recent history, the battle over womanhood – are they fierce matrons, weak hysterics, or a protectable species, or should we leave womanhood alone along with bears?⁴⁴ The parallel between femininity and naturality outlines the parallel between the ontogenealogies of bodies and environments, thus connecting self-constitution and environmental praxes and attitudes.

A parallel between the body and nature allows us to also understand the role of science and the following biological determinism, not only within the confines of coproducing gender roles but also concerning the construction of the understanding of wilderness. After the earlier genealogies of bears as terrible but respectable co-dwellers of the forest⁴⁵ and the Greek and Christian understanding of terrible, yet comical and grotesque natural phenomena that are turned meek and servile via domestication, however, the metaphysical ideal loses its grip.

With industrialization, *nature* not only loses its mythological, terrifying character (that still bears signs of earlier animism) but also acquires two parallel and entangled meanings – an affective, aesthetic appreciation of the fragile, yet sublime nature and the view of a mechanistic view of a deterministic physical world.

Gilles Deleuze shows it as a transformation of the negative nihilism into reactive nihilism,⁴⁶ where the material sphere is completely stripped of the transcendental spirit, yet not induced with an agency of its own. The reactive nihilism thus sees the rise of biological determinism. Although these newfound views of a mechanical nature that serves as a resource are radically different from the previous conceptualizations, they continue the previous discourse of subjugation and dualism, since they are a follow-up of the previous genealogies and continue upholding the same values. Biological determinism does not change the previous order but replaces God’s design with biology and “enhancement” and “normalization,”⁴⁷ thus creating a paradoxical understanding of the necessity for civilizing processes, to adjust the incomplete phenomena to “laws of nature.” Namely, although the law of all things is now imminent and thus material, paradoxically

⁴² Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*; and Merchant, *The Death of Nature*.

⁴³ An anthropocentric and simultaneously gendered understanding of nature is also present in the reception of bears. In 1967, in an unlikely coincidence, two women got killed by a bear on the same day. Following this incident, a theory arose, stating that menstruating women were possibly more likely to be attacked by bears. Studies were conducted but no evidence of the truth of this theory was found, yet the danger signs that women should be especially careful when hiking were kept. Another example is the “crossover” theory that states that bears are more likely to attack a human member of the opposite sex, particularly, in case the bear is male and the human is female (see Brunner, 131–2). Interestingly, certain sexist views also play into the standpoint that bears should be killed. An anecdotal example of this is found in the comments of one of the news articles in Latvia, where a commentator states “If you cannot sexually satisfy it [the bear] then you should shoot it.”

⁴⁴ The genealogies of femininity demonstrate the dialectics between pre-Christian and Christian understandings of the natural world even more clearly, again highlighting a kind of incomplete, genealogical dialectics between scientific–materiophobic–pastoral and the earlier animistic perceptions. Following Thomas Laqueur’s and Toril Moi’s line of argumentation, until the eighteenth century, the understanding of gender is dominated by the metaphysical ideal: everyone is equally grotesque in the face of God, therefore the strive to walk the path laid out by God and to adjust oneself to God’s design by cultivating, for example, “masculinity” seems logically consistent according to the discourse. The same stands also as applicable to the construction of nature as a terrible and mysterious power – the proliferation of materiophobia that stems already from Greeks and then proliferates further within certain dominating strands of Christianity, and the view that *our* “animalistic” or “material” nature is incomplete is logically consistent with a call for enhancement, according to a biblical understanding of the human being as the shepherd of God’s creation. (see Laqueur, *Making Sex*; Moi, “What is a Woman,” 10–21; Keller and Rubenstein, “Tangled Matters,” 5).

⁴⁵ Brunner, *Bears*, 9–17.

⁴⁶ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 148–51.

⁴⁷ See also Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*, for consideration of humanity’s fall from grace as an equivalent of the progressive thinking since the Scientific Revolution. “By the time of the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, the Christian narrative had merged with advances in science, technology, and capitalism to form the mainstream Recovery Narrative.” (Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*, 11).

nature still does not adhere to the ideal and requires human intervention. The focus point of the ideal shifts toward science and future solutions substituting biblical ideals, yet, in a sense, also continuing them.

Judith Butler reflects on this phenomenon in the context of homosexuality, which is often depicted as *both* unnatural and uncivilized.⁴⁸ Similarly, the wilderness becomes the exception and lies outside the norm because it is not cultivated. In contrast with a previous conceptualization of “wild” and “predatory” animals to be tamed in the eternal afterlife, now the same dream of a “tamed” nature is brought down to earth.

The example also demonstrates the materialization of lived ontologies, since today wilderness is quite literally the exception and not the rule, due, in part, also to the ontologies we live by.

Normalizing processes, here, discriminate between the rule and the peripheral exception. In this sense, the “exception” is something that does not adhere to the dominating ontological understanding, i.e., the symbolic order that has seen the rise of the human being over its “ecological background” and endowed humankind with governing privileges, while simultaneously alienating humans from the more-than-human environment, strengthening the perception of nature as simultaneously terrible and threatening, as well as controllable resource. In this context, an encounter with a bear is an encounter with the “exception.” If everything in nature is supposed to be controllable and weaker than a human being, a bear *bears* powerful evidence of the absurdity of this view – it is a potential encounter with what is “ordinary” that does not coincide with how humankind sees itself in the world and thus cannot recognize as superior.

Hence, in context with the conflicting genealogy of nature, bears represent an interesting case. They have arguably had a seemingly paradoxical image – from suspected sacral animals and adored but often ridiculed cartoon characters to monsters or even laughable circus freaks. To understand this apparent paradoxicality of the image of bears that are often shunned and revered simultaneously in the same culture, it is important to note that before the sightings of monkeys and the social acceptance of Darwin’s theories, many people of the Northern Hemisphere saw in bears their closest “natural relatives” and at the same time – their closest competition and thus “natural enemies.”⁴⁹ Hence, due to their *naturality*, they are presumably an “ordinary” part of the human lifeworld. Bears have been known since the dawn of mankind, drawn even on the walls of caves some 35,000 years ago.⁵⁰ Yet, due to their current rarity in many parts of the world, meeting a bear is somewhat *an exception*.

3 Abjected matter, living with wildlife

As I previously demonstrated, often the “rule” is something seemingly paradoxical (as the presumed naturality of ladylike adherence to *civilized* gender roles), and thus the exception (the rare lady) can certainly become the rule. The exception, conversely, could often potentially be the rule, if viewed outside of the ontogenealogical context.

The contradictory image of bears loses its paradoxicality in the context of the understanding of nature throughout the history of the Global North. Bears have hence been prominent figures for signifying the *verge* between nature and culture in the Global North – almost a reminder of the “animal within” that has haunted much of the ratio-centered understanding of the human being. While the human is perceptually positioned in the in-between (a position that has now undergone extensive critique as to its ontological status yet seems complicated to shed in perceptual contexts), the bear is one of the signifiers for this

⁴⁸ “Significantly, being “outside” the hegemonic order does not signify being “in” a state of filthy and untidy nature. Paradoxically, homosexuality is almost always conceived within the homophobic signifying economy as *both* uncivilized and unnatural.” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 168).

⁴⁹ Brunner, *Bears*, 19–35.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 45.

position, a constant reminded of the fragility of the man-made worlds of autonomous, cultural, and cultured selfhoods. Via the notion of the abject – as the negation of subject beyond object, bears are one of the phenomena that take up the role of the “exiled.” The status of the extraordinary thus rests upon the inability to render them object because of their undeniable agency and sometimes – the subjugation of humans. The notion of abject renders nil the paradox of bear reception – as a phenomenon that illuminates the fragility of selfhood, the abject is either rendered comical (think of jokes about feces and vomiting in popular comedies), imagined as monstrous, or reduced to an object of desire. Thus, bears are trained for tricks for cheap laughs and disrespected for it at the same time (one might find here a parallel with other human discriminatory relations via gender, etc.) or revered as the king of the forest, while simultaneously regarded as monsters.⁵¹

Here, the dialectics of the rule and the exception should be reinterpreted. The encounter with bears is not exceptional, nor is it the rule. Rather the exceptionality is connected with the role that the return of bears plays in shifting the existing borders of selfhood and otherness, and rules and their exceptions. As a processual negation of the comfortable boundaries of subjectivity, the emergence of bears becomes *abject* – an enticing yet off-putting alien that negates the wholeness of subjectivity, and via this perpetual negation stands continuously outside both subject and object. The *unacceptable* becomes exceptional because it violently disrupts the habitual limits of the rule and exception that have existed hitherto the said emergence and cracks the fragile borders of autonomous selfhood. The structure also corresponds to responses to the emergence of various phenomena (such as viruses and natural disasters) that both instigate a fear of nature and the desire to overpower it but also force us to question the impenetrability of human selfhood and recognize the presence of death. These are phenomena that represent the more-than-human agency and the *potential* of naturecultures beyond the human, where instead of the phenomenon itself, the exception lies within the impact that the phenomenon has on the existing dialectics of the exception and the rule. While on the experiential level bears might be perceived as the rule *or* the exception interchangeably, depending on whether nature is understood as the rule or as the exception within a given context, due to their incongruity with the *status quo* of the dialectics, bears acquire a meta-level of exceptionality, constituting a disruption of the dialectics of the rule and exception. Thus, the exception and the rule (or the norm) are demonstrated here in three different senses. First, naturality can be presented as the rule in a bioconservative context, and the exception here would be anything invented by humankind and thus “unnatural.” This understanding of the nature/culture divide adheres to what Deleuze terms as *passive nihilism* – the experienced guilt and climate grief that drives humans toward self-annihilation. This view is also connected to the pastoral image of sublime naturality and today it can also be termed via *toxic discourse*,⁵² wherein all that is *touched* by humanity somehow turns *unnatural* and is *spoiled*. Often also in the environmental context, the negative framing of human–environment relations goes so far as to adhere to this interpretation of nature as something free of the shameful sin of becoming human. In this sense, civilization is the exception, while the wilderness itself adheres to the rule, where bears are the unforgiving Other.⁵³ Secondly, the exception is what is alien and mysterious, including – the wilderness, when nature is cast as chaotic (or mechanical, disinterested, deterministic, and distanced). In this sense, bear-trampled bee apiaries are exceptional, while the rule is the urban and civilized environment that suppresses biodiversity and the more-than-human agency.

Both levels reveal the third meta-level, where the meta-rule (the ontological *status quo*) is the simultaneous coexistence of both perceptions and their dialectic that produces a noncontradictory worldview on an experiential level. In the morning, I see a butterfly – how lovely and natural it is! In the evening, I spot a

⁵¹ Nature, in the broader sense, is also often subjected to the role of abject for the human observer. Abjection is, however, never a universal, unavoidable part of human self-constitution or ontology, but rather a transformative part of the ontogenealogical processes. This is evidenced also by the variability of the understandings of nature that also take part in the constitution of lived materialities.

⁵² Buell, *Toxic Discourse*.

⁵³ See, for example, Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, for a consideration of the Other as a non-decipherable “lawgiver” that is to be regarded as primary to the intentional subject.

mole in my garden and hurry to find the right poison. While one stays within the discussion, whether nature is the rule, culture the exception, or culture the rule and nature the exception, one stays with the predisposition of a dialectics that institutes both perceptions as congruent and coexistent. Namely, it does not matter whether I would think that nature is the “rule” and culture the “exception,” or that culture is the “rule” and nature/wilderness “the exception” – since these contradictions themselves are at the heart of the dialectical substance-ontological worldview of the Global North and thus this seemingly contradictory dialectics constitute a meta-rule. More-than-human agency, however, disrupts this dialectic distinction of nature/culture and acquires a meta-level in the sense that it makes us question the distinction of nature/culture itself and their dialectic perceptions. The disruption of this *status quo* ontological understanding via a more-than-human agency is therefore a level of meta-exclusion that goes beyond the habitual dialectics of either/or naturality and civilization, questioning the dialectic itself.

This seemingly contradictory double perception can be considered as primordially “normal” since it is the habitual ontological presupposition that, in the last instance, refers back to a variation of subject-oriented substance ontology. Substance ontologies regard *thingness* as primary to processes.⁵⁴ In substance ontology, the underlying *thingness* translates into an underlying consciousness in the mind–body scheme, and thus allows substance ontology to prepare the ground for theorizing human exceptionalism. Namely, although practically the theorization of *things before processes* follows preexisting human exceptionalism, it circles back as a way of its justification and a platform for reestablishing the same framework.⁵⁵ The prioritization of consciousness also necessitates the constitution of conscious beings as primarily intentional and results in the ontology of a self-controlled, largely intentional human being. Thus, humanity becomes the benchmark of the dialectics of the rule and exception in any situation that is regarded as *exceptional*. Either as the reestablishers, maintainers, or inventors of “the rule” or the disrupters of a “normal state,” humans can be deemed as inherently angelic or toxic, but are nevertheless always at the center stage and thus responsible for everything around them (either to enhance the “natural state” or to reestablish it). Via substance ontology, it is problematic to integrate change or codependency as important parts of identity⁵⁶ and, thus, a clear spatial distinction between autonomous selfhoods in humans and nonhuman life is established. Within this space, the relations between both groups are already primordially (yet historically contingently) defined by the unease of the affect of abject⁵⁷ that often develops in open hatefulness or an obsessed enticement.

Dialectics anticipate the distinction of the self and other, between pleasant and unpleasant, including allowing the rule and exception to change places and meanings, yet not blurring the boundaries between one and the other.

It is no coincidence that the meta-level of exclusion is experienced as abject, often instigated by powers that overwhelm the human being to some extent. Either it is a bear’s lethal attack on colts or bees or the fatal power of an invisible virus. The emergency danger reflects both the human inner fear of the processual self and the overpowering body’s enmeshment in the world that disrupts the perceived autonomy and the preconscious knowledge of the fictive status of this autonomy, namely, the fact that selfhood is always already fragile. This is not a universalizable scheme, yet since autonomy is crucial for substance ontology-based selfhood to be defined, the threat is quite significant. Hence, on a subconscious level, it might be a fear that without this control the “I” will lose its ground and cease existing. This imaginary can be translated to the imaginaries of wildlife, from bears to mosquitoes, and their real or imagined lethal capacities. (Among others, the abject is not only unpleasant, as the experience of abjection can also be enticing.)

⁵⁴ Nicholson and Dupré, *Everything Flows*, 1–45.

⁵⁵ This might not be the case for Object-Oriented Ontologies that I omit from the discussion for the sake of space in this article, and which would necessitate a further discussion of process vs object-oriented approaches that, in my opinion, are to some extent compatible, in as far as subjectivity is the consequence of processes and object relations.

⁵⁶ Meincke, “Persons as Biological Processes.”

⁵⁷ Purvis, “Confronting the Power of Abjection.”

Meta-exclusion of phenomena that upset the dominating dialectics can be expressed also through the notion of time that defines the existing structure of human vs nonhuman spaces. Granjou and Salazar write:

The future has long been viewed in terms of modernity's human-centered categories of innovation, emancipation, progress, and civilization (which have historically been predominantly coded as white and male), while nature has been shoved to the realm of the ahistorical, understood as a fixed background for the development of society. These categories entail the subterfuge that the future is always "ours" to shape and build.⁵⁸

Here, the alienation of nature is reflected via the temporal dimension, demonstrating how linear ontogenealogies of time shape the understanding of space as ultimately divided between temporal human worlds and ahistorical nonhuman worlds, which the agency of more-than-human actors upsets. The modern categories of innovation and progress express the paradigm of reactive nihilism that sets the ideal of arranging the world according to the dream of eternal progression that nurtures human exceptionalism.

Bears here *bear* the ontogenealogical burden of many wildlife phenomena that adhere to the meta-level of exclusion by demonstrating the fragility of the self, the symbolic order of which is dependent on human exceptionalism and bodily *thingness* and autonomy. This order is, however, today criticized in many scientific contexts, through repositioning the body within a process model⁵⁹ that accepts transcorporeality⁶⁰ and porousness of the body and tries to reimagine the body–environment tie based on a processual ontology⁶¹ that would also facilitate thinking *with* the environment and would alleviate the intangibility of environmental problems.⁶²

Many different phenomena can function as vehicles for meta-exclusion: from bears and mosquitos to artificial intelligence and "microchips" that supposedly rid one of free will. In the context of a processual entanglement in the world, it might be necessary to recognize that invasiveness, which has often been employed in scientific discourses as a criterion for the critique of separate species or technologies,⁶³ is not a sufficiently significant characteristic of endeavoring a critique, since something is defined as "invasive" only in the context of respect for autonomy and an individual self that is based upon a variation of a substance ontology. If life is regarded as a fundamentally symbiotic and processual phenomenon, the invasion of something preexisting and a prothesis or enhancement of something cannot be regarded as inherently negative or positive. Moreover, even the prolongation of life cannot be automatically justified.

4 Nonhuman spaces, human affairs

To briefly summarize Section 3, one could say that "[t]hough the public space is almost devoid of bears, they continue to populate our personal and collective dreams."⁶⁴

In this quote, Brunner concisely describes the discrepancy between factual bears and their encounters and the experiential realities that were discussed in Section 3. Due to the alienation of environmental phenomena, there is an almost opposite correlation between how much space is allotted to bears in our minds and the space they are allowed in their natural habitats. The dimension of the spatiality of this human/nonhuman relationship, thus, ties together the themes explored before. Alienation – Abjection – Rarity and

⁵⁸ Granjou and Salazar, "Future," 240.

⁵⁹ Gendlin, *A Process Model*; and Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*.

⁶⁰ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*; and Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

⁶¹ It is important to note that privileging process ontology would not obliterate selfhood, since the self is only enabled by the processes of life. The perceived fragility of the self and the related boundaries of the self/other that often create abjection of the environment are, thus, not prerequisites for the conceptualization of selfhood but rather ontogenealogical markers of specific conditions we live in. I have dealt with this problem elsewhere, Sauka, "Life in Process;" and Sauka, "Becoming Self."

⁶² Neimanis et al., "Four Problems."

⁶³ Böhme, *Invasive Technisierung*.

⁶⁴ Brunner, *Bears*, 7.

the concept of the exception all tie together in a network of interwoven ontogenealogies that are constituted via the mythologies and ontologies (and the resulting praxes, attitudes, and knowledge) about bears and (in a broader sense) our concepts of body, nature, and the environment.

One of the aspects that demonstrate the materialization of ontologies is spatiality. While the alienated lifeworlds create and maintain ontologies of alienation, the opposite is also true and the ontologies we live by do not only adhere to the ethical sphere but also coproduced lived experiences.⁶⁵ For example, the dichotomy of vast wilderness areas and urban spaces has taken part in the constitution of American environmentalism,⁶⁶ while the genealogies pertaining to the understanding of nature co-constitute this materialization of the dichotomy of wilderness and civilization. Thus, in the case of bears, abject as the signifier denoting the fragility of the self and the adherent symbolic order falls into the understanding of the environment as essentially alienated from humankind and urges a discussion of the role of “space” and “place” in human–bear relationships.⁶⁷

The main fear beyond the encounters between bears and other nonhuman beings in public spaces seems to be either that:

- 1) the property of someone has been damaged, and they need compensation or that
- 2) the borders of something or someone are crossed, or
- 3) *next time* it could be a human being, arguing that bears do not have enough food in the woods and are thus unwelcome here (avoiding clear opposition to facilitating biodiversity).

The idea of property damage interestingly depicts the entanglement of nonhuman spaces and political spaces and affairs. The very fact that compensation is one of the main criteria for evaluating the status of large predatory animal management⁶⁸ already shows that deep-seated human exceptionalism reigns over the relations between humans and their environments. Moreover, it reveals *naturalization* (inclusion in the symbolic order) of *civilized, political spaces* that should be the governors of a chaotic or mechanistic nonhuman resource-space and are in some sense primary to the nonhuman “wilderness.” The relation of bears to bees is therefore reduced to numbers that *make sense* only within this symbolic order that upholds a political or judicial relation as more honorable and stable than a natural one. Moreover, the idea of property damage as a significant factor in nonhuman/human relations is also connected to the *naturalization* of capitalism (the materialization of which is poignantly demonstrated by the energy consumption problems of cryptocurrency). Following Kantorowicz’s logic of “the king is dead, long live the king,”⁶⁹ one could say that the bears and the bees today also have two bodies – a political body of capital value and a fleshly one that can be freely substituted. The capitalist sacralization of property value⁷⁰ in Latvia couples with the pastoralist and nationalist discourse of agrarian nationalism⁷¹ that sees nature as both a resource and a pastoral landscape – a fragile garden for tending. The bear destroys a nature groomed by another, in most cases – the bee apiaries.

⁶⁵ One could argue that alienation is only possible after the civilizing processes have taken shape, yet, following a Foucauldian and Deleuzian line of argumentation, the experienced materialities are demonstrated as co-dependent with the social constructions and coproduced by these social constructs. Moreover, if a Foucauldian genealogy (Sarasin, *Darwin und Foucault*; Sauka, “The Nature of Our Becoming”) is embedded in materiality itself, following a feminist posthumanist tradition of deconstructing the lines between nature and culture, social constructs and materialities are not only codependent but entangled, enmeshed, and at the same time non-essentialist, transformative, and processual in form.

⁶⁶ Guha and Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism*.

⁶⁷ In a further installment of this project, I hope to discuss the relations of “space” (alienation and intangibility of the environment) and “place” (situated knowledge) further, but for now, I will discuss spatiality and alienation.

⁶⁸ Ozoliņš J. *Ursus actus sugas aizsardzības plāns. Silava*, 2018.

⁶⁹ Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*.

⁷⁰ Agamben, “Capitalism as Religion;” and Sauka, “A Lack of Meaning?” for discussion of sacral secularity. See also Williams, “Ideas of Nature,” on the relations between metaphors and meanings that adhere to “nature” about capitalist production, and how the ideas of nature also insinuate into the *naturalities* of human bodies via capitalism.

⁷¹ Schwartz, “Nature, Development and National Identity;” Schwartz, “Wild Horses in a “European Wilderness;” Schwartz, “Masters in Our Native Place;” and Schwartz, “The Occupation of Beauty.”

The second aspect of the fear of bears is connected to what Bernd Brunner terms “bearanoia.”⁷² Citing Knight’s research on the attitudes toward bears in Japan⁷³ and the exploration of an example of a politicized bear encounter in Germany,⁷⁴ Brunner outlines the exaggerated fear of bears that is sometimes noticeable. The example from Germany follows the story of a two-year-old bear “Bruno” that had wandered into Germany from Italy and was considered a potential danger to German society. This example is also relevant in the understanding of places and spaces in political vs nonhuman terms since wildlife tends to ignore borders. Moreover, political borders are another aspect of human lifeworlds that fall into the framework of the *naturalization* of politics. As such, they demonstrate the experienced abjection in the context of crossing borders of the symbolic order, instigating a possible further discussion of the coproduction of the factual borders and bordering via the ontogenealogies of inhabited spaces.⁷⁵ On the backdrop of political borders, experienced as a fundamental “rule” for the division of space, wandering wildlife constitutes a peculiar case of trespassing – not subject enough to force adhering to rules, yet not object enough to not cause an alert. The fragility of the borders is, thus, experienced as an abject. Moreover, the question of borders is also connected to the not in my backyard (NIMBY) phenomenon. While rewilding processes happen in neighboring Estonia, they are welcome, however, when a bear appears in one’s backyard, someone has done something wrong.⁷⁶

Brunner’s example of the trespassing bear also demonstrates the third aspect of space relations in bear encounters. In this regard, the most interesting example of a bear encounter in Latvia is described in a LA.lv article “In Madona Region, a Bear Tears a Colt in Pieces: Unfortunately, the Heart of the Owner Fails.”⁷⁷ Both Brunner’s example of Bruno and the example of the colt seem to deliver the message that “next time it could be a human being.” Interestingly, in the case of Bruno, as in the case of bear encounters in Latvia, no strong affinity to object to the return of bears was noticeable. Rather the wish to get rid of bears was expressed either after the fact⁷⁸ or as part of the argument that bears will lack foodstuffs and will thus become a threat to human beings. Although anecdotal, this line of argumentation demonstrates a broader avoidance to be outspoken against bear “infestation.” A similar conundrum is presented in the second part of this article, where I delineated the positive reception of the return of wildlife⁷⁹ as well as the seemingly contrasting media coverage of bear encounters. By simultaneously accounting for any possible bear encounter in the media and upholding the view that a human victim might prove “too much” for the civilized society (via relentless education on how to avoid bears and a lack of media coverage of the necessity of the return of wildlife), the representation of bears mirrors the form of abjection that either

72 Brunner, *Bears*, 22–231.

73 Knight, “Culling Demons.”

74 Brunner, *Bears*, 227–8.

75 See Heise, *Sense of Place*, on the discussion of the meaning of globalization in the context of environmental humanities.

76 Further discussion of borders and bordering in bear encounters also would lead to ask – does the conservation of bears in some corners of Europe run parallel to the experiential “being in exile” of the local communities? Namely, in the case of Latvia, it might be argued that the society will experience the return of bears as if “Wildes Baltikum” was the territory of “exile” that is thus appropriate for the cultivation of biodiversity. Are some communities thus too much in exile to accept other exiled beings? And is Eastern Europe the “designated wilderness” to be “left to the bears”? The movie cycle “Wildes Baltikum” seems to deliver a pastoralist image of the naturalness of the “Baltic States,” including a romanticized image of the population of Latvia prancing in their flower crowns on the beach at Jāņu diena (Midsummer’s celebration on June 24), see Wildes, *Die Küste/Wälder und Moore*. See also Guha and Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism*, for discussion and critique of American conservationist environmentalism that divides spaces strictly in wild/civilized areas.

77 Skaties.lv. “Madonas Pusē Lācis Saplosa Kumeļu. Diemžēl Saimnieka Sirds Pārdzīvojumu Neizturēja.” Before discussing this example, it is important to note that the discussion can only relate to the flashy title, rather than the quite personal event itself because the article does not situate a factual relationship between the heart failure and the attack on the colt – two occurrences, the relation of which is invented with the said title. This title, however, invites various responses to the return of bears to their old habitat.

78 Brunner, *Bears*, 128.

79 Andersone and Ozoliņš, “Public Perception of Large Carnivores in Latvia,” Andersone and Ozoliņš “Sabiedrības viedoklis par trīs lielo plēsēju sugām.”

excludes or “domesticates”⁸⁰ the meta-exclusive phenomena. Thus, bears become either heart-stopping and monstrous or sweet, endearing, and funny.

Curiously, the mainly humanist ontologies we live by⁸¹ see human life as a value that overpowers many other possible values, yet only while the perceived danger is outside the symbolic order within the sphere of *nature* or *the body* and thus in a sense – abject. The dialectics of the exception and the rule,⁸² again, importantly play into the understanding of bears as dangerous. Namely, the normalization and inclusion in the symbolic order of a present danger can allow it to escape abjection connected to the loss of selfhood via death.⁸³

The abject refers to the confusion felt when faced with a more-than-human agency that does not fall neatly in the boxes of subjectivity vs objectivity and facilitates the feeling of danger as not only a literal threat to life but also a threat to the selfhood itself. Dying in a bear attack is thus felt as considerably more horrendous than dying in “normal” processes that fall into the symbolic order of nature vs culture, subject vs object, such as a car crash.

A BBC article about bear attacks in Romania is incidentally the first to find on the internet when seeking statistics of lethal cases of large predatory animal attacks in Europe. Statistics might not uncover the truth – there could certainly be reasons for considering bear hunting in situated contexts – yet the glaring difference in reporting car accidents vs animal damage that also refers to the rarity of the latter, demonstrates clearly that technology, in this case, is more integrated into selfhood than *nature*.

All three aspects are entangled and refer back to the abjection and the ontogenealogies of naturecultures. The entanglement can be conceptualized with the notions of space, symbolic order, and alienation that trace the coproduction of materialities via ontologies we live by. A crossing of borders is recognizable in the discussion of all three aspects, and the alienation of the environment from the human body is also consistently present.

5 Conclusion: More-than-human ontogenealogies

A recent Latvian example is very compelling in the context of anthropomorphizing and border-crossing of both human/nonhuman spaces and human/nonhuman affairs. In September 2021, two bears were frequently seen wandering near human dwellings. It was stipulated that their “unusual” behavior might be human-induced and that they might have been raised by a human. They were consequently caught and divided, and one of them was deemed to be the “rabble-rouser,” i.e., “*kūditājs*” in Latvian.⁸⁴ On October 25, a news story was released “comforting” the public that the most active bear who continues to approach human spaces might have to be eliminated. First, it is fascinating how the language is used in this example. Since bear-hunting is prohibited, this bear is not even going to be “hunted,” but rather – eliminated, and the Latvian word “*likvidēt*” that is used here connotes both the elimination of pests as well as the liquidation of a company. Thus, the use of language here refers to the bear being “canceled” from the spatial playing board, as it is seen as too civilized to keep dwelling in nature and too natural to be accepted

⁸⁰ Here, the association of bears with danger refers back to the understanding of *nature* and femininity as coupled factors in creating as well as extinguishing life. Due to the lasting Global Northern genealogy of bears as *wild equals* of humans in nature (Brunner, *Bears*, 20) bears also represent a subjectivity *unleashed*, almost as an Id without the maintenance of the Superego.

⁸¹ Humanist understanding of life as defined by death, which can ultimately be referred back to a substance ontology (see Braidotti, *The Posthuman*; Sauka, “Life in Process”), constricts life within measurable stretches of individual organisms (Dupré, *Processes of Life*), and facilitates an understanding of life as a property and the body as its vehicle – a machine to maintain (Sarasin, *Reizbare Maschinen*; Sauka, “A Lack of Meaning?”).

⁸² This example of abject, experienced as a fear of lethal danger, also closely resembles the antibiotic discourse today and human attempts to rid oneself of the danger and filth inflicted upon the human body by nature.

⁸³ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.

⁸⁴ La.lv, *Vidzemē pa viensētām klaiņojošais lācis iespējams tiks likvidēts*.

in civilization. The main reason cited is, of course, the invasion of human spaces yet, what is most interesting, the Nature Protection Department's regional administration leader Rolands Auziņš also states that "the bear ... who has been transported two times, will not get a third chance. If the bear does not change its behavior, he will be liquidated."⁸⁵ I refrain here from judgment regarding bear management in the country though, emphasizing the underlying thought patterns that accept a *natural* division of human/nonhuman spaces and yet also *civilize* bears to some extent, stating that it is the bear's choice to act "unruly." In this case, the bear is both anthropomorphized and assigned duties "to stay in the forest" (and the second bear is said to have "been taught a lesson"⁸⁶), while also objectified. Moreover, the objectification comes as a punishment for its un-bear-like behavior, and thus the public is "comforted" that this bear is sadly not "where it belongs," it is a monstrous, unnatural bear even. And what makes it monstrous is the fact that it is probably human-raised, which makes for an ironical circle of nature dialectics.

The exaggeration of danger and the simultaneous avoidance to *touch* nature in fear of toxifying it further repeat the unease with one's bodily processes – sacral and animalistic at the same time. As the unease around the bear reappearance shows, the NIMBY phenomenon also reveals a more *personal* and *affective*⁸⁷ side of relations with beings that show strength and resilience in nonhuman/human encounters in human-inhabited spaces and is associated also with the alienation of environments qua bodies. These relations are characterized by the contrasting human feelings of alienation *vis-à-vis* their environments today and a false sense of security coupled with its dialectical *other* of threat and danger within the darkness of *nature*. The dialectic of *civilized security* and the *threat of nature* maintains the symbolic order and instigates disbelief to encounter beings capable of challenging human exceptionalism while also blowing their danger out of proportion in "bearanoia." Incidentally, also within environmentalism, the reflection of humans as toxic to the environment, in the context of deep ecology,⁸⁸ particularly in the form of American conservationist attitudes, further maintains the existing dialectic that divides human and non-human spaces and stifles a restructuring of infrastructures to the realities of multispecies encounters, rigidly assigning each species to their ontogenealogical predestinations within allotted grounds.⁸⁹

This perspective is not only ontologically problematic but also ignores the complexity of multispecies relationships in various societies, thus, at times threatening to force not only wildlife but also humans from their living habitats. The existing dialectic, thus, maintains the contrast between bioconservative and anthropocentric views and national and transnational approaches⁹⁰ and is upset by the dangerousness of animals such as the bear, which demand a different conceptualization of human/nonhuman cohabitation due to their perceivable agency.

An ontogenealogical exploration, thus, demonstrates bears as an example of a potential *object* to the human subjectivity, threatening not only their livelihoods or health but also the subjectivity itself. It is, however, a negotiable notion, as the enfolded and material experiences of alienation and denial via fear and human exceptionalism are coproduced by the existing presuppositions and ontological models that transform and change, as demonstrated by diverse mythological and ontological discourse layers that constitute different relations within ecosystems. The predominant discourse pattern that holds up the framework that enables the alienated relation of humans and nonhuman life-forms is based on a substance

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ "Rezultāti līdzšinējiem mēģinājumiem atturēt lāčus no tuvošanās cilvēku mājām liek domāt, ka viens ir guvis mācību, taču otrs turpina ierasto uzvedību." (*The results of the tries so far to prevent the bears from coming near human dwellings leads to thinking that one has learned his lesson, while the other continues his usual behavior.*) La.lv. *Vidzemē pa viensētām klaiņojošais lācis iespējams tiks likvidēts.*

⁸⁷ Bladow and Ladino, *Affective Ecocriticism*.

⁸⁸ Naess, "The Shadow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement;" Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*; and Naess, *Identification as a Source of Deep Ecological Attitudes*.

⁸⁹ For an elaborate critique of American environmentalism, wilderness preservation, and its roots within "deep ecology," see Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism," 71–83; and Guha and Aliier, *Varieties of Environmentalism*.

⁹⁰ The theorization on transnational and national dialectics also translates to the dichotomy of deterritorialization and reterritorialization; see Heise, *Sense of Place*, 51, 214. See also Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 145–6; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 167–92.

ontology.⁹¹ While substance ontology resists the notion of change as an integral part of identity,⁹² it also creates particular spatial relations between humans as discernible individuals and the nonhuman life, a space inhabited by discrete entities whose relations are characterized by those of abject-related unease, often resulting in open hostility.

The threat of staying within the *status quo* dialectics does not, of course, end with the conceptual difficulties that such an ontological stance causes, but goes much deeper when considering that the ideas of nature–human dialectic both (a) adhere to structural inequalities between societies and (b) also demand the application of the same dialectics to the human bodies, thus, also designating the *naturality* of humans to the fate of the rest of their more-than-human counterparts.⁹³ Moreover, these underlying thought patterns hinder the conceptualization of new ways of living with the wild animals, which are steadily coming back to their territories.

Taking into account the parallel between bodies and environments in conceptual as well as material contexts, the conception and experience of the self play an important role in the materialities we live by. Thus, the example of bears and their very real presence in our living spaces allows realizing the necessity to rethink the ontologies we live by for the facilitation of environmental awareness and future transformation of the environments we live by.

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⁹¹ Nicholson and Dupré, *Everything Flows*, 1–45.

⁹² Meincke, “Persons as Biological Processes.”

⁹³ Additional research could investigate further the particular ways in which capitalism’s attitudes toward human bodies as productivity resources reflect the ideas of nature. See Williams, “Ideas of Nature,” 84: “Capitalism, of course, has relied on the terms of domination and exploitation; imperialism, in conquest, has similarly seen both men and physical products as raw material.”

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