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## Provocation from the Field: A Multispecies Doula Approach to Death and Dying

Kathryn Gillespie  
*University of Kentucky*

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### Abstract

Death doulas can help to make meaning in the dying process, to be present for what arises at the end of life, and to move alongside those who are dying and their loved ones. At the end of life, doulas can offer help reflecting on what this life has meant, planning for the coming death, holding space during the active dying process, and grieving the loss of the one who has died. This paper extends a doula approach – typically work done with humans – to death and dying in multispecies contexts. Many other species are routinely rendered killable, disposable, and ungrievable by human structures of violence and exploitation. The intention, meaning, and presence inherent to a doula approach can work to subvert these logics and transform how death and dying are conceptualized and practiced. This paper centers two stories of individuals – a dog called Maizy, and a hen known as Emily – to illustrate what a doula approach might do at the end of life, and to explore difficult and at times unanswerable questions in multispecies entanglements of living and dying. In its rejection of governing logics of killability, disposability, and ungrievability, a multispecies doula approach to death and dying enacts a radical politics of care and presence.



## A Multispecies Doula Approach to Death and Dying

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**Kathryn Gillespie**

**University of Kentucky**

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**Keywords:** dying, end of life, multispecies, doula, care, death

How can the process of death and dying be made more meaningful for those nearing the end of life? How can aging and end-of-life care be approached more care-fully, more gently, and more intentionally in how we move toward our own deaths and the deaths of others? How does greater care and attention at the end of life change the experience of grief and mourning? A doula approach to death and dying asks these questions, and then works carefully to answer them in context-specific practices of loving care at the end of life. *Doula* is a term derived from the Greek *doûle*, meaning *woman slave* or *servant* or *woman who serves* ('Doula'). Today, *doula* refers to those of all genders who offer themselves in service at various critical junctures in life – at birth, in the postpartum period, and at death – by providing non-medicalized support and care, frequently coordinating with medical and social service providers.<sup>1</sup> Doulas typically serve *humans* at these stages of life, but I suggest here that applying a doula approach to death and dying in multispecies contexts can be a way to intentionally reject the logics that make animals' lives more killable and their deaths less grievable.<sup>2</sup> I suggest that it is a way to create deeper meaning and care in interspecies relationships. What, then, can the role of the doula offer in these contexts? What are the challenges of centering and enacting care at the end of life for other species? How can this perspective subvert violent and oppressive logics, and in turn, enact a more radical politics of care and responsibility (Lawson)?

### **Subverting Logics of Killability and Ungrievability**

The lives of other animals are routinely rendered killable and ungrievable in varying degrees based on species membership, geographic context, and their usefulness to humans. Animals' oppression and exploitation are anchored by the abject status of the *animal* – a category of life viewed as profoundly *other* to the *human* (Deckha; Kim; Ko). Economic logics govern many animals' lives and deaths, enacting violence for the extraction, production, and circulation of commodities, and deepening their killability under capitalism (Collard and Dempsey; Colombino and Giaccaria; Gillespie; Shukin). Indeed, these logics are so ubiquitous that 'animal death becomes the background noise of everyday life: routinised, normalised, mechanised, and sped up' (Probyn-Rapsey and Johnston xvi). In the case of those animals brought into being to

be killed, and those animals who may come into the world and be treated with varying levels of violence, grievability of their deaths is at once an impossibility and a profound necessity. Many nonhuman animals, whose very *animal* status makes them subjects of violence are, indeed, *made killable* (Haraway 80) before they are even born; it is within the category of *non-* or *sub-human* that this killability resides. Making other species killable not only causes violent bodily harm to the one being killed, but also fractures and devastates whole relational networks of care and love. Melissa Boydé writes, ‘From the debris of the catastrophic effects of the slaughter factory emerge barely a trace of other cows’ loved ones – each body is damaged and unrecognizable’ (147). These intimate relationships are dismissed, dismantled, and obscured within the logics of killability.

Animals’ killability is obvious in the case of farmed animals, but these are also logics that underwrite human relationships with many other species, even with animals we keep as ‘pets’ – in the best cases, they exist in a context of loving control (being leashed, having medical decisions made for them, being confined to a house or yard, being infantilized as ‘fur babies,’ etc.); in the worst cases, they experience severe abuse, neglect, abandonment, and killing (Pierce, *Run, Spot, Run*; Tuan). How do animals, then, come to occupy a radically different state, where their precarity (‘the politically induced condition in which certain populations ... become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death’) is answered with an obligation to care and to work to undo this precarity (Butler, *Frames of War* 25)?

How to dismantle this fundamental orientation is a challenge that the work of *making grievable* can address. ‘Precisely because a living being may die, it is necessary to care for that being so that it may live. Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters’ (Butler, *Frames of War* 14). How does this loss come to matter? *Making grievable* in a multispecies context is a political project of centering how animals’ lives matter to themselves and to others, and how their deaths are ones to be mourned and acknowledged as significant losses (Stanescu; Taylor). Animals grieve for each other and for humans, and in turn, ‘their lives are grievable both by other animals and by humans’ (Taylor 62). Rejecting the killability of animals in human society, and grieving animals’ deaths, continue to be powerful ways of disrupting dominant norms of

violence against animals. But I would suggest here that questioning and rejecting animals' killability, and working to render animals grievable by humans, could be extended into thinking about animals' experiences at the end of life as a way to radically reorient human entanglements with other animals' lives and deaths.

This article begins that process, through placing a doula approach in stark contrast to the logics of killability and ungrievability that pervade animals' orientation within human structures of exploitation, control, and use. Attention to death and dying through a doula approach has the potential to transform our relationships to other animals, deepen our connections, and fundamentally reconceptualize how we think about animals' lives and deaths, death and dying as processes of meaning-making, and the power of care and kinship. This can begin with the animals with whom we live closely, as I explore in this paper, but this form of care at their end of life can, I hope, model a radical shift in how it is possible to think about the lives and deaths of other animals beyond those closest to us.

I draw here on my own experience undergoing training as a death doula, and as a volunteer in human hospice, but I don't pretend to have definitive answers or conclusions as to how this approach might be applied in multispecies contexts. Instead, this paper is a speculative inquiry – a provocation – that resonates with a series of principles that comprise a philosophy of what it means to be a companion to the dying and the grieving: it involves 'learning from others; it is not about teaching them'; it is 'about curiosity; it is not about expertise' (Wolfelt). This may be an unusual aim for a paper published in an academic journal, where *expertise* is a core feature of norms in academic publishing: academics are often expected to deliver knowledge, tidily packaged up in an article or book. And yet, being part of this thing called the academy is, in my mind, about a lifetime of inquiry – mulling over ideas, learning from others, not having clean or clear conclusions, and most importantly, sharing and exploring new ways of knowing together in a spirit of genuine curiosity and care for how these modes of inquiry might transform the multispecies world around us. The question of how a doula approach might be taken up in our inter- and intra-species relationships of care around death and dying is a difficult one, in part because it 'dances on the edge of what is knowable, what it is possible to speculate on, what is available to our immediate grasp' (Tompkins). Thinking through how to be present in

meaningful ways with other animals as they transition into death, and how to hold space for those left behind, is a project that teeters at this edge.

What is knowable, reflected on, and practiced in end-of-life care and experiences with other species is variable and dependent on the time and attention spent to develop this knowledge, which has largely been dictated by the persistent categorizations imposed by humans onto other species ('pets,' 'farm animals,' 'lab animals,' 'pests'). How to offer meaningful end-of-life care for species typically kept as 'pets' has been much more widely considered and addressed than for farmed animal species.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I center two stories of individuals with whom I've lived closely: a dog known as Maizy, and a chicken called Emily. In the supporting resources for how to care for these different species at the end of life, there is a real unevenness: an extraordinary proliferation of work on canine care, on the one side, and the relative absence of a comprehensive literature on chicken care, on the other. These two examples offer a way to rethink the kinds of relationships fostered with different species: with Emily, intentional and meaningful care at the end of life subverts notions of chickens as fundamentally killable and disposable (a species routinely sequestered outside of the realm of legal protections and grievability).<sup>4</sup> With Maizy, her care at the end of life may be more legible because of the frequent positioning of canines as family members and as grievable lives, but even for dogs, logics of killability and disposability operate (Wadiwel), making this an approach relevant for rethinking canine and avian life and death, not to mention its possibilities for extension to species beyond these.

## **A Doula's Work**

As it is conceived of and practiced in human contexts of death and dying, the role of the death doula is to support both the one who is dying and those around them who will be left behind. Doula work can begin long before death occurs, continue through the dying process, and extend past the point of death with those who are working through experiences of grief and loss. There can be significant overlap and synergies between doula work and hospice. Hospice and a doula approach are rooted in the same fundamental objective: as Jessica Pierce explains in her

description of animal hospice, ‘The focus of attention shifts from cure to care, and death is openly accepted as the inevitable outcome’ (*The Last Walk* 131). In human contexts, there is typically a diverse care team involved in providing hospice: a doctor, nurse, nurse’s aide, social worker, chaplain, grief counselor, hospice volunteer, and sometimes others; Pierce points out that in hospice for animals, there is usually just the veterinarian and veterinary technician as professional or outside care providers. Hospice for animals generally involves, according to Pierce, ‘relieving pain and discomfort (which can involve administration of drugs, massage, physical therapy) and maximizing pleasure for the animal (for example, through social interaction, companionship, mental stimulation, play, walks, human touch, delicious foods)’ (*The Last Walk* 132). A doula’s work, often offered alongside hospice, involves building a relationship with the one who is dying and their loved ones; whereas in hospice, there is often a revolving door of providers, a doula can be a constant, more intimate connection. A doula approach is distinct in its capacity to supplement what is offered by hospice, filling in the gaps caused by structural and bureaucratic limitations of hospice programs to provide holistic emotional, spiritual, and physical support to the one dying and to their loved ones (Fersko-Weiss). Approaching death with focused attention on these various facets of care and dying is ‘deep, powerful, and important work that awakens us to life, builds communities, connects families, and guides us on the path of grieving. After all, at the core of a community are the ways we care for each other’ (Be xv).

At the heart of this kind of work is the recognition that death and loss occur *relationally*. These moments at the end of life and after reverberate through multispecies families, communities, and collectives, changing the dynamics and lives of those they touch. Judith Butler theorizes how loss helps to illuminate the power of our connections to one another, that profound loss unsettles all that comes after it and, in fact, disrupts who we think we are or know ourselves to be. Although she is writing from a persistently humanist perspective (see Taylor), Butler’s words help to explain the nature of grief and loss, when she writes:

It is not as if an ‘I’ exists independently over here and then simply loses a ‘you’ over there, especially if the attachment to ‘you’ is part of what composes who ‘I’ am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to



myself. Who ‘am’ I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost ‘you’ only to discover that ‘I’ have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost ‘in’ you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related. (Butler, *Precarious Life* 22)

A doula approach acknowledges this relationality, and indeed, centers it in the work that must be done. To face death in this way, then, is to identify, honor, and deepen the connections we have made, recognizing what they have meant to us, and moving through a journey of transformation, often characterized by loss. That death and dying are a relational process is at once an obvious and underacknowledged insight. For people who work with the dying, it’s common to hear that one who is dying retreats into themselves as they prepare to transition into death (and this occurs with many other animals, too, who may withdraw to a safe, isolated spot when they are dying – a kind of spatial ‘turning inward,’ in addition to a retreat into themselves). Among other reasons such as perhaps protecting others, this retreat inward could be read as confirming to a certain extent the notion that *we all die alone* – that there is an “*I*” *over here* and a “*you*” *over there*. And yet, just like living, dying itself occurs in relation, in the meaning made collectively with and around someone who is dying, in the lives someone’s life and death touches, in the preparation for that death, and in the grief that comes in waves during and afterward. ‘*We live on* after the deaths of others. And so we live with the dying of others. As long as we live we are surrounded by death, and until it is time for our own death, we are the ones who call out to the dying, who stay with the dying, but who do not accompany them into death. We go on living even as they are dying, and we go on living after they are gone’ (Rose 4). Being present for this continuum of life and living, death and dying, grief and grieving is the work of the death doula.

Henry Fersko-Weiss, founder of the International End-of-Life Doula Association, identifies three primary phases to death work: 1) reflecting on life, and planning and preparing for death; 2) holding space for the one who is dying and for their loved ones during the active dying process; and 3) after death, helping the family to reprocess the death and experience their

grief. What role the doula takes on also depends on the conditions under which someone dies. If there is a terminal diagnosis, with some time leading up to their death, all three of these phases of doula work can be moved through. If someone is already actively dying, then a doula might be able to engage in the latter two stages of this work. And if someone dies suddenly, or a doula enters the picture after someone has already died, then the work of the doula is to help the loved ones process their grief. What is involved in these stages, and how might they apply in multispecies contexts?

### *Reflection and Planning*

For humans who are dying, the time leading up to death, if there *is* time, can be spent reflecting on what life has meant to the person who is dying and to those in their circle of connection. At the same time, thinking forward to death can involve making a plan for how, ideally, that death will unfold. Of course, there can be much that is unexpected in the process of dying that cannot be fully anticipated, but having what is often called a *vigil plan* (similar to a birth plan) can help to foster intention and meaning in the path leading to death (Fersko-Weiss). In the main, these two forms of intention – a reflection on one’s life, and a planning for one’s death – may not happen at all when a person or collective of people are caught up in denial about the reality of what is occurring: when talking about death is taboo; when medical providers have not been direct or honest about the fact that death is near; or when death is seen as a failure (Cochran; Fersko-Weiss; Gawande). The doula, then, may also help the dying and their family come to terms with the fact of death, and find a language for how to communicate around it, so that this reflection and planning can begin.

As the death of an animal nears, those of us humans who are involved can engage in a reflection on that animal’s life and on our relationships. We can reflect on what this time shared together, and the love and care it manifested, has meant to us. And we can try to communicate that to our animal kin through the loving care and attention that we offer at the end of life. The impending death can be overwhelming – and our minds and hearts can become clouded by worries about what is coming, whether we will do right by the one who is dying, and what we

will do, how we will go on living, and who we will be when they are gone (*'Who am I without you?'*). These are important concerns, but this anxiety and fear of the future steals time when we could be present – when we *need to be present*. It skips ahead to the point of death and beyond, without being grounded in reflection on this *life* that has been lived or without thinking carefully about how this coming death could occur with meaning and intention. A doula can help us work through these worries and regain a grounded center in these moments, so that we can take the time to reflect, and so that we can plan for the time we have left with a clear head and a careful attention to what we know about the one who is dying.

It is difficult to know in highly specific detail what a member of another species might want for themselves and for their own death. Where would they want to die? How would they be most comfortable? Who would they want around them? What forms of care would they choose, and what forms of care might feel like an invasion of what time they have left? Would they choose euthanasia for themselves and, if so, when? Or would they prefer to let death come in its own time, as it does without human intervention? Many nonhuman species have the capacity to anticipate and plan for the future – including dogs and chickens – and they have lasting memories of what has happened to themselves and to those around them (Bekoff; Marino and Colvin, *'Thinking Chickens'*). Indeed, '[m]any detailed studies show that mental "time travel" – imagining the past and looking ahead to the future – is not uniquely human' (Bekoff 118). Whether and how other species plan for their deaths and the deaths of their kin are difficult questions to answer. For animals in our care, we routinely make decisions for them, and these 'cross-species proxy judgments involve substantial uncertainty' (Pierce, *The Last Walk* 143). It may be difficult to know what other animals would truly want in their own dying process, and so we often make these plans for them. We guess, using the information we have available to us. In the best cases, we try not to make assumptions or project onto other animals what we would want for ourselves (Gruen). And we do this by 'taking them seriously as subjects with their own perspectives on life, and paying attention to their experience of the situation' (Meijer 214). A doula can help here, too, by providing a distanced or neutral perspective – to gently ask questions to draw out what a loved one knows about the one who is dying, to interpret this knowledge, and offer ideas in developing a plan.

### *Holding Space*

The active dying process is a time when those questions that have been asked, explored, and hopefully (at least partially) answered in the work of reflection and planning can manifest in an intentional form of creating and holding space for the one who is dying and for those around them. The active dying phase may last days or only hours – this is the stage when the body’s systems are shutting down, when there is nothing to be done but wait, be present, and let death gradually take over the body. Much more often than in human contexts of dying, euthanasia is the means by which companion animals’ deaths often occur, a practice ending or preempting the unaided active dying process.<sup>5</sup> In either context – euthanasia or unassisted death – *holding space* brings meaning, comfort, and intention to the dying process. Holding space for someone who is dying involves centering as much as possible that other’s own desires for how their death unfolds. ‘The act of holding space creates a circle of care around an individual that says, I see you and I bear witness to your journey. I am here with you’ (Glenn 82). Holding space is an act of being ‘present for what is’ (Glenn 53). It’s a kind of presence without judgement. A heart-centeredness and a clear mind. A deep active listening to what is being communicated, however subtly. A calm and powerful openness to what is expressed and needed. Holding space, then, is an emotional and spiritual practice of *presence*.

But holding space is also more literal, physical – what kind of space will be held for death? The space where death occurs, and in what atmosphere, matters (Fersko-Weiss; Maddrell and Sidaway). The work of a death doula can involve helping to identify where someone feels most comfortable dying: home or hospital or veterinary clinic, indoors or outdoors, on a bed or a couch or the floor, and so on.<sup>6</sup> There is also the atmosphere to consider: what they might want that space to look like, smell like, sound like, and feel like (Fersko-Weiss). For dogs, for instance, living in human worlds can already be highly stressful, given the limitations imposed on their lives and their inability to release stress in ways that they might need (Bekoff; Kuzniar; Pierce, *Run, Spot, Run*). Scent, of course, is central to a dog’s experience of the world (Horowitz; Rosell), so taking care to not have strong chemical, perfume, or soap

odors could make the space more comfortable and less overwhelming. Eliminating, or minimizing as much as possible, sounds that are known stressors to the one who is dying can help ease their experience (these might include, depending on the individual, loud noises, discordant music, arguing, crying, etc.), as can allowing for sounds that may be a comfort (for example, the clucking of the rest of the flock, the purring of a companion cat, human speech in a soothing and familiar voice, silence). Considering the role of touch is important: is this someone who likes to be touched, and if so, how, where, and by whom? Are they comforted or bothered by others touching them? This is something to constantly reevaluate because even if someone has enjoyed touch in certain ways in the past, it doesn't necessarily mean this contact is going to be comfortable or comforting as they are dying.

A great sensitivity is needed, then, to observe how other animals respond to smell, sound, and touch, and whether these stimuli seem to be helping or hurting. Who is present for the death is something to consider: are there those humans or other animals who are beloved to the one dying, who would be a comfort? And are there those who are known to cause stress, heighten anxiety, or trigger avoidance? Honoring these preferences might mean, for instance, inviting people into the space who might not already be there, or asking others (even close family members) to keep some distance. A doula can help to draw and maintain these boundaries. Doula work, then, in the active dying phase, involves being attentive to how someone might be expressing subtly or overtly what they need in the moment (such as asking to be lifted onto a bed, needing to be touched or not, refusing to eat). It also might involve another animal companion being present in that moment for the one who is dying, communicating in their own way what kind of intra- or inter-species support they need – communication that, in fact, might be lost on humans involved in this care work.

It is likely that this level of attentiveness on the part of the doula would require species-specific knowledge acquired by learning about and specializing in the care and needs of certain species. Human caregivers know particularities about the personalities, desires, and preferences of their individual nonhuman kin, and this is invaluable knowledge during the time leading up to and through the dying process. However, a doula with specialized knowledge in dog behavior, care, and communication, or chicken behavior, care, and communication could offer an

additional layer of alertness and care-fullness at the end of life. Doulas in human contexts, for instance, are trained to understand the physical phases of dying in humans and in the later stages of active dying especially – a purpling of the toes and sometimes fingers, and a low, rattling breath. These are important things to know as a doula in order to best support the person who is dying, to let the family know that death is near, and to understand what is a normal part of the dying process and what might be signaling that the person is in pain and needs some kind of relief. Knowledge, then, about particular species and their dying processes, learned through more formalized forms of training or through lived experiences and knowledge-building, can offer a layer of support and responsiveness to an animal's dying process that might otherwise be missing from human caregiving. And yet, there is also the question of introducing human strangers into the dying process, a presence that may be stressful for an animal who is dying. There is, then, an opportunity to carefully consider whether the doula themselves should be present with the animal leading up to and during the dying process, or whether they might be of better service by offering support to the human caregiver from a distance.

Holding space is necessary also just after the point of death. What will happen to the body? In mainstream Western cultures, it is often common to remove the body from the space of death quickly after death. But a doula approach encourages meaning-making around the body that might bring in established rituals originating in someone's faith or cultural traditions, or it might involve loved ones creating their own unique rituals (and this can be part of the planning phase before death, as well). Will the loved ones spend time with the body after the death? Will they wash the body of their kin? What will be done with their remains? These are important questions to consider before and after death and, as much as is possible, in collaboration with any nonhuman kin who may be present for or affected by this death. Holding space in this context involves helping to implement any plans that were made for immediately after death, and being present for what other actions might be meaningful or needed in the moment.

Thus, holding space can (must?) be a multispecies endeavor – not merely in the entanglements among humans and other animals, but also in terms of a web of species relationships that may or may not involve the human at all stages. As humans, allowing for this

possibility – decentering ourselves, our experiences, and our assumptions about what a good death looks like – can be a powerful embodiment of interspecies solidarity and love.

### *Facing Grief*

As earth-beings, we grieve over the loss of others, as well as for ourselves. That grief occurs at all is evidence of the love we felt for the one we've lost. It's common to talk about grief as if it is something that has a beginning and an end: something that is precipitated by an event of loss, and culminates when the stages of grief have been completed. But grief may never go away. It becomes a part of us. It changes us. And the deeper the connection, the more it has the potential to change us. 'Our very bones and sinews are transformed. We are irrevocably changed after the passing of those we love. How could we not be?' (Glenn 23-24).

Grief comes in waves, and often begins long before a death occurs. Facing one's own approaching death or the death of someone we love involves a kind of *anticipatory* grieving – an anticipation of the pain an impending loss might cause (Pierce, *The Last Walk*). Grief occurs in real-time, too, as the death unfolds – as we watch the ones we love slip away, their lights going out, their breath ceasing. And grief continues, well past the point of death. The doula's role can involve helping those left behind process their grief and, as an important part of this, *reprocess* the death. Reprocessing can be crucial to understanding the death and recalling a more robust accounting of what has happened (Fersko-Weiss). Sometimes when we watch someone we love die, we fixate afterward on one aspect of the dying process – such as something we said or left unsaid or a particularly unpleasant smell that persisted in the last hours of death (Fersko-Weiss 213). Reprocessing the death, especially with the community of those who were present for the process of dying, is an opportunity to share stories, insights, and experiences of the dying process – to weave a fuller and truer narrative, a shared story of living, dying, loving, and loss. My own imagination is, at this moment, limited to envisioning how this occurs in the human realm of shared storytelling, but how might we think about a multispecies experience of *reprocessing*? Perhaps it might involve an inter-species coming together in silence, or in a chorus of squawks, bellows, growls, whines, squeaks, whistles, chirps, barks, purrs, and howls.

Being a doula for someone who has lost a nonhuman loved one involves entering into this relationship of care with a deep awareness of the importance of acknowledging and internalizing that this loss (regardless of species) is profound and world-shattering. Grieving other animals and taking seriously the grief of other animals is still widely rendered ‘socially unintelligible,’ and responses to grief in these contexts can unintentionally reinforce this ‘social unintelligibility’ (Stanescu 3; Brooks Pribac, ‘Animal Grief’). The impact of losing canine and feline family members is now more widely recognized as significant – as a legitimate loss (Kuzniar; Redmalm; Pierce, *The Last Walk*). However, in the context of farmed animal species, grieving over the death of a chicken, pig, cow, duck, or turkey still remains largely outside the scope of social recognition and care (Brooks Pribac, ‘Someone Not Something’; Taylor). Grieving their loss, then – making grievable and being present to grief – is one way of rejecting governing logics of killability and disposability.

Holding space for this grief, helping to process it through storytelling, and remaining consistent in this support, are powerful forms of solidarity. The days and weeks immediately following a death are not always the most difficult. We might still be in shock from the loss, and we have distractions that might involve practical details to consider (what to do with the body, who to tell about the death, how to mourn and memorialize), and we may be surrounded by people coming to support us and participate in mourning. It’s often not until weeks later that the full weight of loss hits us – when those around us have moved on with their lives, returned to their routines, stopped providing the daily support of being present for our grief. This is the time when, in contexts of human death, a doula typically returns. They help to address the loneliness and emptiness that may have settled in, they remind the one grieving that they are there for them, that they are not alone, and that they can continue to grieve, talk about the one they lost, and feel whatever emotions they might be feeling. A doula helps with this, but doulas typically draw boundaries around their time, and often perform a ritual to close out the work they’re doing. Thus, with or without a doula involved in the dying process, it is vital that when we know that someone has gone through a loss of a nonhuman loved one, we remain present for their grief as long as they need it, checking in over weeks, months, and even years – reminding that person that they are not alone in their grief, and that they have someone with whom they



can share, and who recognizes, acknowledges, and moves alongside them on their journey of profound loss.

The grief experienced by nonhuman animals, too, must of course be recognized, honored, and supported. These forms of grief have been routinely and persistently denied, particularly so in the case of farmed animal species (Brooks Pribac, ‘Animal Grief’, ‘Someone Not Something’). Even Barbara King’s excellent text *How Animals Grieve*, one of the few book-length works that explicitly focuses on animal grief, is surprisingly silent on the grief of farmed animal species; the chapter on farmed animals centers on horses and a goat, with only a couple of pages on the grief of chickens, cows, pigs, ducks, turkeys, and other commonly farmed species. From an anthropocentric perspective, there are good reasons for humans to overlook or deny farmed animal grief, since humans are overwhelmingly responsible for the conditions that produce that grief through the violence that our species delivers on farmed animals.<sup>7</sup> But farmed animal species grieve profoundly for those they’ve lost; they may wail and moan, search again and again for their loved one, hold silent vigil over a grave, gather with others to mourn (Hatkoff; Jones and Gruen; Masson). They may be permanently changed, or they may appear to not have noticed at all (Jones and Gruen point out that grief in other species – just as it does in humans – takes many visible and less visible forms). And so, for all animals, but perhaps especially for farmed animal species whose grief has for so long been denied, erased, or forgotten by humans, being present for this grief and supporting another animal in grieving in the ways they need is central for meaningful death work with other species. It is also a practice that subverts the norms and logics that deny and ignore the reverberating impacts that death and loss have on nonhuman kin.

Being present to grief – both to our own, and to the grief of other animals, involves a practice of *companioning*. Adam D. Wolfelt, founder of the Center for Loss in Fort Collins, Colorado, USA, describes his theory of companioning:

Companioning the bereaved is not about assessing, analyzing, fixing or resolving another’s grief. Instead, it is about being totally present to the mourner [...] The companioning model is anchored in the ‘teach me’ perspective. It is about learning and

observing. If your desire is to support a fellow human [or other animal] in grief, you must create a ‘safe place’ for [those who are grieving] to embrace their feelings of profound loss. This safe place is a cleaned-out, compassionate heart. It is the open heart that allows you to be truly present to [. . .] the intimate pain of others. [. . .] It is a sharing in a deep and profound way.

Companioning is about moving alongside someone in their journey into and through grief. ‘Companioning is about being present to another person’s pain; it is not about taking away that pain’ (Wolfelt). Most people are not adept at being present to grief in a practice of companionship: we may avoid the person completely because we have no idea what to do with their grief; we may try to take the pain away by offering solutions; we may inadvertently minimize by ‘looking on the bright side’ or expressing in some way that it’s ‘not that bad’; and we might re-center ourselves when we compare our own stories of loss and thus take away from the real, true, and singular experience of the one grieving. What questions can we ask about grief as it relates to the loss of other species and loss experienced by other species? Perhaps they might include: how can I avoid minimizing this other animal’s grief so that I don’t engage in a disavowal of their experience and, importantly, so that I don’t reinforce normative assumptions that either animals do not grieve or that their grief is inconsequential? How can I validate and be present for listening deeply about the experience of the one who has lost someone they loved intensely? What can I do that will be helpful to the one who is grieving that they might not have the mental clarity, or self-awareness, to request for themselves?

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These stages of doula work around death – reflection and planning, holding space, and facing grief – provide a framework for thinking about how we might do death and dying differently with other species. To speculate about how these might manifest in human-animal relationships of end-of-life care, I share two stories of individuals whose lives and deaths were closely intertwined with my own life.

## Maizy

Just before I started graduate school, my partner and I adopted a five-year-old yellow Labrador retriever named Maizy. She had lived for five years with a family who kept her tethered on a cement patio behind their house, with a small metal shed for shelter. Her story was one of neglect, both emotional and physical, that culminated in abandonment when the family she lived with moved and decided not to take her with them. Her treatment for those five years was oriented around her disposability, resulting in a lack of adequate care. Our next-door neighbor offered to care for Maizy until she could find her a new home. I remember the first time I saw her, over the fence, she wagged her tail emphatically and flashed me a big canine grin. She was the first dog I'd shared a home with, and the years that we spent collectively making our lives together were transformative for us as humans, and I think, for her, too.

There's a way that living closely with other animals can heighten your attentiveness to your impacts on those around you. One of the first things I recognized in this new shared life together was Maizy's sensitivity to my moods and to every interaction I had with her – if I was stressed out, she got stressed out; if I was impatient with her, she immediately responded dejectedly (this is a documented phenomenon in dogs and the humans with whom they are in close relations; see Bekoff 148-149). Maizy's responses called on me to practice greater care. I remember many times working at my computer and Maizy would come up – bored and wanting to play, and I would often put her off, saying aloud, 'Just five more minutes and then we'll go out and play!' At some point, it registered that this was a form of dismissiveness that would make her feel ignored, and how hurtful (even momentarily) it can be to be ignored or dismissed. There are all kinds of ways we thinkingly and unthinkingly restrict the movements, desires, and lives of those nonhuman animals with whom we share our lives and love (Kuzniar; Pierce, *Run, Spot, Run*; Tuan). So, a practice of caring for and with other animals in our lives, and in their deaths, must take into account how we might ameliorate the effects of this power differential. I tried harder in our relationship to respond, to be present, to think about how my five minutes more on the computer would feel to her, to worry over how much of her life was taken up by

*five minute mores* of waiting, to fundamentally acknowledge her need for care and her willingness to give it.

At the end of Maizy's life, I was confronted again with how to best care for and with my friend. What would be most important to her in what time she had left? How could we go out of our way to make her life more livable, as she had made ours? How could we help to make every moment that remained meaningful in ways that mattered to *her*? How could we ensure she felt loved and cared for, and let her know through our care for her, how much her care had meant to us – how much she had taught us about love, presence, and heart-centered connection. In effect, what my partner and I were searching for, or trying to engender, a decade before I knew what to call it, was a doula approach to Maizy's death – a making-meaning in the dying process, an attentiveness to her embodied and emotional state, and a being-present for what was going on for her in the moment so that we could respond with care and acknowledgement.

When we got the terminal diagnosis for Maizy (she had an inoperable tumor tangled around her heart), in shock and grief, my partner and I imagined grand plans for how we could spend Maizy's last months (or *weeks*, as it turned out). Immediately, our conversations went to people who, after learning that they are imminently dying, go off on a trip to complete their bucket list. We wondered what Maizy's bucket list might be. We weren't sure if there were things she had never done that she would want to do. But we did know, from our years together, what she loved doing. She loved swimming at the park, taking long walks through the neighborhood, visiting with her closest canine friend, Mally, and rolling in the grass. We knew all kinds of little details about what delighted her, and we wanted her to enjoy as many of these things as possible in what time she had left. We wanted her to have as many good days as possible. And so, while she was still well enough to do so, we took her swimming at the park and on walks around the neighborhood, we arranged time for her to visit and play with Mally, and we waited patiently while she rolled in the grass to her heart's content. We sat and stuffed the filling back in her stuffed hedgehog toy over and over so she could experience the joy of pulling it out again and again. We scratched her ears as long as it took for her to feel satisfied. We lifted her gently onto our bed when she became too frail to jump up herself. We tried to manage what emotions we had that might be upsetting to her, trying to keep a calmer presence

when we were together. And we turned toward her every time she asked for attention, setting aside our own priorities to get work done, and recognizing that these moments were fleeting, and that, to all of us, they were everything.

In many ways, I think we helped Maizy have meaningful and love-filled time at the end of her life. Our close attentiveness to her meant that, to a large extent, I think we were able to center *her* and *her experience* at the end of life. She spent time with her favorite people and her closest canine kin. We provided her comfort in the form of pain management and an array of new orthopedic dog beds when her own beds seemed to be increasingly uncomfortable for her. We tried to anticipate what she wanted or what might make her more comfortable in the moment. And we made the decision to euthanize her when she wasn't having any more good days. And yet, there were things we could have done better around her death. Although making the decision to euthanize is always fraught, I think we did the best we could in that decision-making. However, *where* Maizy died, and how we supported her two canine companions at home after, cause me to pause, and have worried me consistently in the years since she died. Maizy was euthanized at a veterinary clinic, and we sat around her, petting her and talking soothingly to her as she died. The staff at the clinic were kind and gentle with her. In retrospect, though, Maizy was stressed by going to the vet throughout her life with us, and she would have likely been more comfortable being euthanized at home.

Saoirse and Lucy, her beagle kin at home, clearly knew that she was sick – in the days leading up to her death, they were careful and gentle with her, they gave her space, and they were themselves more subdued in their interactions with each other and with us. We were, all of us, holding vigil for Maizy. They saw us leave the house with her in the car and return without her. They did not get to see her die. They did not get to spend time with her body. I don't know if these are things that would have helped them mourn. When Mally came over for visits afterward, he looked through the house for his dear friend, never finding her. What more would they have needed that we didn't know or think to give them in the time leading up to, during, and after Maizy's death? How could we have supported them better? Would a doula –

someone external to our intimate web of relations – have been able to help us do this differently, more thoughtfully? How to resolve these questions is difficult, but they are questions that must be asked.

## Emily

Before we chose to become vegan, my partner and I purchased chicks from a country feed store and raised them in our home until they were old enough to move out to a coop in our backyard. From the moment they arrived in our lives, we loved them, doted on them, and named them, enthusiastically, after some of our favorite nineteenth-century novelists: Emily and Charlotte (Brontë), Jane (Austen), and George (Elliot). The Brontë sisters were closely bonded: they rarely let each other out of their sight, they slept side by side in the coop, they took dirt baths next to each other in the same dusty little trench, and they clucked and cooed at each other while they preened and ruffled their feathers. Each member of the flock had a dramatically unique personality and varying levels of interest and comfort interacting intimately with us. Emily and Jane were both affectionate with us and sought out our attention, Charlotte and George preferred the company of their chicken kin.

The four lived together in the backyard for five years, and then Emily got sick. There's a distinct look to a sick chicken – a kind of droopiness to their whole body. We took her to the vet and learned that she had ovarian cancer (common in chickens bred for egg laying). She also had an infection and fluid build-up in her abdomen, presumably both stemming from the cancer's effects on the body. The vet, who was well-versed in chicken care, informed us that there was little she could do for Emily beyond palliative care. And so, before sending us home with antibiotics and pain medication that we subsequently injected into her chest daily, she drained the fluid out of Emily's abdominal cavity. The effects of this removal of fluid were immediately noticeable; Emily perked up, and once she was back in her home with the other hens, she had some good time left, pecking around the yard and fluffing and preening with

Charlotte. We had the fluid drained twice more before the vet said it was not going to make a difference beyond that. So we brought her home once again and tried to manage her pain as she declined.

When she was unable to walk around the yard anymore, we brought her inside and I held her on my lap while I worked. I stroked her silky golden feathers, spoke softly to her, and offered her all of the best chicken treats. She would coo ever so faintly, her shockingly light body resting against mine. We took her outside several times to visit with the other chickens, and we brought Charlotte into the house for visits with Emily. I alternated between holding her on my lap and letting her rest in a bed of soft linens. We worked hard to offer her comfort care, to hold vigil for her, and to attend to her needs in the moment.

These kinds of interactions themselves subvert the dominant logics that would make Emily killable and disposable. Holding her and tending to her carefully in her final days, taking her to the vet repeatedly for medical care, and bringing her into the house (a kind of space typically reserved for humans, dogs, cats, and other ‘pets’) – these were unusual things and were, in fact, met with disdain and confusion from people around us. One person asked us, in disbelief, why we would ‘waste money’ on veterinary care for a chicken when we could ‘just buy another chick for \$1.75 at the feed store’. Another was disgusted that we would bring a chicken – ‘a filthy bird who probably carries disease’ – into the house. Chickens, perhaps above most other farmed animal species, attract a special kind of disdain and apathy – in the United States, for instance, chickens are not offered even the most lax animal welfare protections; chickens’ emotional and cognitive experiences are routinely denied and mocked; and chickens are, curiously, even sometimes referred to as a ‘vegetable’ (a sentiment I’ve heard lately with increasing frequency from unapologetic animal-eaters). Chickens – both those raised for their eggs and their flesh – are subjected to extreme forms of confinement and the highly industrialized machinery designed to swiftly and unceremoniously steal their lives and their selves from them (Wadiwel). Chickens are, then, as are other farmed animals, or perhaps even more so, positioned as imminently killable and disposable – as not worthy of even the most basic care and consideration, and certainly not the kind of care called for in a doula approach.

Working against these logics, Emily's end-of-life and dying process offered a radical reconceptualization of her life and the lives of others.

On Emily's final day, she declined quickly. She had plateaued the few days before, but it was clear on this last day that death was near. I called the vet to ask if I could bring her in to be euthanized; they told me I could come immediately. I went to her bed and gently picked her up to place her in a towel-lined box to transport her to the vet. In that moment, she died in my hands. I could feel the last breath go out of her and her body go limp – like a sigh of relief. The tension in her body that I had felt over the last few days was gone and her head rested, eyes closed, on my forearm as I held her, absorbing the reality that she had died.

I took Emily's body outside, and sat with her as Charlotte, Jane, and George came to see her. They pecked gingerly at her body. Waited. Pecked again. Emily didn't wake up. Soon, Jane and George moved away from us, returning to their routine pecking and scratching around the yard. But Charlotte remained. She continued to peck and wait. Peck and wait. And finally, she stopped, and stood still and silent beside Emily's body. After a time, she turned and walked away across the yard, strangely quiet. I took Emily's body back into the house and waited until my partner got home from work so that we could bury her together in the backyard. By the time we buried her, it was after dark, and the other hens had put themselves to bed in the coop. It was raining as we dug the hole, carefully laid Emily's body at the bottom, and covered her gently with the wet earth. We chose a large stone from the garden to mark her grave.

The next day, Charlotte was bereft. Did she know that we had buried Emily in the night, near one of their favorite dustbathing spots? She wandered around the yard, moaning and wailing – a sound we had never heard any of the flock make over years of living closely with them. For many days this lasted – Charlotte searching, moaning, and pacing over every inch of the yard, again and again. Eventually she settled into a new routine with George and Jane, but for the next couple of years, until she herself died, she was cranky and standoffish. She had been profoundly changed by the loss of her companion. patrice jones and Lori Gruen tell a very similar story of a bonded pair of chickens, Violet and Chickweed. After Violet's sudden death, Chickweed was never quite the same: 'Chickweed watched [Violet's] burial, then stood staring



at the spot where she had disappeared into the ground. The next day, and for weeks thereafter, he stormed and stomped, wanting nothing to do with anyone. Over time, he became less angry and more sociable, but he never recovered his sunny personality' (Jones and Gruen 188-189).

For Charlotte and Chickweed, the relationality of death and loss was felt all too keenly. Charlotte's moaning and wailing might have been, in part, a plea to Emily: '*Who am I without you?*'; and Chickweed's storming and stomping might have been a broken-hearted recognition that in Violet's absence, he himself had '*gone missing as well*' (Butler, *Precarious Life* 22). What, then, would it mean to care for Charlotte and Chickweed in these moments where they have lost what they knew to be themselves?

As with Maizy's death, there were things to question and mull over about Emily's end of life – things that we might have done differently, more intentionally, more meaningfully for her, for her avian collective, and for Charlotte in particular. Although we took care in Emily's dying process, in retrospect, a doula approach would have called on us to be more mindful of certain things: the relationship between Charlotte and Emily, for instance, and what that meant for both of them as Emily was dying. It might have meant, for instance, not keeping Emily in the house, away from Charlotte, for so much time in those last days. Maybe Emily would have preferred to die outdoors in the space that felt most like her home? Maybe she would have liked to have Charlotte by her side, and Jane and George nearby? Maybe she would have liked to feel the fresh air and the sun on her feathers and hear the soft clucks and coos of her flock? What else would she have needed to make her death more her own?

And what could we have done to better support and serve Emily's flock, and indeed, each member of her flock specifically? This could have started, but not ended, with making sure that Charlotte, Jane, and George could have been present for Emily's burial, spent some time with her body again at the graveside, and watched as she 'disappeared into the ground'.<sup>8</sup> Were there things we could have done in the months and years following Emily's death to acknowledge and care for Charlotte in her lasting grief?

## Concluding Thoughts

My hope is that introducing a doula's work into multispecies death and dying can reformulate dominant understandings of animal life and death oriented around their precarity, disposability, and killability. This work is, perhaps, more easily legible in relationships of care with canine family members, like Maizy. But it is also possible – and indeed, *necessary* – to conceptualize and practice this work with other individuals from species often characterized as less or un-grievable, like Emily. For both Maizy and Emily (individuals with whom I lived closely and intimately), reflecting on our shared lives, planning for a death that honors as much as possible the one who is dying, holding space during the dying process – emotionally, spiritually, and materially – and facing grief leading up to, during, and after a death: these are core features of a doula approach to death and dying. Each phase of this work can be taken up and practiced in multispecies contexts through focused care, attention, imagination, and openness.

And yet, it's likely that this approach might not be possible to apply in all contexts where other animals die – nor perhaps *should* it. I'm thinking, for instance, of the deaths by slaughter of farmed animal species in spaces of food production where a doula approach could be coopted by the industry as yet another discourse of 'humane slaughter' that could work to assuage people's guilt about eating farmed animals.<sup>9</sup> What a doula approach does offer in relation to animals who are bred, farmed, and slaughtered is a model for how we could think differently about other animals' lives and deaths, their positioning in relation to human structures of violence, and what can be offered in multispecies entanglements of harm and care.<sup>10</sup> Being present for what Emily needed and for supporting Charlotte and the other hens in this dying process offers one such path of possibility.

The uneven power relationships in multispecies relationships – exacerbated by the level of control humans have over so many other animals – call us to be particularly mindful of end-of-life processes for and with other species. Our attentiveness must be heightened as we consider what these others, like Maizy and Emily, might need – what those dying might need, and also what their nonhuman kin might need – from us and from each other. Acknowledging that someone's death is grievable, and grieving this death ourselves, is one important step, but

so is recognizing other animals' grief – the grief of the one who is dying over their own decline, and the grief of those others around them who are feeling this loss keenly.

Seeking support for ourselves and offering support for other humans is important work, but so too is being present to act in service to other animals' journeys of death and dying, grief and loss. Can we, then, act as death doulas for members of other species? In processes of death and dying, like Emily's and Maizy's, where their deaths reverberate through the lives and hearts of their nonhuman kin, we might work to de-center ourselves, and center their needs and wellbeing in these moments. This intentional refocusing can enact a subversive and de-anthropocentric politics of care and relationality, and it can open us up to other questions: how might members of intra- and inter-species circles of kinship serve as doulas for one another? And how can we act in service to helping these caring relations manifest and flourish – even when they may require our absence?

We exist, live, flourish, die, and grieve *in relation*. These webs of relation call on us to more mindfully and intentionally practice deeper forms of care at the end of life. To be present, with an open heart and a clear mind. To move alongside without judgement. To listen deeply to the wails and whispers of kinship lost, and to the spaces of silence in between.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It's no surprise that the term *doula* is gendered – care work has long been a feminized, and thus, devalued form of work (Glenn; Lawson; Milligan). Animal welfare work – of which sanctuaries for formerly farmed animals make up a part – is overwhelmingly performed by women and non-binary folks (Herzog; Neumann).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of killability and grievability, see Butler, *Frames of War*; Haraway; Lopez and Gillespie; Taylor.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, one significant exception to this absence of meaningful geriatric and end-of-life care is the powerful work done in sanctuaries for formerly farmed animals. These are spaces where care and intention can manifest in supporting farmed animal species at the end of life. Also, see Probyn-Rapsey and Johnston for considerations on how various species' deaths unfold and are understood.

<sup>4</sup> See Davis on chicken oppression and liberation; see Potts on the at-times contradictory view of chickens – both as species who have been revered and as species who have been indiscriminately exploited; see Wadiwel on the violence delivered on chickens in industrialized farming settings and the consistent erasure of this violence *as violence*.

<sup>5</sup> While I do not dedicate time in this article to exploring the ethics and practices of euthanasia, there is much that has been written on the subject as it relates to nonhuman animals. See, for example, Meijer; Morris; Pierce, *The Last Walk*.

<sup>6</sup> See Pierce, *The Last Walk* for considerations of *where* euthanasia might occur.

<sup>7</sup> See Meijer for a discussion of anthropocentrism and animal death.

<sup>8</sup> Jones and Gruen 188-189; see also Meijer 220.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Vasile Stănescu's work troubling how notions of *humaneness* are deployed to make the violence of eating animals palatable.

<sup>10</sup> This approach complements other forms of activism and relationality that reject animals' killability and make visible the grievability of their lives and deaths, such as for instance, the

Animal Save movement that Alex Lockwood has written so eloquently about (see Lockwood, *The Pig in Thin Air*; ‘Bodily Encounter’).

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