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Chapter 12: To make pets live, and to let them die. The biopolitics of pet keeping

David Redmalm

Figure 12:1 Mary Shannon Johnstone, a photo of euthanized dogs in plastic bags, from Breeding Ignorance

Introduction

In Mary Shannon Johnstone's (2016; n.d.) photography art project *Breeding Ignorance,* she visits animal shelters to document the incarceration and mass killing of dogs and cats. She points out that in North Carolina alone, more than 250,000 abandoned dogs and cats are euthanized every year. Seeing puppies gathered in a corner awaiting euthanasia, a pile of cats in a freezer, and dogs put in black trash bags is a forceful reminder that the global kennel complex kills pets on an industrial scale. "We are simply breeding more animals than we have

homes for," Johnstone concludes (n.d., n.p.). This chapter focuses on humans' tension-filled relationship to companion animals. Pets—the animals under humans' care living within or in proximity of the home—are often considered to be friends or part of the nuclear family, and many pets are grieved when they die. Therefore, the very term "pet" is derogatory, as it reduces these nonhuman animal companions to one-dimensional objects of caress—to mere belongings (Redmalm 2013: 17). But pets are also routinely bred in abundance and are sold, given away, abandoned and quickly forgotten, or euthanized because they are unwanted. Therefore, the word "pet" comprises companion animals' ambivalent position as being *subject to* and the *object of* human care, in between dominance and affection (Tuan, 1984).

The aim of this chapter is to suggest a way of understanding pet keeping in the light of this paradox. The chapter accomplished this using Michel Foucault's notion of *biopolitics*, a kind of decentralized governing based on the idea that each member of society can be regarded at once as an irreplaceable individual and as a consumable resource. Rather than traditional dominant, totalitarian or sovereign power that relies on violence and corporeal punishment, the biopolitical state is ruled according to the logic of biopower, a power that has the right "to make live and to let die" (Foucault, 2003: 241). To make pets live and to let them die, to breed and to euthanize, are equally central to the pet keeping industry. The study of animals and biopolitics is growing, although pets have been underexplored, most efforts focusing on animals in the food industry and in laboratories (see Asdal, Druglitrø & Hinchliffe, 2017, and Chrulew & Wadiwel, 2017). However, pets are particularly interesting because they are affected by human treatment and change their behavior accordingly, while they to some extent have the freedom to move around in contexts dominated by humans and affect their owners and others. Thinking through pet love and pet death, the chapter argues, also sheds light on the dynamics that make some lives grievable while others are rendered ungrievable (see also Furst and Hagren Idevall, Chapter 11 this volume for a discussion of Butler's notion of grievability). To make live and to let die are thus also central to the experience of the individual pet keeper—as Carmen Dell'Aversano (2010: 104) puts it, "to love an animal means to allow death into one's life." Most pets have a shorter life span than humans, so choosing to enrich one's life with a nonhuman companion introduces this biopolitical dilemma into one's daily life.

In the first section, titled “To make pets live,” I use Foucauldian theory to discuss humans’ preoccupation with pets and the social institutions and normative frameworks that make pets live and thrive in human societies. The section follows Heidi J. Nast’s (2006) call for a ”critical pet studies,” a research field that draws on a Foucauldian notion of power to identify the social structures that have made pet love possible and increasingly popular during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the second section, “Threshold,” I turn to the work of Giorgio Agamben, who relies on Foucault’s work on biopolitics to examine the peculiar analogy between the status of pets and human citizens of contemporary democratic states. Pets exist at the intersection of the line between invaluable and disposable life, and the line between human and animal. Agamben argues that these two distinctions were integral to the formation of larger societies, which is why I suggest that pets help humans take a biopolitical approach to human life. This analogy between human and nonhuman animals—their shared biopolitical condition—will be further explored in the subsequent section: “To let pets die.” When pets die the tragedy of an individual fate and biopolitical norms and calculations converge. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, and my previous studies of expressions of grief for pets (e.g., Redmalm, 2015, 2018), I show how pets’ ambivalent status is accentuated, and their biopolitical condition is laid bare, when pet owners face their pets’ transience and death. I argue that pet keeping can be regarded as a demarcated zone where norms surrounding life and death can be played with, managed and reproduced. In the relationship between pet and owner, humans are allowed to address pets’ biopolitical subjectivity in a relatively secure and delimited manner, which helps reinforce the wider biopolitical condition in contemporary societies. With the section “The ever after” I ask: Is there life after the politics of life and death? I suggest that by taking into consideration the shared precariousness between humans and animals, and the exchanges of wordless gestures fundamental to the relationship, the relation between humans and other animals could open up an alternative “ever after” from within a biopolitical playground.

To make pets live

Foucault’s (1978, 2003) concept of biopolitics refers to the way society is governed through the statistical monitoring and measurement of bodies, sexuality, migration and ways of life; disciplinary institutional machineries; and a set of knowledge and norms redistributed to the wider population. This is a decentralized form of power, or *biopower*—a power that has the right “to make live and to let die” (Foucault, 2003: 241). Biopower is employed through a

number of biopolitical technologies, among others a "natalist policy" (Foucault, 2003:243). The state needs to secure a certain birth rate and a certain level of health among its citizens to continue to exist, and thus ideas regarding reproduction and norms of the nuclear family, as well as health ideals, are distributed throughout society. "Letting die," or what Agamben (1998) calls *thanatopolitics*, is an extension of biopolitics. Thanatos was a god of death in Ancient Greek mythology, and the term designates the technologies used for disposing of superfluous or unwanted life. The uneven distribution of wealth and the prioritization of economic gain over environmental concerns, which considerably decrease the lifespan of a large number of people worldwide, are examples of contemporary forms of thanatopolitics deployed in post-world war democratic states.

With a nod to Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic,* Donna Haraway (2008: 139) argues that "the birth of the kennel had all the constitutive discourses in place from the first appearance of the formation." Rather than an actual geographical place or a specific organization, Haraway regards the kennel as a material-semiotic node at which technology, knowledge, power relationships and norms converge. The kennel is a set of technologies for breeding nonhuman animals according to humans' expectations. The kennel is also a set of normative ideas about maintaining a healthy nonhuman gene pool through breeding and selection in order to maximize the quality of human life. Thus, the kennel is indeed characterized by a "natalist policy," just like the modern democratic welfare state. The "letting die" aspect of biopolitics is also clearly visible in the kennel: surplus dogs are routinely killed in an anonymizing machinery that makes it possible to let them die. Nonhuman animals with unwanted physical and behavioral traits are sterilized or prevented from procreating. Pet owners also regularly let beloved pets die—pets are regularly euthanized when their owners do not feel they are living life to the fullest due to illness or old age.

The fact that pets are bought and sold on a market is one reason why they so conveniently fit into the biopolitical scheme. Pet keeping takes place within a juridical and ideological framework—termed *animal welfarism* by Francione (2000)—that presupposes that humans own animals, and that animals are resources for human pleasure. Pets are mass produced and constantly available, but nonetheless imbued with uniqueness and authenticity, turning them into irreplaceable and invaluable individuals. Pets make perfect commodities, because they can be mass produced, yet remain unique (Boggs, 2013: 186; Redmalm, 2014; for a similar

argument, see Kania-Lundholm Chapter 9 this volume on the commodification of dead celebrities). This enables humans to regard pets as things while at the same time benefiting emotionally from the relationship. It also allows them to treat one or a few nonhuman animals as pets, while excluding other animals from ethical concern. Thus, pets without a human caretaker are categorized as strays, as feral, or perhaps as pests, and are rendered "killable" within the animal welfarism paradigm (see Holmberg, 2017). The thin line between pet and pest is just as thin as that between biopolitics and thanatopolitics.

According to Foucault, power is enacted through a bipolar technology: It is both normative and disciplinary in an embodied manner—"it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements" (Foucault, 1977: 26; see also Foucault, 1978: 139). Society engages the citizen in disciplinary processes in schools, hospitals and prisons, whereby a "soul" is produced "around, on, [and] within the body" (Foucault, 1977: 29) of the citizen. In this way, docile souls and docile bodies are created that fit neatly into the larger normative biopolitical scheme. These docile subjects do not necessarily have to be human, although Foucault focused on matters of human subjectivity. Several scholars have suggested that the subject of such a power can be both human and nonhuman (see Palmer, 2001; Wolfe, 2013: 37; Kirk, 2017: 201). The kind of decentralized and relational power Foucault conceptualized is rarely transparent to the beings subjected to it, these scholars argue. Subjects regularly reproduce power relationships without being conscious of doing so, which means that a nonhuman being acting within a certain social structure can actively reproduce that structure. Whether that nonhuman being is aware of what is going on is a non-issue, just as human cognition was largely a non-issue for Foucault.

Following this line of argument, it is possible to say that pets have subjectivity and are imbued with a "soul" in Foucault's sense (Palmer, 2001; 2003: 52; Chrulew, 2017). As long as pets are framed as relatively free within an anthropocentric context, this opens the door to governing nonhuman "free" subjects within disciplinary and biopolitical frameworks. Palmer (2001) argues that fences, doors, leashes, neutering and spaying, as well as instrumental training methods are all disciplinary technologies that have dominant features, but they also presuppose that pets have some kind of scope for agency and "freedom." A fence may seem inhibiting, but within the fencing, pets are allowed to act on at least some impulses and interests. Likewise, neutering and spaying eliminates some behaviors and drives in the pet,

but will also make the pet more widely accepted in a human-centered community and thus freer, albeit in a narrow sense. Neutering and spaying are also biopolitical technologies, in that they are used to control reproduction. Another disciplinary-biopolitical technology is pet pharmacology. Wolfe (2013: 54) notes that Reconcile, a drug identical with Prozac, is given to dogs to treat separation anxiety. People who live with pets on Prozac may experience them to be slightly duller, but also more predictable and reliable from a human perspective, and the pets can thus be allowed some leeway in the lives of humans. Seen in this light, pet pharmacology can be regarded as a dominant, disciplinary and biopolitical technology—all at once.

Even the mere act of touching is a disciplinary technology: pet owners are generally advised to touch and handle their pets from early age to create docile bodies—to make them insensitive and compliant to human treatment (Palmer, 2001; Wadiwel, 2017). However, it is interesting to note that bestiality is always associated with stigma and social prohibition, unlike the act of killing an animal (Wadiwel, 2017). Passing the threshold between petting and a sexual act would threaten the distinction between humans and other animals, while killing does not. While the idea of bestiality threatens the boundary between humans and other animals, both "disciplinary" caressing and killing appear to fit into the biopolitical scheme that modern societies assume.

Pets must be framed as "free" if they are to be governed, which also means that pets can actively participate in the reproduction of disciplinary power relations and the proliferation of biopolitical normativity. One example of this is the Obama Family's dog Bo Obama (Skoglund & Redmalm, 2017). By framing Bo Obama as a free and slightly unruly individual, the imagery around Bo and Barack Obama gains normative efficiency. Whether it is Barack Obama playing football or running through the White House corridors together with Bo, or his children playing with the dog against the backdrop of the White House—such press photos give the powerful leader a human face. Bo Obama thus assists in the proliferation of family norms and reproduce normative aspects of "doggy-biopolitics" (Skoglund & Redmalm, 2017).

Some scholars have suggested that, at least to some extent, the very fabric of the family is changing into a "furry family" (Power, 2008) or a "posthuman family" (Charles, 2016; see

also Fox, 2006), which blurs the boundary between human and animal and decenters the human subject. Yet, after having taken a closer look at Haraway's kennel, inclusion of pets in the family can be regarded as a way of maximizing both human and nonhuman life, in alignment with a biopolitical logic. Thus, although pet keeping includes boundary-transgressing features, these practices, as Charles (2016) puts it, "exist alongside others which reinforce it." Individual pets are appreciated as friends and family members, but the elevation of an individual pet presupposes a system in which humans have the power to decide whether their pets should live or die as well as the ultimate power over all other animals.

Threshold

A biopolitical analysis of pet keeping shows that pets exist on the threshold between invaluable and disposable life. Agamben has theorized this threshold, as well as the threshold between humanity and animality, which makes his theoretical work imperative to the understanding of pet keeping. In this section, I discuss how Agamben can shed light on the fundamental biopolitical function of pets. Human biopolitical subjects can mirror themselves in pets: Pets and humans are subjected to a similar set of biopolitical technologies, yet pets exist on the opposite side of the human-animal divide, which gives humans power over pets through these technologies. I argue that the idea of the pet helps humans think about life in terms of biopolitics.

Agamben adopts Foucault's notion of biopolitics, but while Foucault associates the birth of biopolitics with Enlightenment ideas and ideals, Agamben (1998) argues that because the birth of the state far precedes modernity, so does biopolitics. The administration of all larger societies—societies where all members do not act in direct relation to each other, and where the community is secured by symbolic means—relies on society members' ability to think of the other members both as kin and as an abstract number, as both fellow humans and as resources in food production and warfare. Agamben thus argues that every state formation is founded on the distinction between political life, *bios*, and nonhuman life belonging to the domain of nature, *zoē*, which lacks the rights of the citizen and is excluded from the state. The idea of political life thus presupposes a notion of something outside the reach of state power, which means that the formation of the state builds on an "inclusion of what is simultaneously pushed outside" (Agamben, 1998: 18).

For Agamben, *bios* is reserved for humans, although not all humans qualify as *bios*. Agamben argues consequently that political life is fundamentally precarious. *Bios* can at any moment be reduced to a state close to *zoē*, which Agamben (1998: 13) calls 'bare life': a state where one adheres to normative expectations in constant fear of being bereaved of the fundamental rights associated with *bios* (see also Butler, 2009: 16; Stanescu, 2012). The liminal creatures roaming the boundaries between *bios* and *zoē* are no longer fully human, but not quite animal either. Agamben refers to these beings as *homines sacri* (sacred humans), a concept borrowed from the juridical term for the lawless in ancient Roman law. Agamben suggests that in contemporary liberal democracies "the realm of bare life […] gradually begins to coincide with the political realm" (Agamben, 1998: 9) and that bare life "now dwells in the biological body of every living being" (Agamben, 1998: 140). This means that the marginal *homines sacri* are becoming the norm through the expansion of the state apparatus, and the increasingly flexible juridical framework fueled by the neoliberal deconstruction of the state and the "war on terrorism." Thus, the making of bare life is a constant threat against humans in contemporary nation states. But don't many nonhuman animals face the same conditions, given that animals are both widely anthropomorphized and objectified and used as resources in modern societies?

Agamben does not discuss the biopolitical status of nonhuman animals, instead he is first and foremost interested in the notion of "the animal" in the sense of animality. In other words, Agamben is interested in "the animal" as an idea because, as he argues, the reproduction and constant negotiation of the boundary between humans and animals are crucial to the making of *homines sacri*. In relation to ideas about "the animal," humans define themselves as humans, although there is no singular way of actually separating humans from all other animals. Humans can separate themselves from others by ascribing them animal characteristics. Psychoanalysis and modern biology have also identified an "inner animal" within the human—humans can define themselves as human by claiming to isolate and control their animal within. Agamben (2004: 26–27) calls this constant negotiation of an inner and outer human-animal boundary *the anthropological machine*, "an optical machine constructed of a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image always already deformed in the features of an ape." The anthropological machine ensures that humans are distinguished from other animals, but also that there is a constant conceptual dependency between the two poles. Thus, human society partly relies on an impending threat

of becoming animal, which makes humans adhere to a specific normative idea of being human, while those who refuse or do not fit into this conception are excluded (Alt, 2011: 148).

This threat is most prominent in what Agamben (1998) refers to as *zones of indistinction*—places such as refugee camps, concentration camps, and prisons. These places are organized to create bare life—to produce a context where the boundary between valuable and disposable life is dissolved so that life can be seen as *bios,* yet treated as *zoē*. This presence of bare life reminds the wider population of their precarious biopolitical condition. Kirk (2017) suggests that there are zones of indistinction designed to turn nonhuman animals into a similar liminal state—into *animalia sacri*. Laboratory animals, he suggests, enter into a zone of indistinction where the line between *bios* and *zoē* has ceased to exist, because they are both reared and cared for, but most often killed after the experiment. The kennel, in Haraway's sense of the word, can also be seen as a zone of indistinction, and pets as *animalia sacri*. While pets are in a vulnerable position in anthropocentric societies, many pets in the global North are privileged compared to millions of humans, especially in the face of the humanitarian crises of the 20th and 21st centuries. Wolfe (2013: 54) concludes that "many animals flourish not in spite of the fact that they are "animals" but *because* they are 'animals.'" Pets thus exist in an ambivalent zone of indistinction—a sort of *benevolent camp* (Diken, 2004)—that comes not only with hazards, but also with privileges.

Within this zone, humans' relationship with pets forces humans to face the close connection between *bios* and *zoē*, and to negotiate their relationship both to their animal pet and to their own inner animal. Through interviews with pet owners, I have previously shown how they put the anthropological machine to work and draw on quasi-scientific explanations to conceptualize their pets' behavior as animal behavior (Redmalm, 2013). This allows the owners to distance themselves from their animals. But these biological explanations can also be applied to the humans themselves: Owners of, for example, dogs, cats and rats can recognize their own mammal selves in their pets' characteristics, behaviors and needs. A clear indication of this ambiguous stance is that dog owners, as well as some cat owners, often use the words "pack" and "family" interchangeably. Pets are often referred to by humans as family members, but pet owners also refer to themselves as their pets' pack members. In this way, both humans and nonhumans achieve the status of biological as well as political life

within the frames of the relationship. Another indication is that cat and dog owners sometimes joke about their animals being true carnivores. Dogs will take the alpha position the first chance they get. Cats are referred to as "killing machines" and would bite their owners' head off if only the cats were big enough.

Some of the features of pets associated with *zoē* are deeply valued by pet owners. They often emphasize that their pets teach them an "animal" way of living. Such a way of life emphasizes the importance of play and of living for the moment rather than accumulating belongings or climbing the career ladder (Redmalm, 2013). Yet all these traits are focused around the individual, and the sphere of the home and the closest community. In other words, the traits gained from pet ownership can be seen as ways of maximizing the human individual's life, turning that individual into someone with a docile mind in tune with the biopolitical machinery. Thus, through pet keeping, the close connection between *bios* and *zoē*, and between bio- and thanatopolitics, is reflected, managed, and reproduced. Pet ownership is thus not only a mere symptom of biopolitics, it is also an arena where humans can learn to conceive of life according to the biopolitical scheme by engaging with pets—creatures who incorporate *bios* and *zoē* at the same time. Carnivorous companion animals bring violence and death into the everyday and turn it into something natural. Consequently, pet keeping prepares pet owners to accept their own biopolitical condition.

Although contemporary forms of pet keeping are associated with the affluence of the post-war Western world, this ambiguous approach to nonhuman animals far precedes modernity. In fact, both biopolitics and the idea of a nonhuman animal companion seem to date back to the first sedentary societies and the early states. There is archeological evidence that early states made proto-biopolitical calculations of both human laborers and herds of domestic animals, and slaves as well as livestock were managed through controlled reproduction and continuous surveying in these societies (Scott 2017). In the biopolitical state, the majority benefits from the disadvantaged minorities, soldiers are sacrificed to protect the rest of the population, and both human workers and nonhuman animals suffer to secure the life quality of the privileged. Citizens will thus have to accept that life can essentially be separated into two categories, invaluable and disposable, and that any given life must be able to pass between these categories for the survival of the state. But this also means that when humans pass into *zoē*, it enables a movement in the opposite direction: A low threshold between *bios* and *zoē* also

allows nonhuman animals to achieve the status of *bios*. Archeologists have found remains of dogs in graves many thousand years old at various locations, some as old as from the first sedentary societies in the Eastern Mediterranean from the pre-Nauftian (23,000-11500 BCE) and Nauftian (13,000-9,800 BCE) eras (Collier, 2016). The character and context of the findings suggest that the buried animals were considered to be persons, or unique individuals, possibly with a "soul." I therefore wish to suggest, somewhat speculatively, that the formation of early larger sedentary societies made it possible for humans to conceive of the idea of a nonhuman companion—the idea of the pet. In turn, pets' presence in larger societies has facilitated the reproduction of the biopolitical condition. In the next section, I will further explore the connection between biopolitics and the mourning of individual animals.

To let pets die

Butler (2004; 2009) has explored how normative frameworks structure the experience of loss so that some lives are grieved, while other lives can come to an end without a single tear being shed. While Butler argues that grief is central to human communities—we grieve those we think of as included in a "we"—Butler's perspective on grief does not presuppose that a grieved life is necessarily a human life. Indeed, she has described her approach as "a non-anthropocentric framework for considering what makes life valuable" (Antonello & Farneti, 2009: n.p.; see also Stanescu, 2012). Her approach thus allows us to study to what extent animals are made grievable. Butler connects her theorizing of grief to the work of Agamben, and points out that, because human lives are not always grieved, we cannot rely on the human/animal distinction alone to understand how life becomes grievable. Rather, it is a matter of which lives are regarded as livable, meaningful, and intelligible—a line of thought close to Agamben's distinction between *bios* and *zoē*.

Relying on Butler's conceptualization of grief, and my own work on pet grief in various contexts, I will now discuss how the tension between *bios* and *zoē* is handled in expressions and representations of grief for pets. On the one hand, pet owners often compare losing a pet to losing a friend or a family member (Redmalm, 2015). Furthermore, there are a number of services available to pet owners who have lost a nonhuman animal companion, such as condolence cards for bereaved pet owners, mortuaries specializing in pets, and therapy and self-help books on how to deal with the loss of a pet (Witt, 2003; Redmalm, 2018). However, pet owners also risk meeting social sanctions as a consequence of the norms surrounding

human-animal relationships (Morley & Fook, 2005). Therefore, humans grieving the loss of a pet are referred to delineated social and geographical spheres, like pet cemeteries (Witt, 2003: 765) or friendship networks (Redmalm, 2015).

Butler's perspective can be summarized in three points. First, for a life to be grieved, it must be regarded as irreplaceable. According to Butler (Butler, 2004: 20f; 2009: 14, 98), we become who we are through our relations to others, so when someone important to us passes away, we cannot remain the same. Second, there is an unpredictable force in the loss of a grievable life—the existential uncertainty that a grievable loss brings with it makes it transformative (Butler, 2004: 46). Third, there must be a shared embodied relationship between the grieving person and the grieved (Butler, 2004: 26–27; 2009: 29–31). We are born dependent on others, and intimate relationships are often physical, Butler explains (Butler, 2004: 31; 2009: 14). Therefore, loss is always a bodily experience.

Pets are generally described as *irreplaceable* beings who will be remembered forever when they die. In interviews with pet owners (Redmalm, 2015), in condolence cards (Redmalm, 2016, 2018) and in dog handbooks (Redmalm, 2014), the loss of a pet is repeatedly compared to that of a human friend or family member. Many tombstones at pet cemeteries also describe the deceased pet as an irreplaceable family member, and the owners as "moms" and "dads" (Redmalm & Schuurman, 2017). But pets are also to some extent made exchangeable in the way they are talked about as biological beings, as members of a breed or species with certain characteristics that are appreciated independently of the individual expressing them (Redmalm, 2015). For example, while human condolence cards basically never depict humans, most pet condolence cards have photographs, paintings, drawings or silhouettes of nonhuman animals (Redmalm, 2018). Rather than paying respect to the individual that has been lost, the cards instead focus on the fact that the recipient has lost a member of a species—a dog, a cat, a rat.

When turning to the second aspect of grief, the *unpredictable* force of loss, the same ambivalence can be found. Unpredictability is both visible and downplayed in various ways in expressions of grief for nonhuman animals. Dedicated pet owners can talk extensively about how deeply affected they were by the loss of a beloved pet. At the same time, a pet's death can be planned: death seldom arrives suddenly, but is often the result of a decision that has

been carefully thought trough and discussed with a veterinarian. Accordingly, handbooks for dog owners urge readers to plan for the coming and going of pets in their lives. For example, Coile (2003:89) writes that the bereaved pet owner should start looking for a "second once-in-a-lifetime dog" because "another Chihuahua is a welcome diversion and will help keep you from dwelling on the loss of your first love." It is common among pet owners to plan loss and pet adoption in this way, which can be seen as a way to curb the unpredictability of loss. The unpredictability of loss can also be handled by framing the pet's death as something natural. Pet cemeteries are often planned and managed in harmony with the surrounding green area and the shifting seasons. The emphasis on the connection between pets and nature as part of the same circle of life frames pet loss as predictable and "natural."

Finally, in relation to the third aspect of grief—the *embodied* character of grievable loss—pet owners regularly talk about their own bodily experience of loss, as well as the bodies of dying pets. Many pet owners describe how animals who have died leave an almost palpable absence behind, and how the loss can be felt as physical pain (see also Chap. 2). But many pet owners attest that they also actively scan their elderly pets for bodily signals of pain, signals that can be used as grounds for a euthanasia decision. Pet owners thus take the role of the empathic friend, sharing the pet's suffering, on the one hand, and the owner proper, trying to decide whether the living commodity is still operative or needs to be terminated, on the other. Agamben (1998: 142) argues that "[e]uthanasia signals the point at which biopolitics necessarily turns into thanatopolitics." From a biopolitical perspective, pets' lives need to be maximized to benefit the lives of humans. But from a thanatopolitical perspective, lives that are not lived to the fullest, and are not considered to be fully human, are rendered disposable. One dog handbook urges the reader to "[l]et him [the dog] die while he's living" (O'Neil, 2008: 231). This formulation truly comprises Agamben's point about euthanasia.

Mourning pets is a balancing act between proximity and distance, between making pets grievable and ungrievable, between embracing life and letting die. Mourned pets move back and forth between *bios* and *zoē*, and the close paradoxical connection between these kinds of lives is accentuated. This way of approaching the lives of animals is fortified by many animals' short lifespan: Many pet owners will experience several unique nonhuman lives come and go during their own lifespan. In consequence, pets' death can be experienced as extremely painful and as manageable—both reactions to loss are present at the same time and

equally real. By extension, this stance on pet loss and grief mirrors the biopolitical mechanisms ensuring that humans can be at once persons and resources. When the ambivalence becomes acute in the moment of loss and in times of grief, this also means that humans' ambivalent relationship to other animals in general is reinforced. Through pet grief, pet owners learn to think of *bios* and *zoē* in tandem.

The Ever After

In his analysis of the present state of Western liberal democracies, Agamben suggested that bare life "now dwells in the biological body of every living being" (1998: 140). As I have argued, "every living being" should be understood in a wide sense, including nonhuman animals. This does not only have fatal, thanapolitical consequences for nonhuman animals. The inclusion of pets in the biopolitical scheme also means that pets proliferate and flourish in human societies. In turn, humans' lives are enhanced—humans benefit emotionally and physically from living with pets.

Scholars studying multispecies biopolitics have suggested that the inclusion of pets in the biopolitical scheme can turn biopolitics against itself. McHugh (2011: 20) suggests that the parallel biopoliticization of human and nonhuman lives enables "biopolitical potentials of love." Boggs (2013) follows a similar line of reasoning and posits that when humans make nonhuman animals into commodities, the fact that pets can respond to this commodification debunks capitalism's commodity fetishist fantasy and makes possible economies of desire and reciprocity as alternatives to capitalist logic. Stanescu (2012) in turn suggests that loss highlights the fundamental condition of precariousness, or the condition of bare life, that humans share with other animals. If humans took into consideration their shared status of bare life that contemporary society imposes on humans and other animals alike, it could work as a starting point for ethical responsibility for other animals. Indeed, Butler (2004; 2009) argues that we challenge the very frameworks of grievability when we make someone grievable in conflict with prevalent norms, that is, when we recognize as grievable life that is generally regarded as bare life or *zoē*.

However, as I have suggested, there is also a risk that negotiation of pet grief will reinforce the anthropological machine that makes *bios* and *zoē* coincide. Elevating animal life to a human-like status is itself a kind of politicization of life, and such elevation of some

nonhuman lives does not counteract future distinctions between *bios* and *zoē*—between invaluable and disposable life. As a closed realm, pet keeping, including the rituals and practices around pet loss, becomes a way to momentarily play with the boundaries between *bios* and *zoē*. Life in the kennel becomes a reminder that within biopower, there is never a clear demarcation between *bios* and *zoē*, and between human and animal, to begin with.

Agamben also theorizes a way to exist beyond biopolitics, and similar to Stanescu's suggestion, he turns to a form of existence rooted in the body. In a society where life itself was not politicized, inhabitants would find common ground through nothing but the lack of a common ground, a belonging, or a shared identity—a society "without presuppositions and without subjects," as Agamben (1993: 70) writes. Agamben (1999; ten Bos, 2005) argues that the "gesture" could be key to thinking about such a society. The gesture is a wordless act that, in sharp contrast to the biopolitical rationale, lacks linguistic categorizations and teleology, and does not belong to an organizational structure. Here, it is possible to make an anti-anthropocentric reading of Agamben: The emphasis on the gesture is a way to challenge the politicization of life without reproducing human life as the norm. Above I discussed petting as a disciplinary technology, but petting can also serve as a gesture in Agamben's sense in some situations. Wadiwel (2017: 311) suggests that petting can be a way of creating local forms of resistance against biopolitical normalization, through the creation of an "exceptional friendship" in contrast to "the large scale war against animals." I will end this chapter by giving an example of such a context.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore the paradox that pets are both subject to and the object of human care—that pets are both treated as autonomous subjects with their own interests and unique traits, and objects that can be purchased, sold and disposed of depending on their owners' needs and wishes. I have suggested that pet keeping can be regarded as a demarcated zone where norms surrounding life and death can be played with. In this way, pets help humans conceive of and also accept the biopolitical predicament that humans and many other animals share. However, if this playfulness can be allowed to leak out from the delimited sphere of the kennel, and be moved away from categorizations of life and identity negotiations to an uncharted and rougher territory, the play with boundaries can alter the biopolitical logic that made play possible in the first place. Although the human-pet

relationship as such does not automatically challenge biopolitics, when mobilized against animal welfarism and biopolitical technologies, the relationship can work as a useful illustration of the kind of gesticulation that may create a life in the ever after that follows biopolitics and anthropocentrism.

A photograph from Mary Shannon Johstone's project *Breeding Ignorance* opened this chapter. In a later project called *Landfill Dogs*, Johnstone decided to take dogs facing euthanasia out on a trip to a landfill where the dogs will be buried when euthanized, together with household trash. Every dog in the project is photographed behind bars, and then during the trip. In the latter photographs the dogs move around freely. In a few images, a human is also visible, touching, playing with or jumping around together with the dogs. Although Johnstone hopes that the photos will attract possible adopters, she knows that most of the dogs will not be saved. The immediate purpose of the trip is simpler: "Each dog receives a car ride, a walk, treats, and about 2 hours of much-needed individual attention," she explains (landfilldogs.com/about). For two hours, the exchange of wordless gestures, rather than disciplining and normative expectations, are in the center of the interaction—an exchange that does not immediately generate economic gain, or rely on stereotypical ideas about what a human and what an animal are. For a moment, the dogs transcend their precarious position in the bio- and thanatopolitical scheme.

Gestures and bodily expressions can always be categorized as symbols or reduced to behaviorist reactions. But Johnstone has found a way of bringing out Agamben's gesture without at the same time reproducing a biopolitical constellation of *bios* and *zoē*. And she does so without resorting to the conceptually well-ordered sphere of the interpersonal human-pet relationship, where boundaries between invaluable and disposable life, and between life and death, can be transgressed relatively safely. Instead, she chooses a highly thanatopoliticized place as playground. By the landfill, the dogs' liminality is not used to normalize the fundamental, biopolitical condition that humans and other animals share. Instead, this liminality is made into the topic of an intervention against biopolitics itself. Here, the exchanges of gestures between Johnstone and the "landfill dogs" bring the relationship between politics, life, death and play into broad daylight. Through the exchange of gestures, and the display of these gestures through her art, Johnstone recognizes that the dogs are grievable, not as humans or as animals, but as *animalia sacri*—as beings existing on the

threshold between *bios* and *zoē*, both conceptually and very literally, given their impending fate.

Figure 12:2 Mary Shannon Johnstone, “Akimbo” from Landfill Dogs

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