

*Inevitable
porosity.*

Vishnu Priya Chakravarthi
Critical Strategies: Theory + History
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The American

mink. “Run ... *The mink are coming for you.*” ¹ reads one of many articles from late 2020, reporting dead ‘zombie’ American mink rising from their shallow graves a few months after a mass culling. Under a mandate from the Danish government, close to 17 million mink were preemptively culled - *regardless of if they were infected or healthy* - and buried in make-shift graves due to COVID outbreaks among fur farm populations². Widespread paranoia about mass outbreaks during the pandemic lead to a systematic push to attempt the ban of fur farms. The mink were spat out of the earth with gass emissions from decomposition pushing them out, and it’s in cruel irony that it’s right in time to act as witness to this supposed shift towards freeing the American mink from being farmed. As praise was flung for the notion that the American mink could now finally be free of human contact, a lingering glaze at human-mink entanglement reveals that post contact, untangling relationships are perhaps never that simple.

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¹ Henley, *Culled Mink Rise From the Dead to Denmark’s Horror*, 2020.

² Kessler, *Here’s why Denmark culled 17 million minks and now plans to dig up their buried bodies. The Covid mink crisis, explained*, 2020.

There are only two species of mink that exist on this planet today - The American mink (*Neovison vison*), and the European mink (*Mustela lutreola*)³. Within the context of Europe, the American mink has been classified as an invasive species as of the 1960s, and the European mink has been classified as critically endangered as of 2011 (largely why they are protected from being farmed for fur⁴). Although the term 'invasive species' gives the impression that the American Mink independently crossed boundaries to invade European territories, they were originally transported to Europe in the 1920s by road from North America for fur farming. They have since been largely classified as a resource - *raw material*. From being monitored and captured in the wild, to lab testing, to being among kin in the almost 1,000 active mink farms in the EU (as of today) , examining these instances of contact contextualizes human-American mink entanglement.



Figure.(1) : The American mink

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- 3 Shields, *How Humans Have Made a Mess of Mink*, 2023.
- 4 VIER PFOTEN International - gemeinnützige Privatstiftung, *Animals Used for Fur*, 2020.

More-than-human contact

zones. Mary Louise Pratt used the term contact zones to describe those spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of Power⁵. Although Pratt coined this phrase initially in the context of colonial encounters, Isaacs and Otruba⁶, among others⁷, extend this concept as both theory and method to environmental and ecological research, using the term to demarcate grounds of contact that are inter-species and more-than-human.

“Without encounter there is no contact zone” writes Isaacs and Otruba. This implies that the contact zone is manifested at the point of *an* encounter, but not limited to the point of mutual encounter. It’s not at the same time that all participants realize that they are in fact within a contact zone, but the zone exists as long as encounter exists. The site is moulded by asymmetry, with the dynamics of underlying power structures and varied intentions shaping it’s spatiality. Paired with the larger context of the shift into the Anthropocene, some of these contact zones often become the *only* grounds of inter-species and more-than-human contact.

Pratt’s original context of colonial encounter brings some clarity to what the human-mink contact zone looks like. Considering that the contact zone is formed when an encounter occurs and is fueled by intention, the contact zone is not

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⁵ Ferguson and Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 1993.

⁶ Isaacs and Otruba, *Guest Introduction: More-than-Human Contact Zones*, 2019.

⁷ Wilson, *Contact Zones: Multispecies Scholarship through Imperial Eyes*, 2019 & Grant, Canniford, and Shankar, *Becoming Nature: Classifying Encounters in Interspecies Contact Zones*, 2024.

limited to being a physical site around the mink, but can rather be envisioned as a metaphysical site that engulfs the mink the moment the human encounters it.



Figure.(2)

The possibility of Human-American mink contact in the wild is credited to poor storage facilities at fur farms and a few deliberate releases from activists helping a small number of mink escape, and over time establish themselves in the wild. On account of its predation and the threat it poses to native species, it is given the prefix of feral, and is either captured for monitoring population numbers, culled, or sent to fur farms. The contact zone engulfs the unwitting mink as the human sets up Box traps in the wild for its capture. The mink barely recognizes that it has stepped into a contact zone, with its boundary metaphysical as spatiality is now only defined by the human encountering the mink. As the American mink encounters the human for the very first time via the Box trap, the material physicality of the contract zone now presents itself as rigid and unwavering. Metaphysical now very much physical, the mink is met with capture.



Figure.(3) : Box trap

Typically made of plywood, the Box trap is loaded with different mechanisms based on the



purpose of encounter (A simple trap for capture, or a conibear trap⁸ for culling). The boundary encloses the mink in a grand total of 4.3sqft, and is designed using the mink's natural inquisitiveness and love for dark spaces. They're deemed incredibly effective because mink love to squirm in and out of small areas as they search for food, as they typically check out every hole or tunnel they come across⁹. If the box is designed to cull, the mink faces its demise at first contact with the human.

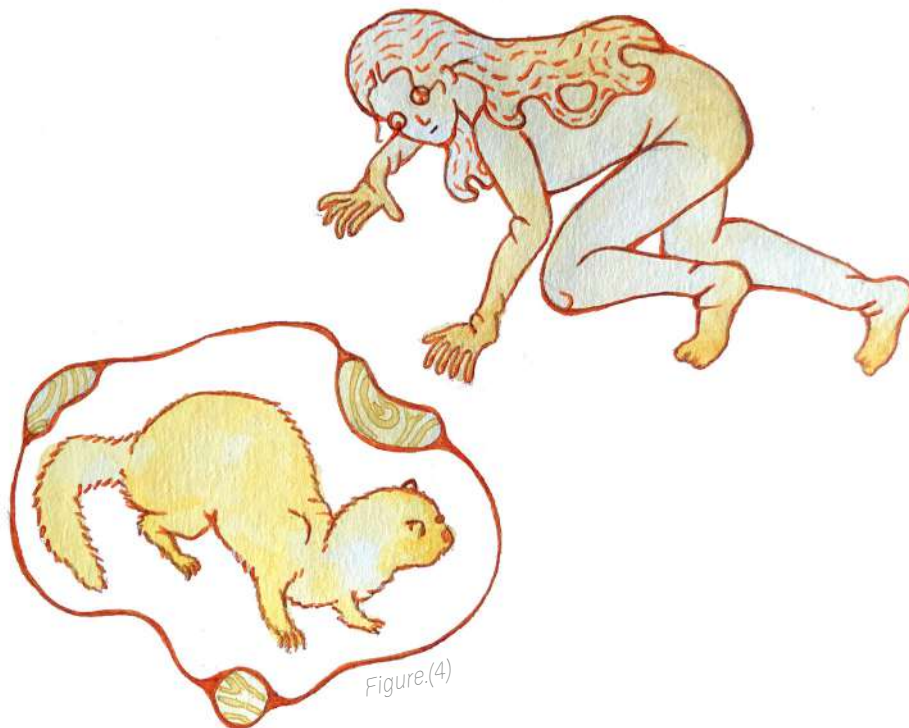


Figure.(4)

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8 A conibear trap has two jaws that close like a scissor, designed to close around the animals neck or body with enough force to quickly kill the animal "reducing the chances of it suffering."

9 Trap-anything.com, *Mink Box Plans - How to Build Conibear Box*, 2018.

The mink that are to be transported to fur farms are transferred to metal crates. Crate sizes have been standardized since the early 1900s - 70-90cm long (depending on the number of mink per crate), 30cm wide, and 30-45cm in height. 4.3sqft in total - when the fur farming industry took roots within Europe, as evidenced by the book *Mink Farming: How to Start, Buildings, Care and Feed, and Its Possibilities*, originally published in 1913¹⁰.

To the mink in the crates, post encountering the human, the boundary of the contact zone shifts

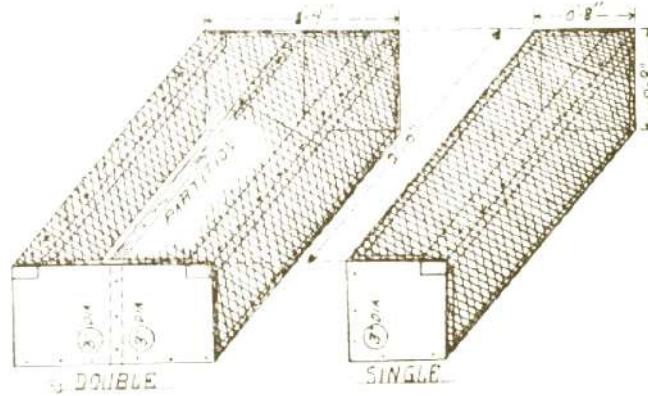


Figure.(5) : Transportation

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 10 White, *Mink Farming: How to Start, Buildings, Care and Feed, and Its Possibilities*, 1913.

Figure.(6) : Transition



slightly in materiality, but is nonetheless constricting. Spatiality and boundary react to human agency. Although the mink remains within 4.3sqft, as a gloved hand reaches into the box trap, grips the mink by the back of its neck and places it in a crate, the material nature of the contact zone's boundary transitions from the plywood of the box trap, to the leather of the gloved hand, to the metal of the crate. For generations now when the mink unwittingly enter the contact zone, post encounter with the human, they're rarely able to leave.



Figure.(7)

Once at the fur farm, the mink are 'housed' in metal crates similar to the ones used for transport. They are able to make a total of two strides in each direction before being met with the end of the crate, and are served with a paste of fish and meat right on top of the cage. The only provisions made for the mink are for food and for limited pacing. They only leave the crate in planned cycles for inspections of growth, fur health and for breeding.

The process of these inspections reveals the underlying truth of our conditions of dipping into the contact zone. The mink are held down with metal clamps so that the fur farmer can inspect its body. The mink farmer knows the mink's health from a single caress down its body, knows how soft or rough its fur should feel for breeding¹¹, and knows when the mink is ready for culling. Familiarity and intimacy with the mink are given room when the mink is clamped down. This is perhaps due to intimacy being the prerequisite to extraction, in specific to the fur farm. It's the only instance of the human *entering* the contact zone using their bare hands, yet the metal of the clamp remains. The gloves come off only as the physical boundary of the contact zone completely immobilizes the mink.

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¹¹ SWI swissinfo.ch, *Skin Trade: How Minks Live on Danish Fur Farms*, 2015.

Figure.(8) : Inspection



In addition to the mink that unwittingly step into encounter, some American mink are born into the contact zone, born into Nest boxes on fur farms. Nest boxes are typically constructed of one-inch boards, 90x30x30cm in size, and divided internally into three components¹². This provides a dark home resembling a tunnel to house the parent mink and its offspring. The spatiality of both the mink's lifespan and parenthood is once again limited to 4.3 sqft. Nest boxes are under no circumstances opened, and the offspring aren't handled by the fur farmer until they crawl out on their own - typically at the four-week age - or else the parent will kill their offspring. The parent mink steps out occasionally to fetch food for the offspring, and in circumstance that the nest box smells foul, a fresh nest box is placed in proximity and the parent mink can move into it if they see fit. Change cannot be forced on them though, and the move should come from their own agency, guide books claim. Straw and wood shavings are shaped like a bowl within the Nest box, to keep the offspring warm and to give the parent mink room for nursing¹³.

First impressions might give the illusion of the boundary of the contact zone perhaps shifting to nurture and care, shifting to encourage the agency of the newborn mink to step into independence. But as soon as the young ones crawl out and are able to eat on their own, a gloved hand reaches in to rip them away from their parent mink to place them in segregated metal crates. One female sometimes left in the pen with the parent to take care of whatever milk the parent has left, to prevent them from becoming restless. The material boundary of plywood (Nest box, Box trap) helps spatiality feign nurture, and the shift in materiality to that of the leather from the gloved hand and the metal

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12 White, *Mink Farming: How to Start, Buildings, Care and Feed, and Its Possibilities*, 1913.

13 Herscovici, *A Year on a Mink Farm. Part 2: Whelping and Weaning*, 2021.

of the crate rips in as a reminder of intent. To recenter initial illusions of care, intention here stands firm - the offspring need to survive for the fur farm to survive. They need to be nurtured until they can leave the nest box, so that they can grow into becoming raw material.

“They will make an awful fuss but go right ahead with your work.”¹³

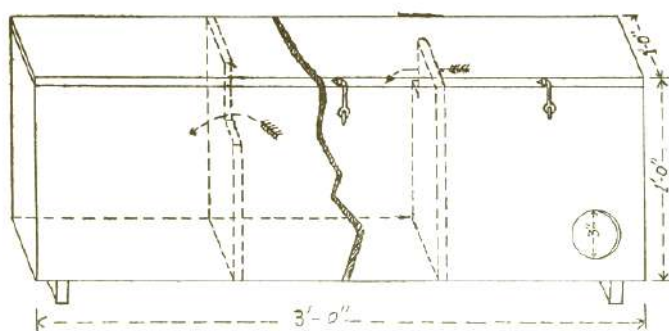


Figure.(9) : Nest box

Metal and leather seem to spatialize violence even in the American mink's final moments. It's the same leather gloves that grab the mink to force it into a closed metal box, a gas chamber, for culling. In an Open cages Investigation video¹⁵ on a mink farm, one mink can be heard breathing even after three minutes of its lungs being flooded with carbon dioxide. Most die soon after, and the ones that survive are yet again met with leather gloves that club them to death seconds after.

From the moment of American mink's capture, and until its demise, the human only encounters the mink with the boundary of the contact zone mediating, which is in turn materialised by

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14 White, *Mink Farming: How to Start, Buildings, Care and Feed, and Its Possibilities*, 1913.

15 Open Cages, *Inside a Mink Gas Chamber | Open Cages Investigation*, 2021.

extraction. Extraction of the American mink from its habitat (both natural and imposed), extraction of its hide for the garment industry, extraction of the oil produced during the skinning process for conditioning leather, and extraction of fats in the carcass for feed or fertilizer. The mink is reduced to raw material the second it makes contact with the human. The mink encounters the human solely through extraction, becoming physically trapped within the contact zone, experiencing violence as the boundary of the contact zone bends and makes room only for human agency.

On extraction.

The contact zone is thus bounded by the materials that mediate encounter, materials that define it. The human seems to stand outside the contact zone, separated by its material boundary, and is dependent on its malleability for encounter. As the physicality of its boundary sways between wood, metal, and leather, what's becoming increasingly clear is that while the boundary is designed for extraction, it is *based* on the mink's behavior and character. The mink's natural inquisitiveness for tunnel-like spaces, its love for dark spaces, the bodily measurements of the mink, its natural aquatic diet, the use of leather gloves to protect against the mink's natural instinct to bite down and grip when at threat, a dark and warm space for the parent mink to encourage its offspring's weaning, and knowing to feel its fur thickness to check for the health of the mink. A by-product of physical extraction creeps up to the surface : *The extraction of knowledge*. Isaacs and Otruba write that within the contact zone, although asymmetrical, there is production and extraction of knowledge¹⁶. A testament to this is the feedback loop between changing fur farm conditions and behavioral studies done via lab testing.

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16 Isaacs and Otruba, *Guest Introduction: More-than-Human Contact Zones*, 2019.

Depending on who the behavioral studies are funded by, lab testing results are used either to justify the existing spaciality of the contact zone, or seemingly advocate for its change. As a first step in performing behavioral studies, groups of mink are classified based on initial variables specific to the purpose of study. One classification of mink is into four categories (aggressive, curious, fearful, and neutral) using two tests - The Glove test and the Empathic test¹⁷. The Empathic test involves the introduction of an object into the crate, a stick for example, and the mink were scored based on their response to the object. Their degree of inquisitiveness to a new foreign object provided one strand of behavioral information. The data here feeds into the narrative of the knowledge we have of the mink - most mink are by nature inquisitive (they majorly categorized as curious or neutral under the Empathic test).

In the Glove test, a hand gloved in leather was put into the crate through an open door in repeated intervals until the mink is touched, and the mink was scored based on it's reaction to the gloved hand - based on if it bit the hand, if it held its bite, for how long, if it was fearful of the hand, or if it was neutral towards it. Although more invasive then the Empathic test, the glove test at times is more conclusive for behavioral studies as the purpose of study typically ties back into fur farm conditions, hence their reaction to the gloved hand is deemed as more relevant.

The Hedlund mutation study¹⁸ uses this classification and begins by breeding 17 successive generations of mink for aggressive or tame reaction towards humans. Seventeen successive generations, born into the contact zone

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17 D. Zieliński et al., *In-Depth Analysis of the Emotional Reactivity of American Mink (Neovison Vison) Under Behavioral Tests*, 2018.

18 Kulikov et al., *Interplay Between Aggression, Brain Monoamines and Fur Color Mutation in the American Mink*, 2016.

and conditioned behaviorally for the purpose of study. Coming to the Hedlund study results a bit further on, what's curious here is that modes of testing and conditioning itself reveal context - they are tests performed by the act of *encountering* the mink within the contact zone. The mink are inquisitive towards foreign objects that enter the zone, but aggressive or fearful of the hand of the human, cloaked in leather, not entering but pushing the boundary of the contact zone towards the mink.

Another study begins by having raised 64 male-female pairs of mink either with or without environmental enrichment¹⁹. The purpose of this study was to check for correlations between environment and Stereotypic behaviors. Stereotypic behaviors in mink such as pacing, scrabbling, and fur-chewing, are repetitive, invariant, and seemingly functionless behaviors often observed in captive mink. These behaviors are thought to be a coping mechanism for frustration or stress caused by suboptimal environments. At the stage of data gathering for study, sample collection for faecal cortisol metabolite (FCM) analysis was done, and after an additional research of 1.5 years, the mink were 'humanely' killed. Stress-sensitive variables were then measured post-mortem. 128 mink, both born and culled within the contact zone to serve as raw material in the context of knowledge.

The systems of knowledge that we have build with the mink - *around it* - are all by means of the contact zone. Extraction of knowledge and very literal extraction feeding into and growing from each other, and this is blatantly clear when looking at the methods of testing employed. The extraction of knowledge used by studies that are seemingly advocating for better fur farm

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19 Díez-León et al., *Environmentally Enriching American Mink (Neovison Vison) ... Reveals Differences Between Two Sub-Types of Stereotypic Behaviour*, 2015.

conditions are dependent on the mink being confined to the very same contact zone, and are dependent on encounter with the mink through extraction.

The nature of entanglements within the contact zone results in the production and extraction of knowledge being asymmetrical, implying that the production and extraction of knowledge is imbalanced, but in fact two-way.

The first question that struck at this realization was *‘In that instance of contact when the farmer grazes his hand over the minks fur, just as he can tell its health by fur thickness, could the mink tell if the hair on farmer’s skin has thinned with age or if their skin has cracked with winter?’* Although this line of thought posed the opportunity to romanticize two-way familiarity, re-centering focus to the testing labs bring to the forefront the true nature of knowledge exchange within the contact zone.

The behavioral study acknowledges in the beginning -

“The use of a glove in this test can be associated by mink with the activities in which they participated in the past, for example, gripping, carrying, and veterinary treatments with immobilization.”¹⁹

This adds a layer to the American mink’s reaction to the gloved hand - the mink could be reacting in aggression from the mnemonic weight of previous experiences, and reacting in defense by instinct.

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²⁰ D. Zielirski et al., *In-Depth Analysis of the Emotional Reactivity of American Mink (Neovison Vison) Under Behavioral Tests*, 2018.

The Hedlund study was undertaken to examine genetic correlations between aggression towards human beings and coat mutation. The Hedlund coat mutation is a change in the pigment of the fur on the species to white, either in spots or entirely, typically due to stress. The paper begins by explaining that a major type of aggression exhibited against humans seems to be Defensive aggression²¹, where wild animals who do not consider humans as potential prey show active avoidance or defensive aggression towards humans²². The mutation gene was introduced to American mink that were generationally bred and conditioned to be 'tame'. The study post-mortem found that the change in its brain chemistry indicates the possibility for new-found aggression towards humans, one the mink didn't initially have. The aggression towards humans seemingly stemmed directly from the introduced mutation gene. The fur pigment mutation and its link to aggression against humans makes it clear that the mink are changing based on their knowledge of human encounter within the contact zone. The American mink are growing to exhibit defensive mechanisms against human encounter at a genetic level.

With the enrichment study, Scrabbling is defined as a specific type of stereotypy where mink scratch or paw at the enclosure walls or boundaries. Defensive behavior yet again presents itself as the mink in distress claws at the boundary of the contact zone, claws at human encounter. The study concludes that long-term housing with preferred enrichments not only reduced Stereotypic behaviors, but also induced anatomical changes consistent with

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21 Albert, D.J., M.L. Walsh, and R.H. Jonik, *Aggression in Humans: What Is Its Biological Foundation?*, 1993.

22 Kulikov et al., *Interplay Between Aggression, Brain Monoamines and Fur Color Mutation in the American Mink*, 2016.

better cell-mediated immunity and reduced developmental stress. The key word here being *reduced*. The American mink's genetic shift towards exhibiting human aggression reduces when the boundary of the contact zone feigns nurture, but it isn't entirely eliminated. The boundary is perhaps porous, and perhaps the human cannot truly stand in separation from the contact zone.

To tie in with the introduction of this paper, another study demonstrated sustained human-to-animal and back-to-human transmission of SARS-CoV-2 on mink farms in southeastern regions of the Netherlands, detailing the results of the first 16 SARS-CoV-2-positive mink farms²³. Employees of mink farms were infected with mink strains of SARS-CoV-2 rather than other strains circulating among humans in that community at the time. Vaccines didn't yet account for this new variant transmitted from the American mink, resulting in their mass culling. This reveals the immense porosity of the boundary of the contact zone. The unwitting, inevitable bodily porosity of encountering another. The mink might be encountering the human through the boundary of extraction, but are encountering the human nonetheless. The contact zone is facilitating two parallel systems of knowledge to be built up.

The contact zone is thus grounds for *exchange* of knowledge, and sad actuality is that while human production of knowledge on-site only enables literal extraction at the point of mink encounter, the knowledge the mink extracts on-site conditions it to be vary of and survive human encounter. Contact zone knowledge is what the human and American mink know of each other.

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23 Sparrer et al., *Role of Spillover and Spillback in SARS-CoV-2 Transmission and the Importance of One Health in Understanding the Dynamics of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 2023.

The uncomfortable truth is that to encounter is to be encountered. Notions of being able to remain outside the contact zone we've created are challenged with each interaction we have with its boundary. The boundary bleeds and engulfs, funneling the human ultimately, unwittingly *into* the contact zone itself. The boundary is as porous as it is malleable, and this contact zone is ultimately with two participants. The mink might not be coming for us in grand acts of revenge, but it could bode well to remember that ecology encounters us within the same frameworks we set up to encounter it. The nature of our participation within these contact zones builds systems of knowledge within ecology about human encounter, and what to make of it.



Figure.(10) : The inevitable porosity of contact

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