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More-than-human political geographies: Abjection and sovereign power

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ABSTRACT

This article unravels the processes of abjection that render certain nonhumans as *abject*, devoid of value and amenable to elimination and killing. It argues that these processes play a constitutive role in practices of state-making and sovereign power. Abjection works towards the exclusion and rejection of certain parts of a supposed socio-material order, which, for one reason or another, confuse dominant categorizations, trespass certain spatial boundaries or challenge socially produced distinctions and hierarchies (Bataille, 1970 [1934]; Kristeva, 1982). Abjected nonhumans thus regularly become the target of state-induced practices of elimination and culling – as is the case, for instance, with species classified as 'invasive', as 'pests', as 'biosecurity threat' or as 'disease reservoirs'. Yet, abjection also points to the ability of nonhumans to unsettle, challenge and confuse dominant boundaries and established orders. Abject beings inhabit "unruly edges" (Tsing, 2012) from which they challenge and transcend sovereign impulses to order, govern and eliminate their existence. Taking cue from previous works on abjection and sovereign power, on the one hand, and works on the role of nonhumans in political processes, on the other, I argue that abjection and state-making are not only intertwined but also crucially played out in relation to nonhuman forms of life and death. My wider conceptual aim is to illustrate what an engagement with processes of abjection has to offer for the agenda of more-than-human political geographies.

1. Introduction: killing abject life

In November 2020, the Danish government ordered the immediate mass culling of 15 million minks and the subsequent disposal of their dead bodies (cf. Green, 2022). Up to that date, the country had been the world's largest producer of mink skins and a global hub for the fur trade, with China being a top export market for Danish fur (Danish Agriculture & Food Council, 2021). Yet, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, the government feared that the animals could become a constant reservoir of a mutated virus strain, which had been detected on a handful of Danish mink farms and which was suspected to threaten the effectiveness of vaccines (The Local Dk, Nov 5, 2020). In response to the culling order, mink farmers often unwillingly eradicated their entire livestock, even if the animals on their farms had not shown any signs of a previous infection with the Covid-19 virus strain. Most gassed their animals in small boxes using carbon monoxide or carbon dioxide – the usual killing technique in fur farming.[1] Their dead bodies were then discharged at a mass dumping site on a military field.

The case of the mink cull bears striking resemblances to the 2001

Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) crisis in the UK, which saw a similarly excessive state-induced killing of potentially infected but most often healthy farm animals (Convery et al., 2005; Donaldson & Wood, 2004). As Braun (2013, p. 55) observes: "at such moments biosecurity reveals itself as an excessively violent affair, as a thanatopolitics […]", one that raises questions on "the way in which animal life can be sacrificed – and is, by the millions – so that human life can persist". Although death had been inscribed into the lives of the minks from their birth as a farm animal, the Danish culling regime disrupted the regular rhythms and purposes of their 'ordinary' killing (cf. Convery et al., 2005). Previously, their killing had constituted a regular act in the commodification process and formed a central step in the value-creating transformation from lively commodity to expansive fur. The culling order amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, however, presented a rupture to this system of economic production in which nonhumans are enrolled: it stripped the minks of any economic value and turned their life and death into matters of state control and intervention – in other words, it transformed the minks from valued commodities into *abject* defilement that must be cast away. Their killing on mass thus constituted an ultimate act of

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[1] Animal welfare activists and veterinarians have repeatedly emphasized the cruel effects of this killing technique on minks, which are semiaquatic species and are thus capable of holding their breath for a long time. Gassing minks with carbon monoxide or carbon dioxide might thus lead to painful suffocation and prolonged suffering (Hansen et al., 1991

devaluation in a wider process of abjection, with the only aim to restore a supposedly healthy and purified socio-material order and to 'clear up' contaminations. In order to protect the lives of humans, those of the potentially infected minks were thus rendered disposable by the state, considered as *abject life* devoid of value. How can we explain this excessive outburst of state-induced killing that eventually led to the universal destruction of the farmed mink population in the country? And what role did the abjection and killing of nonhumans play in the government's wider attempt to demonstrate sovereign power and to seize control amidst a perceived crisis?

This article unravels the processes of abjection[2] that render certain nonhumans as devoid of value and amenable to elimination and killing. It argues that these processes play a constitutive role in practices of state-making and sovereign power. Abjection puts not the act of killing itself into question but rather, to speak in Haraway's (2008, p. 80) words, the process of "making killable", the how and why of rendering certain matters and beings killable through governmental intervention. Through processes of abjection, species might become equated with their excrements, construed as an abject and alien 'threat' to society (Kornherr & Pütz, 2022). Those who are rendered abject thus frequently become represented as "the filth, the snot, the vermin" (Bataille, 1970 [1934], p. 219).[3]

What is central here is the question of how processes of abjection are intertwined with sovereign power and the political: as Atchison and Pilkinton (2022, p. 3) argue, abjection inflicts a "moral politics of neglect" that enables the state to execute governing practices that would otherwise be deemed questionable and that work towards the exclusion and violent erasure of, for instance, species classified as "invasive" (Dobson et al., 2013; Everts, 2015; Robbins, 2004), as a "biosecurity" or "health threat" (Cassidy, 2019; Enticott, 2008a; Green, 2022), as "feral" (Johnston, 2021a; Nagy & Jonson, 2013), as a "nuisance" (Johnston, 2021b) or as "out of place" (Jerolmack, 2008; Srinivasan, 2013). All of these different categories of abjected nonhumans might become subject to sudden, often unpredictable or temporary fixed outbursts of state-induced violence with the aim to fully and once and for all exclude and destruct all those who transgress social or spatial boundaries – a form of making killable that differs from ordinary or everyday forms of nonhuman killing and death. Processes of abjection thus reach their climax when they turn into the systematic eradication of certain groups of species or matters that, for one reason or another, do supposedly 'not fit in'.

The main aim of this article is to discuss what abjected nonhumans share in their wider function for the workings of the state. As Wadiwel (2015, p. 28) suggests, techniques of control and violence towards nonhumans "seem likely to have informed, and continue to be intertwined with, human practices of violence towards other humans". The point is therefore not to replace humans with nonhumans, but to open up anthropocentric conceptions of state-making and sovereign power in ways that account for our complex relations with other beings (cf. Cadman, 2009; Colombino & Giaccaria, 2016). Taking cue from existing works on abjection, on the one hand, and works on the role of animals and other nonhumans in political processes, on the other, I aim to offer a conceptual take on how processes of abjection work towards the banishment of certain beings to a biopolitical threshold, a state of indifference between life that is worth living and life that is potentially expandable (Agamben, 1998; Minca, 2007). Taking abjected nonhumans into account thus draws attention to forms of governing that target both the management of life *and* the management of death (Cadman, 2009; Colombino & Giaccaria, 2016; Lopez & Gillespie, 2015; Rose &

Van Dooren, 2011).

Yet, processes of abjection also point to the ability of abjected nonhumans to cross boundaries and to confuse the dominant socio-material order. As Kristeva (1982) argues: what is abject refuses to stay obediently in its place of banishment. Thus, abjection raises questions on the political agency and *revolting unruliness* of nonhumans and their ability to challenge authoritative forces of control and power (Dickinson, 2022). This article therefore also explores how abject beings inhabit "unruly edges" (Tsing, 2012) from which they challenge, resist and transcend sovereign impulses to order, govern and eliminate their existence – and, by doing so, make themselves visible as agents in political processes.

My wider conceptual aim is to illustrate what an engagement with processes of abjection has to offer for the agenda of *more-than-human political geographies* (cf. Boyce, 2016; Fregonese, 2015; Minca, 2023). During the past years, more-than-human and posthumanist approaches have opened up new lines of inquiry for the subdiscipline and put established ones under critical scrutiny. Taken together, works under this line of thought demonstrate how animals, objects, technologies and other matters constitute part and parcel of a more-than-human political geography's ontological field, while they provoke a reformulation of some of the key concepts of the subdiscipline, such as territorialisation or borders.

This article contributes conceptually to these works by arguing that processes of abjection and state-making are not only intertwined but also crucially played out in relation to nonhuman forms of life (and death) – thus suggesting that a closer consideration of 'abjection' is a relevant avenue to explore for future empirical research in more-than-human political geographies. As the political philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998, p. 164) suggests, the essence of sovereign power plays out in the state's ability to decide on what counts as life that is worth living and what as life devoid of value; on what is treated as life that is worth protecting and what is rendered disposable and threatened with the possibility of death and elimination. A closer investigation into processes of abjection is thus not only telling in regards to the powerful spatial practices that continually (re)produce and implement this biopolitical threshold onto the lives of nonhumans and across species divides (cf. Margulies, 2019). It also illustrates how this threshold position comes with possibilities for nonhumans to resist and challenge the intentions of sovereign power.

The article is structured as follows: in the subsequent second section, I scrutinize how it contributes to a recent turn towards less charismatic beings. In the third section, I then draw on Georges Bataille's (1970 [1934]) and Julia Kristeva's (1982) work on abjection in order to rethink the concept and discuss its relevance for more-than-human political geographies. In the fourth section, I scrutinize how a more explicit focus on processes of abjection contributes to a more-than-human reconsideration of sovereign power, biopolitics and killing. The fifth section then pays closer attention to questions relating to the unruliness and agency of abjected beings in political processes. Finally, I wrap up with a concluding section, returning to the example of the abjected minks in Denmark in order to illustrate how, even in their dead form, they did not cease to challenge those in power.

2. A 'turn' towards abject nonhumans?

In the past decades, more-than-human approaches have vividly illustrated how social and spatial processes are always a product of co-fabrications shaped by humans *and* a multitude of nonhuman actors, such as animals, plants, objects, and technologies (see for instance Asdal et al., 2016; Braun, 2005; Eriksson & Bull, 2017; Greenhough, 2014; Lorimer, 2010b; Panelli, 2010; Peters, 2014; Whatmore, 2006). Taken together, such works have questioned dominant binary thinking, actively challenging the divide between nature/culture, human/animal and object/subject, thus, working towards a less anthropocentric conception of human geography.

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[2] The original meaning of the term abjection derives from the Latin verb *abicio,* meaning "to abandon", "to cast away", "to throw away", or "to degrade" (Charlton T. Lewis, 2021).

[3] Translated from French by the author. French original: "La crasse, la morve, la vermine".

More-than-human thinking has also led to a reformulation of some of the key concepts of political geography by posing questions on the role and agency of different nonhumans in political matters. Discussions revolve around the question of how objects and materials, such as cameras, wiretaps or oil pipelines extend and shape the performance of state power (Barry, 2013; Darling, 2014; Dittmer, 2017; Meehan, 2014; Meehan et al., 2013). Scholars also illustrate how nonhumans, such as animals, vegetation or objects take part in struggles around border control (Boyce, 2016; Squire, 2014; Sundberg, 2011). Others point to the role of new technologies, such as drones, robots or algorithms, in shaping the spatial arena of the political (Braun et al., 2010; Shaw, 2016; Vincent J. Del Casino Jr et al., 2020). There have also been a number of works seeking to integrate assemblage thinking into political geography and critical geopolitics (Allen, 2011; Depledge, 2013; Dittmer, 2014; Müller, 2015). Others take their cue from thinkers on *New Materialism*, highlighting the political agency of technologies and other materials, while decidedly criticizing a poststructuralist over-emphasis on language and representation (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010). Furthermore, political geography has been taken to unusual arenas by integrating elements such as air (Adey, 2015) or water (Steinberg & Peters, 2015), or by considering voluminous aspects of state-making and sovereignty (Battaglia, 2020; Billé, 2019).

Living nonhumans (or their remains and afterlives) are also considered as elements of networks of power and as entangled in asymmetrical hierarchies with humans and other species (see Dickinson, 2022; Hovorka, 2018; Minor and Boyce, 2018; Squire, 2020). For instance, scholars have scrutinized the contours of a political animal geography (Hobson, 2007; Margulies and Karanth, 2018; Srinivasan, 2016; Swann-Quinn, 2019). Others have introduced viruses, plants, microbes and other vital and dead matter onto the scene of political geography (Barker, 2010; Dobson et al., 2013; Greenhough, 2014; Head et al., 2014; Ingram, 2013; Klinke, 2019; Theriault, 2017). And yet scholars have disproportionally focussed on beings that elicit more sympathetic feelings or positive associations and are thus 'easier' to relate with. If living nonhumans are integrated into geographic inquiry, they are most often animals – at the expense of other beings, which are considerably less likely to become the focus of more-than-human research, such as plants (cf. Head & Atchison, 2009; Margulies et al., 2019). In particular, there is a tendency towards animal species that are, in one way or another, valued and admired by humans, such as pets, zoo animals or rare wild animals in need of protection (Moran, 2015, p. 636). Of considerable influence for setting the species agenda here is Donna Haraway's (2003) seminal work on "companion species", which has inspired scholars to delve into our close affective relationships with pet animals, for instance, dogs and horses (Brown & Dilley, 2012; Power, 2008; Pütz, 2020; Urbanik & Morgan, 2013). Others observe a tendency towards large terrestrial mammals – especially those that incite fascination or yearning – at the expense of smaller animals, aquatic species, other vertebrates and invertebrates (Bull, 2014; Greenhough, 2014). Most tellingly, a considerable number of scholars has engaged with elephants, an animal species that might respond to romantic imaginations of exotic nature (Barua, 2014; Lorimer, 2010a; Whatmore & Thorne, 2000). Bull (2014, p. 74) observes a tendency towards a *geography of nearby* within animal studies, a tendency that privileges certain species over others due to their perceived close spatial, emotional, behavioural or taxonomic ties with humans, as he puts it: "Most often the animals concerned have a recognisable 'face' and are generally benign". And, in his inspiring essay on *Nonhuman Charisma*, Jamie Lorimer (2007) elaborates different modes of relating that determine whether a species becomes subject to charismatic affection and sympathetic feelings.

However, there is a growing interest among more-than-human and animal geographers in nonhumans that are *not* commonly valued as charismatic and benign companions. As Bear (2020) argues in relation to the broader field of animal studies:

"the interdisciplinary field of animal studies has recently taken what might be termed an awkward turn. Having focused for much of the past two decades on ostensibly 'familiar subjects' (Lorimer: 2014, p. 195) such as warm-blooded mammals, recent scholarship has turned to beings that appear harder to engage or empathise with" (Bear, 2020, p. 5)

A number of works has looked at species of animals that incite affective responses such as disgust, repulsion or abomination. For instance, in their collection of essays entitled *Unloved Others*, Rose and Van Dooren (2011, p. 1) focus on creatures "less visible, less beautiful, less a part of our cultural lives"; on unloved and often disregarded others that are regularly vilified by humans, such as soil organisms, vultures, ticks, moths and flying foxes. In their edited volume *Trash animals*, Nagy and Jonson (2013, p. 1) direct their attention to animal species that are considered "worthless, threatening, dangerous, destructive, and ugly. Varmints, vermin, pests, scavengers, nuisances and exotics or invasive alien species", species that are treated like trash and stripped of value. Their intention is to challenge the very processes that link these forms of life with 'real' trash.

Another line of inquiry raises awareness for beings that are commonly assumed to be at a taxonomic distance to humans. In their editorial to a special issue, Ginn et al. (2014, p. 113) are interested in "creatures that bite, or sting, or – like giant isopods – fascinate but repulse us, and in creatures that must die so that others may live: awkward creatures, in other words, which tend not to fit off-the-shelf ethics". Krieg (2020, p. 1) focusses on reptiles that, as she argues, "represent a kind of alterity that is often deemed categorically different from warm-blooded animals". Others have directed their attention to fish (Atchison, 2019; Bear & Eden, 2011) or invertebrates (Abrahamsson & Bertoni, 2014; Bull, 2014; Lorimer, 2016). There are a number of works that look at insect geographies (Bear, 2020; Beisel, 2010; Beisel et al., 2013; Bingham, 2006; Vincent J Del Casino Jr, 2018). Plants and vegetal forms of life are also more frequently considered in geographic inquiries (Everts & Benediktsson, 2015; Head et al., 2014; Pitt, 2015). Moreover, geographers have looked at organisms that confuse dominant taxonomic boundaries, including mould (Schemann, 2020), yeast (Brice, 2014) or microbes (Eriksson & Bull, 2017; Lorimer, 2017).

It is in this context, that scholars have started to engage with the spatial and political dimensions of *abject* nonhumans and their production as threating and disposable 'other' (Atchison & Pilkinton, 2022; Gesing, 2023; Kane, 2023; Kornherr & Pütz, 2022; Moran, 2015). Exploring how lives are rendered abject, be they animals, plants or other beings, can help to foreground the political nature of the often violent relations with less charismatic nonhumans, thus opening up interesting avenues for future research. The following section engages more thoroughly with the concepts of 'the abject' and 'abjection' by discussing their potential for furthering the agenda of more-than-human political geographies.

3. Rethinking 'abjection' for a more-than-human political geography

There are two main thinkers whose works form the basis of current conceptions of abjection. The first is the writer and philosopher Georges Bataille, a leading figure of French surrealism in the first half of the 20th century. In 1934, shortly after the Nazis' rise to power in neighbouring Germany, Bataille published a short essay entitled *L'abjection et les formes misérables*. This text formed part of a more general interest in the subconscious as well as in social processes of exclusion and oppression – recurring themes in many of his writings (Biles, 2014). Second, building on but also departing from Bataille's understanding of the term, the French-Bulgarian philosopher Julia Kristeva (1982) wrote the seminal work *The Powers of Horror– An Essay on Abjection*, in which she focuses more explicitly on the psychic dimensions of abjection, taking cue from psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan. Her work inspired a whole line

of scholars who subsequently engaged with expressions and modes of abjection in various empirical and disciplinary contexts, such as in the liberal arts (Arya, 2014; Seegert, 2014), in literature studies (Hennefeld & Sammond, 2020), in feminist theory (Butler, 2011 [1993]; Covino, 2012) or in critical migration and border studies (Brun et al., 2017; Isin & Rygiel, 2007; Papastergiadis, 2006; Tyler, 2009, 2013). Before delving into the details, however, I would like to note that it is not my intention to uncritically copy Kristeva's or Bataille's use of psychoanalytic terms and concepts nor is it in the scope of this article to do justice to the substantial number of works that have criticized, worked with and refined psychoanalytic theory in the field of psychoanalytic geographies (see for instance Callard, 2003; Kingsbury, 2004; Kingsbury & Pile, 2016; Philo & Parr, 2003). Nevertheless, I think that Kristeva's and Bataille's works hold inspiring thoughts for the development of more-than-human political geographies of abjection.

In his short essay, Bataille foregrounds the forces of exclusion that work towards the production of 'abject' parts of society. He thus treats the abject as a synonym for the "miserable population", i.e. the part of the population that is "excluded from life by a prohibition of contact [and] represented from the outside with disgust as the dregs of the people, populace and gutter"[4] (Bataille, 1970 [1934], p. 218). Abjected parts of society thus come into being as mere products of social and political processes of exclusion. Abjection, he goes on to argue, always requires coercion. This coercion is established by the ruling elite through a prohibition of contact (p. 219). Through this act of exclusion and the prohibition of contact, the ruling elites "have deprived these under-privileged of the possibility of being men"[5] (ibid.). Thus, abjected parts cease to be valued as humans and instead become abject *things*, objectified by the force of the ruling elite. As Sylvère Lotringer (2014) comments, with this conceptualisation, Bataille intended to describe the imperative force that forms the basis of fascism. As Lotringer comments: "[it] was essentially a reflection (…) on fascism, on the forces on which fascism relied, the imperative act that defined a certain fraction of the population, even a fraction of the proletariat, as abject". One might thus argue that Bataille's notion of 'abject things' bears resemblance with what Hannah Arendt (2013 [1951]) later depicted as "the scum of the earth" or Frantz Fanon (2007 [1961]) as "the wretched of the earth". Although Bataille does not explicitly refer to nonhumans in his essay on abjection, Biles (2014) suggests that animals present recurring metaphors in many of his other writings.

Kristeva (1982, p. 3) also stresses the importance of acts of exclusion and rejection for understanding abjection; acts that she regards as the very foundation of an individual's identity and which she originates in the primordial breaking from the mother. Kristeva's deep interest in the term abjection, however, stems from the perception that it constitutes "a crossroads", "a bridge" that accounts for "all sorts of phenomena that have to do simultaneously with disgust and fascination" (Lotringer, 2014). She therefore defines the abject as what "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions and rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). On the one hand, Kristeva's abject provokes affective bodily responses such as vomiting, nausea or spasms. She explicates this by referring to the sentiments that we experience in relation to body fluids, such as excrements or saliva, but also filth, waste, sewage or food loathing. On the other hand, she points to a contradictory feeling of attraction to the abject, arguing that "many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones" (p. 9). For Kristeva, the abject thus holds a characteristic essence; a capacity to disturb order and to cross boundaries: "We may call it a border, abjection is above all ambiguity" (p. 9).

Scholars in political geography and related fields have worked with and refined the works of Bataille and Kristeva mainly by illustrating how state-induced processes of abjection hold a spatial dimension (Brun et al., 2017; Isin & Rygiel, 2007; Moawad & Andres, 2023; Robinson, 2000; Russell, 2017). Abjection also materializes in spatial separations, confinements, territorialisations and acts of border-making – which all work towards the spatial seclusion and invisibilisation of those who are rendered abject (Isin & Rygiel, 2007). For instance, Dorn and Laws (1994, p. 107) argue that "micro-geographies of abjection separate the deviant body so that it will not pose a challenge to the established norms". Moawad and Andres (2023) outline how space contributes to the seclusion and spatial separation of those deemed abject, while Isin and Rygiel (2007) conceptualize "abject spaces", which they define as follows:

> "abject spaces are those in and through which increasingly distressed, displaced, and dispossessed peoples are condemned to the status of strangers, outsiders, and aliens (e.g. refugees, unlawful combatants, insurgents, and the conquered) and stripped of their (existent and potential) citizenship […] in various emerging frontiers, zones, and camps around the world" (Isin & Rygiel, 2007, p. 181)

Yet, so far, political geographers and scholars from related fields have employed the concept of abjection mainly in order to grasp the processes of exclusion and marginalisation directed towards groups of *humans* who become deprived of fundamental rights, such as irregular migrants or stateless persons (Brun et al., 2017; Isin & Rygiel, 2007; Moawad & Andres, 2023; Papastergiadis, 2006; Tyler, 2013). They have illustrated how certain fractions of the population become targets of processes of abjection precisely because they confuse dominant binaries between insider/outsider (Papastergiadis, 2006), citizen/non-citizen (Brun et al., 2017) or male/female (Robinson, 2000; Russell, 2017). As Brun et al. (2017) argue, processes of abjection are therefore processes of boundary-making, which work towards the exclusion and separation of deviant parts of the population, parts that cannot be integrated into a system from which they become expelled.

Taking cue from these works, I would suggest that abjection is a relevant concept for exploring our violent relations with abjected nonhumans; relations that also materialize in spatial processes of exclusion and marginalisation (Atchison & Pilkinton, 2022; Kornherr & Pütz, 2022). Although political geographers have so far engaged with the concept mainly from an anthropocentric perspective, there are a number of inspiring works in the liberal arts that have included animals and other organisms in considerations on abjection (Biles, 2014; Johnson, 2014; May, 2014). In this disciplinary context, Kristeva has inspired a whole strand of art works that has been labelled "*abject art*" (cf. Johnson, 2014). Creed and Horn explain this turn towards the abject in the arts as follows: "contemporary art practices that explore animals and animality do so as a means to challenge the notion that animals form humankind's abject other" (cited in Arya & Chare, 2016). In their arts collection *Concrete Jungle*, which engages with abject nonhuman life in urban environments, Dion and Rockman (1996) also tellingly explain this ability of animals to confront us with the abject:

> "[Pests] such as the cockroach, rat and pigeon – are that dangerous class of animals, who are rarely appreciated with the sentimental eye we reserve for pets. Seen as emblems of decay and contamination (…) these animals remind us that we too are animals, and therefore, mortal. The cockroach and rat can shake the foundations of civilization to the core and us to the marrow" (Dion & Rockman, 1996, p. 6)

This indicates how certain animals, such as rats or cockroaches, might become a symbol of decay and contamination - phenomena that, in a Kristevan sense, remind us of our own animality, challenging boundaries between nature/culture, man/animal.

Processes of abjection thus work towards the exclusion and rejection

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[4] French original: "(…) écartée de la vie par une prohibition de contact est représentée du dehors avec dégoût comme lie du peuple, populace et ruisseau".

[5] French original: "ils ont enlevé à ces déshérités la possibilité d'être des hommes".

of both human and nonhuman parts of the socio-material order, which, for one reason or another, confuse dominant categorizations, trespass certain spatial boundaries or challenge socially produced distinctions and hierarchies, for instance, between nature/culture, human/animal, clean/unclean, native/foreign, healthy/diseased, inside/outside, pure/impure. This builds on a history of works that have highlighted how animals become framed as a problem when they are experienced as 'out of place' or as 'transgressive' (Carter & Palmer, 2017; Philo, 1995). Examples are pigeons that 'invade' the ordered urban spaces designed exclusively for human use (Jerolmack, 2008) or street dogs that are controlled as a 'pest', rather than being treated as a 'pet', if they are out of human homes (Srinivasan, 2013). A focus on abjection, I would suggest, holds the potential to add to these works in at least three ways. First, it helps to foreground the political processes and violent power-laden mechanisms with which the sovereign works towards the elimination or banishment of such 'matter out of place'. Precisely because some nonhumans are perceived as 'not fitting in' for a variety of reasons, they become targets of state-induced processes of abjection, which work towards their invisibilisation or eradication, so as to restore the normalised and purified socio-material order of things. Second, in a Kristevan sense, an analytical focus on abjection draws attention to the affective and psychic dimensions of state practices targeting supposedly transgressive or contaminating nonhumans. Thirdly, abjection points to the capacity of 'matter out of place' to unsettle, challenge and confuse dominant boundaries and established orders, actively resisting political attempts to discipline and control their lives.

Summing up, I would suggest that a more-than-human inquiry into processes of abjection opens up at least two interesting avenues for future empirical research in the subdiscipline of political geography. First, works should explore how abjected beings become the targets of spatially relevant and state-induced processes of exclusion, invisibilisation and eradication – and hence objects of the disciplining practices of sovereign power. Second, future studies could focus on how those who are rendered abject constitute limit-figures and thus posses the ability to transgress boundaries and to challenge the normalised socio-material order, thus, exerting agency in political processes. I will turn to each of these directions in more detail throughout the following two sections.

4. More-than-human political geographies of killing, sovereign power and biopolitics

A more-than-human reformulation of abjection raises questions on the role of nonhumans in state-making and government practices. As I suggested in the previous section, processes of abjection work towards the violent exclusion and spatial separation of both humans and non-humans. In their most severe form, they may turn into systematic eradication; sudden outbursts of violence with the aim to fully and once and for all exclude and destruct all those who 'do not fit in' – as Atchison and Pilkinton (2022) tellingly illustrate in relation to the invasive species management by the Australian government in the aftermath of the 2019-20 bushfires.

This opens up a fruitful link to works that have looked at how animals and other nonhumans are frequently affected by mass killing and human-induced death (Brice, 2014; Cassidy, 2019; Crowley et al., 2018; Gibbs, 2021; Lopez & Gillespie, 2015; Margulies, 2019; Perkins, 2020). Such works respond to Philo's (2017, p. 257) observation that the "pervasive tone" in more-than-human geographies is predominantly "rich, lively, indeed vital" and his subsequent call for a more systematic exploration of "not what renders it lively, but what cuts away at that life, to the point of, including, and maybe beyond death". For instance, works have drawn attention to the afterlives of commodified animals (Bersaglio & Margulies, 2022; Bezan & McKay, 2021; Gillespie, 2021). In this context, Dickinson (2022, p. 4) makes the case for investigating "the political agencies of dead animals and disembodied animal derivatives or fleshy tissues" while arguing that they co-constitute political processes.

A focus on abjection, however, differs from accounts that have looked at the "everyday" death of nonhumans (see for instance Shcheglovitova, 2022). Rather than investigating 'ordinary' forms of death and killing, such as in the context of factory farming or commodified animals (Lopez & Gillespie, 2015), abjection draws attention to the sudden, often unpredictable or temporary fixed forms of state-induced killing and violent death. What is crucial here is that, in the case of abjected forms of life, the act of killing does not become a value-adding activity in the 'regular' commodification process, in which nonhumans and their derivatives are bound up. Instead, killing, presents an ultimate act of devaluating abject lives with the aim to restore, secure or clear up a certain socio-material order. Most drastically, such state-induced outbursts of killing emerge in the context of animal diseases or zoonoses, such as during the 2001 FMD epidemic in the UK, when millions of often healthy domesticated animals were culled on state orders and within a short time frame (Donaldson & Wood, 2004) Although death was already inscribed into their very existence as domesticated farm animals to be slaughtered for human consumption, the FMD culling regime presented a fissure in and disruption to the usual lifescapes on British farms because, from the perspective of farmers, "death was in the wrong place, at the wrong time and in the wrong scale" (Convery et al., 2005, p. 107). In the context of abjected nonhumans, regimes of killing unfold not only through singular events but can also emerge on a recurring basis, as is the case with the badger cullings in the UK (Enticott, 2008b). Abjection thus puts not the act of killing nonhumans itself into question but rather the act of 'making killable'; the how and why of rendering certain species killable. To speak in Haraway's (2008, p. 80) words: "It is not killing that gets us into extermsin, but making beings killable". Rather than accounting for all sorts of killing, the concept of abjection puts a particular focus on extraordinary and state-induced forms of 'making killable' and it might be here, where the political relevance of nonhumans becomes most visible.

This connects with works in political geography that have directed attention not only to the management and disciplining of biological life, i.e. the *power over life,* but also to the management of killing and the *power over death* (Coleman & Grove, 2009; Kaur, 2021; Leshem, 2015). There are two main thinkers who have conceptualized the role of killing and death for modern biopolitics: Achille Mbembe (2008) and his work on *necropolitics* as well as Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2004) and his work on sovereign power and the *biopolitical threshold*. These authors have inspired political geographers who have built on, worked with, criticized and refined their thoughts against different empirical backgrounds and in different regional contexts (Hagmann & Korf, 2012; Kaur, 2021; Leshem, 2015; Minca, 2007, 2015; Shewly, 2013). Works on the specific topic of more-than-human and animal death have also referred to and worked with the theoretical thoughts of Mbembe (Davies, 2018; Margulies, 2019; Sneegas, 2022; von Essen & Redmalm, 2023) and Agamben (Chrulew, 2012; Colombino & Giaccaria, 2016; Wadiwel, 2015).

In his monograph *Homo Sacer*, Agamben (1998, p. 142) argues that "in modern biopolitics, sovereign is he who decides on the value or the nonvalue of life as such". In his understanding of biopolitics – which departs from Foucault's – it is the power to decide upon the value or the nonvalue of life, and ultimately its killing, that is the fundamental structure of power in Western modernity (p. 137). Central to his works is the notion of a *biopolitical threshold* between life that is included in the dominant order through means of protection, on the one hand, and life that is excluded and rendered killable, on the other – what Agamben calls 'bare life' (p. 64). Minca (2007) explains the relationship between Agamben's biopolitical threshold and the political as follows:

> "It is this [biopolitical] threshold that defines the boundaries of the political today, and that marks the original spatialisation of sovereign power. It is (with)in the inscription of this mobile confine defining *what is life* – on the body of each and every individual – that the modern state finds its ultimate task, concealing in this way its

macabre autopoietic destiny" (Minca, 2007, p. 79; emphasis in original)

In order to make his conception of a biopolitical threshold more explicit, Agamben draws on a figure from archaic Roman law, that of *homo sacer*, whom he regards as embodiment of bare life; an "intermediary between man and animal" (p. 165). Such homines sacri are included in the form of their exclusion, what plays out as the fundamental capacity to be killed with impunity. They are stripped of their political and social existence and have nothing left to lose except their naked biological existence, their bare life that is constantly threatened with the possibility of death. It is in the production of bare life that, according to Agamben, human and nonhuman life collides (p. 104f).

Quite connectedly, in his conception of *necropolitics*, the postcolonial thinker Mbembe (2008, p. 152) seeks to grasp how "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die". He points to the existence of death-worlds, i.e. the "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring on them the status of *living dead*" (p. 176f, emphasis in original). Mbembe is thus interested in "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" (ibid.), which he observes primarily in the (post)colonial and racialized violence that is exerted on certain groups of humans.

Processes of abjection, I would suggest, do precisely what Agamben and Mbembe had in mind with their accounts on sovereign power: abjection works towards the production of certain forms of life, be they human or nonhuman, as stripped of value and excluded from efforts of protection, confining them instead to a threshold existence as living deads – while their governing can eventually 'flip' towards eradication and killing. It is in this way that processes of abjection are intertwined with sovereign power and biopolitics, thus, playing a constitutive role in practices of state-making (Brun et al., 2017; Isin & Rygiel, 2007). A more-than-human concern with killing and death, on the one hand, and political geographies of sovereign power and biopolitics, on the other, might thus be fruitfully combined in the study of abjection.

Abjection could therefore be an enabling analytical concept for opening up anthropocentric conceptions of sovereign power towards nonhumans. Neither Agamben[6] nor Mbembe explicitly account for nonhumans as potential objects of sovereign power (Cadman, 2009; Colombino & Giaccaria, 2016, p. 4). Yet, as Wadiwel (2015, p. 83) aptly argues: "The control of life, the power to allow and disallow life, extends to all living beings within the space of exception; in this sense, Agamben's analysis of the relation of life to sovereign power may be extended to incorporate the life belonging to the non-human". In a similar vein, Saraiva (2018) regards fascism as "a totalitarian attempt to control every dimension of life, an extreme case of biopolitics" (p. 1) He analyses "how new strains of wheat and potatoes, new pig breeds, and artificially inseminated sheep contributed in significant ways to materialize fascist ideology" (p. 3). Thus, just as certain humans are confined to a threshold existence between life and death, so are nonhuman forms of life bound up in relationships of sovereign power and biopolitics – relationships

that materialize in spatial forms of exclusion, separation and killing (Isin & Rygiel, 2007; Minca, 2015).

Such an opening towards nonhumans, I would argue, calls an implicit nature/culture, human/animal dualism of existing works on biopolitics and sovereign power into question. Works that take their cue from Agamben and Mbembe often assume that sovereign power works towards the abandonment of certain humans to an animal-like status, stripped of any rights and excluded from efforts of protection (see also Abrell, 2015). Thus, they equate animals with their bare biological existence as beings without any rights, supposedly located 'outside' the law and radically excluded from the protection of the state. At the same time, they assume that the 'inside' of state protection and the juridical order is constituted by humans. However, as Margulies (2019) points out in his inspiring piece on tiger conservation in India: at times, the lives of certain nonhumans can be valued even more than those of humans, as is the case for marginalized tea plantation workers whose life is exposed to potential death by protected tigers. He puts this as follows: "[…] as a formally recognized endangered species with strict laws regarding their protection, tigers carry the law of the state in their very being, (re)producing spaces in which differential valorizations of life across the species divide are acted out." (Margulies, 2019, p. 159). In resonance with Margulies, I would argue that a focus on abjection illustrates how the boundary between the 'inside' and 'outside' of the juridical order cannot be mapped neatly onto the human/animal, nature/culture divide. This boundary is rather constantly negotiated in relation to both humans as well as nonhumans: while certain beings become politically valued and protected through the workings of the state (like the tigers in India), the lives of others (such as the culled minks in Denmark) are stripped of any value and rendered disposable.

The taking into account of abjected animals and other beings could thus enable us to tell different and more complex stories about how sovereign power and biopolitics play out and become challenged (cf. Sundberg, 2011). The point here is neither to simply replace humans with nonhumans nor to trivialize the cruelties that were and continue to be directed towards humans who become confined to an outsider status and reduced to their bare biological needs. Rather, the intention is to open up anthropocentric conceptions of sovereign power in ways that also enable us to account for our complex relations with other beings (cf. Cadman, 2009; Colombino & Giaccaria, 2016).

A focus on processes of abjection might also hold potential for coming to terms with another frequent criticisim at Agamben's works: his overestimation of sovereign power and his disregard of possibilities for protest and resistance as well as for the agency of those who are abandoned by the law (cf. Brun et al., 2017; Vandevoordt, 2020). Agamben (1998, p. 109) assumes that "the relation of abandonment is so ambiguous that nothing could be harder than breaking from it". Kristeva (1982), in contrast, regards a threshold existence as quite a powerful position, one that possesses the capacity to disturb order and to cross boundaries. As I illustrated in the previous section, a more-than-human reformulation of abjection simultaneously draws attention to the ability of abandoned nonhumans to remain unruly and to challenge the normalised socio-material order – thus enabling a more explicit consideration of the agency of those who are rendered abject through sovereign attempts to govern and eliminate their existence (see also Isin & Rygiel, 2007, p. 185). In the following section, I turn to this unruliness of those who are rendered abject in more detail.

5. More-than-human political geographies of revolting unruliness

Nonhumans are not only the passive backdrops of state-making but also hold agency in shaping political processes: they set in motion, resist, obstruct or counteract governmental incentives to control and order their existence (Dickinson, 2022; Hobson, 2007; Johnston, 2021c; Srinivasan, 2016). Thus, a number of works in political geography have pointed to the capacity of nonhumans to challenge and resist practices of

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[6] In 2004, Agamben published the book *The Open: Man and Animal*, in which he reflects on the acts of boundary-making ("caesura") between (hu)man and animal, divisions that he regards as the founding element of human existence. He argues that this still ongoing and never complete "anthropogenesis", this coming into being as an ostensibly distinct species through a series of separations, forms the basis of Western politics: "In our culture, the decisive political conflict, which governs every other conflict, is that between the animality and the humanity of man" (Agamben, 2004, p. 80), while the former refers to the sovereign abandonment of certain humans as bare life, an animal-like status. Nevertheless, his accounts still focus on the *human* as the central figure of thought, while he does not take the fate of other-than-human animals into serious concern, thus limiting the potentials to overcome the anthropocentrism of his works on sovereign power.

state-making and power – for instance in the context of border-making (see Boyce, 2016; Squire, 2014; Sundberg, 2011). For instance, Sundberg (2011, p. 2) "makes the case for addressing nonhumans as actors in geopolitical processes such as boundary making and enforcement." She shows how endangered cat species in the U.S.-Mexican borderlands challenged and altered the operational plans of the U.S. Border Patrol. She therefore argues that political agency is always a "doing-in-relation", one that unfolds between a range of actors, including humans, plants, animals and other natural elements (ibid, p. 331). Boyce (2016) also stresses the role of nonhuman actors in resisting the intentions of border enforcement technologies, arguing that "the climate, topography and inhabitants of the border region (…) continuously disrupt, frustrate, and constrain enforcement operations" (ibid. 257). He thus concludes that, in the context of border enforcement, "the state seeks to tame and digest a chaotic exterior that continuously withdraws from its gaze" (ibid. 259). As Wadiwel (2018, p. 528) aptly puts it in the context of the factory farming of chickens: "animals press against, disrupt and leak value from even the most apparently complete and relentless models of authoritarian subordination that we can devise".

Putting an analytical focus on processes of abjection foregrounds the possibilities for nonhumans to resist sovereign power and to challenge biopolitical attempts to discipline and eliminate their existence. In the first place, those who are affected by processes of abjection become the targets of sovereign power, biopolitics and killing precisely because they share an ability to challenge and cross the boundaries of the dominant socio-material order, for instance, between nature/culture, healthy/diseased or native/foreign. What follows from this is that abjected nonhumans are not only the passive backdrops of practices of sovereign power and state-making but form co-constitutive agents therein. This resonates with works that have pointed out how nonhumans resist and shape the disciplining and often violent attempts to produce 'safe' and 'biosecure' spaces (Collard, 2012; Mather & Marshall, 2011; Sneegas, 2022). Indeed, efforts to 'make life safe' often respond to an 'unruly' (micro)biological world, which continuously refuses to be contained and controlled, as Braun (2013) argues. Abjected forms of life might thus articulate what Antonio Negri, departing from Foucault, had in mind with his conception of 'biopolitics' and which Hinchliffe and Bingham (2008, p. 1539) summarize as "those forces that are always already resisting any such attempt to capture, control, manipulate, and manage life". The practices that seek to discipline or eliminate abjected forms of life might mingle and mix up humans and nonhumans in surprising ways, bringing about results that have not been predicted or fully anticipated by those in power (cf. Hinchliffe, 2007, p. 111).

Previous works on abjection have also pointed to the agency of abjected groups of humans (see also Isin & Rygiel, 2007, p. 185). For instance, in her book *Revolting Subjects*, Tyler (2013) investigates processes of social abjection in Britain. She alludes to the double meaning of the word 'revolting', which can either refer to the expression of disgust or to acts of protest and rebellion against those in power. Thus, Tyler argues that abjection is both a fundamental component of sovereignty and, at the same time, also a state of revolt. Biles (2014) points to the ability of nonhumans to be similarly 'revolting'. He suggests that *the rat* functions a central 'simulacrum' or metaphor of the abject: "The rat is a metaphor of abjection, a metaphor in its full, archaic sense – from the Greek for carry, transfer, alter or change. The rat carries abjection like it carries disease. It instigates transferences, alternations, through a logic of contagion" (ibid., p. 118). As Biles thus goes on to argue, rats do not stay passively in their despicable position, they also respond and strike back: "The abject is revolting, in a double sense: repellent and in a state of perpetual revolt. Abjection is the rat's revolt" (ibid.).

This draws on Kristeva's (1982, p. 2) understanding of abjection, which stresses the ability of the abject to challenge authoritative forces: "It [the abject] lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the […] rules of the game." The abject thus possesses the capacity to challenge the unconscious/conscious divide of the subject (p. 6). In her understanding, the abject is located on the limit of primal repression,

constantly threatening to confront the subject with what it has suppressed to the unconscious. *First* and foremost, these repressed rejections and separations that threaten us are "our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity", i.e. the parting from the mother. *Second*, the abject confronts us with the inevitability of death and our mortal existence as living beings. Kristeva explicates this by drawing on the repulsion felt in relation to excrements and other body fluids: "These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death" (p. 3). In other words, expelled body fluids and excrements remind us that we die, successively with each loss "until nothing remains" (ibid.). Its particular ability to remind us of our mortal existence makes the corpse, in Kristeva's eyes, the utmost of abjection: "It is death infecting life" (p. 4).

A *third* repressed rejection and separation that the abject confronts us with – and which might be most significant for a more-than-human political geography of abjection – are "those fragile states where man strays on the territories of the animal" (pp. 12, emphasis in original). According to Kristeva, abjection is thus the founding principle of the nature-culture divide. Abjected nonhumans gnaw at the roots of our very existence as an ostensibly superior species distinct to animals. They shatter the founding exclusion of our own animality, which we have repressed to the unconsciousness, while they remind us of the impossibility to ever fully enforce this separation. Abjection thus "notifies us of the limits of the human universe" (p. 11). It is precisely this ability of the abject to blur, cross and challenge the nature-culture and human-nonhuman divide that illustrates the importance of animals and other nonhuman forms of life for the study of abjection. Those animals and beings that become targets of processes of abjection pose a constant threat, one that reminds us to be in perpetual danger of being exposed as a human animal.

Summing up, future works on more-than-human political geographies of abjection might explore how those who are rendered abject exceed, confuse or challenge sovereign claims to eliminate or exclude their existence – and thus possess a *revolting unruliness*, in the double meaning of the term. Further empirical studies are needed in order to explore how abjected nonhumans, despite their life being stripped of value and rendered killable, strike back in a number of ways and, in a Kristevan sense, remind us of our own origin, mortality and existence as a human animal.

6. Concluding discussion: the affective power of abject life and death?

To wrap up, I would like to return to the example of the Danish mink cull, to which I referred in the introduction to this article. The minks in Danish fur farms served as an apt opening to the discussion on abjection and sovereign power, not because they present forms of life that are *per se* abject but because they were systematically turned into abjected beings through state-induced processes of abjection in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic; processes that linked them with contamination and disease and triggered affective responses by the Danish state. This abjection of formerly economically valued farm animals eventually culminated in the state-induced culling order which led to their death on mass.

Yet, the case of the Danish mink cull also illustrates how the practices that seek to discipline or eliminate abjected forms of life not always go about as planned. They mingle and mix up humans and nonhumans in unexpected ways, bringing about surprising results that have not been predicted or fully anticipated by those in power: After their cruel deaths, the abjected minks did not cease to challenge those in power. In fact, the millions of mink corpses that were dumped and buried on a military field 'haunted' the Danish government. Due to gases formed by their decaying bodies, they were pushed back off the ground – an unforeseen turn of events that was covered with horror by the national and international media, which reported on returning "zombie minks" (Forbes, Nov 27, 2020; The Guardian, Nov 25, 2020). The media also called attention to

worried local residents who felt disturbed and disgusted by the smells of the animals' decomposing bodies and feared that they might contaminate ground water in the area (The Independent, Dec 10, 2020).

Moreover, the posthumous reactions to the mink cull illustrate how the fate of nonhumans can be enrolled by wider publics so as to contest state-induced practices of violence and abjection and to bring about political change (cf. Crowley, 2017). Ultimately, the returning zombie minks caused a major public controversy that brought the ruling government in Denmark under an intense "mink crisis" (NBC News, Dec 2, 2020). Not only did the animals' moving corpses spark criticisms at the government for its lack of a legal basis for the culling order, which was subsequently discussed as 'illegal' (The Guardian, Nov 10, 2020). Growing forces within the Danish public also expressed their solidarity with and care for the killed minks, thus actively challenging their abjected status, while criticizing not only the processes that led to their abjection and their destruction on mass, but also employing this case as a more substantive critique at the fate of minks in factory farms. The resulting media scandal eventually caused the resignation of the Danish minister of agriculture, the passing of a legal amendment that would authorize the mink cull in retrospect, as well as the articulation of a formal apology by the Danish prime minister.

In a Kristevan reading, this posthumous turn of events raises question on the affective power of abject lives – or, better, abject deaths. First, their coming to public attention pointed to the cruel *origin* of ostensibly prestigious fur coats in Danish factory farming; infrastructures that are usually hidden from public sight. Second, the returning zombie minks confronted the Danish public with their own *mortality*, since, as potential carriers of a mutated Covid-19 strain, they challenged the divide between healthy/diseased and life/death. Third, the death of the abjected minks served as a reminder that we are *animals* too and just as mortal as minks: sooner or later we are also going to turn into corpses, becoming decomposed until nothing remains. As Green (2021) aptly describes in relation to the mink cull: "the existence of germs reminds people that bodies are porous, and that the world is full of other living things that can slip through bodily boundaries without being seen, felt or heard". Thus, posthumously, the abjected minks struck back in a number of ways, causing affective responses that illustrate their agency in shaping – or better disrupting – practices of state-making.

To conclude, my aim for this article was to discuss what an engagement with processes of abjection has to offer for the agenda of more-than-human political geographies. I argued that a more-than-human reformulation of abjection illustrates how not only humans but also nonhumans become abjected, confined to a threshold existence. This status comes with the ability to challenge boundaries in the dominant socio-material order. At the same time, it subordinates beings to biopolitical technologies of power that, in their most severe form, result in state-induced mass killing and death. We might therefore ask how abjection, sovereign power, and unruliness play out in relation to both human and nonhuman life and death in order to better understand how spatial and political formations become institutionalized or shifted. Such a focus draws attention not only to more-than-human practices and spaces of killing but also to the ability of abjected nonhumans to remain unruly and to resist, obstruct and counteract the intentions of sovereign power.

In sum, state-induced processes of abjection do not remain uncontested. They can be challenged by humans and nonhumans in diverse ways. Paying closer attention to processes of abjection in future empirical research may thus hold potential to uncover the cruelties that are associated with the expression of sovereign power in more-than-human worlds, while working towards different alternatives. In resonance with Judith Butler (2011 [1993], p. 16), we might thus ask: "What challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as 'life', lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?" A focus on abjected forms of life might ultimately point towards different alternatives; to potential ways of relating with those who are frequently excluded; and to the possibility of valuing those who are commonly treated as devoid of value.

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