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What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?

1/ Theories and definitions

Abstract: This is part 1 of 6 of the dossier *What Do We Talk about when We Talk about Queer Death?*, edited by M. Petricola. The contributions collected in this article sit at the crossroads between thanatology and queer theory and tackle questions such as: how can we define queer death studies as a research field? How can queer death studies problematize and rethink the life-death binary? Which notions and hermeneutic tools could be borrowed from other disciplines in order to better define queer death studies?
The present article includes the following contributions: – MacCormack P., What does queer death studies mean?; – Radomska M., On queering death studies; – Lykke N., Death as vibrancy; – Hillerup Hansen I., What concreteness will do to resolve the uncertain; – Olson P., Queer objectivity as a response to denials of death; – Manganas N., The queer lack of a chthonic instinct.

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What does queer death studies mean?

To ask this question offers two immediate options, which will in turn, lead to a conservative outcome, or a proliferative force of trajectories unknown. We can think of queer death studies as oppositional – to straight life studies. We can think of queer death studies as something otherwise, as a tantalising encounter with *outside*. Outside the anthropocene. Outside normativity. Outside where death already dwells, beyond language beyond signification, incandescently fleshy and material nonetheless. Here is another false binary. For the matter (in every sense) of queer death studies is both. Striving, in activism, in philosophy, in art, to join the elite exclusory hegemony of straight being equated with life is a practice toward which many difference movements seemed compelled within anthropocentrism. The anthropocene has rarely privileged humans so much as certain kinds of humans. So counting means counting as those kinds, equivalence counting over additional qualities. If queers want to count we usually have to 'pass'. All our lives we

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pass or don't pass. We count as lives or don't count contingent on our passability. The dying, the never really counted as life-worthy, already queer, and the queer not valid human life, not willing or able to straighten up to reproduce in order to perpetuate the earth and nonhuman genocide every human generation perpetrates. None of us have belonged to human life. So within anthropocentrism were we ever alive? Were we already dead? Is that what draws us to the worlds of vampires, the undead, zombies with their colonialist insinuations, werewolves howling in packs and refusing to de-hirsute, hairy chested feminists and gendermorphous wrong-kinds, wrongkins, occupying unnatural positions within constellations of desiring flows that exceed, deny any positional, hierarchical stratification of subjects? Our unnatural nature belongs to nature, as anthropocentrism belongs to society. Anthropocentrism's repudiation of nature makes its occupation define 'life' as something highly synthetic, synthesising master signifying systems with enamourment of power, flesh an inconvenience that allows the not-counted to suffer and die, or to be exploited as flesh alone, labour, consumed in any variety of ways. If we don't live anthropocentrically, we live queer. If we live queer we never counted. So we are alive differently. To trauma, to mourning, for every manifestation of life in spite and wilful ignorance of its strata and subject. But also to fabulated monsters, ahuman perpetual becomings, desiring pulsations. Queer death studies are the resistances of creativity against anthropocentric definitions of life. Embracing precarity, treacherous to the dominant value of the dominant being. Traitors to humans. Not wanting to count within those parameters and never having done so anyway. We queer death studies activists were never alive but lived anyway. We were never not queer no matter how we tried to 'norm up'. Queer death time is the time of the mesh of nature and life in its infinite combinations succeeding the anthropocene. We deny the primacy of human exceptionalism and its reproductive compulsions. The thriving and flourishing of non-anthropocentric life, and the radical compassion of death activism that sees nurturing art in care are central. We don't covet your life, power performing as normalcy. We seek grace in existence and anthropocentric death as revolution.

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On queering death studies

What does "queer death" mean in "queer death studies" (QDS) is in fact a question that immediately requires rephrasing: what does the queering of death in queer death studies mean? And why to talk about queering death here and now? In the second half of the twentieth century, it became increasingly clear that the manufacturing of death had reached unprecedented planetary scales: colonial genocides and postcolonial violence; two world wars; the Cold War with its lingering spectre of threat from nuclear winter and radioactive waste; and the recognised since the 1970s ongoing environmental disruption, manifested in the annihilation of ecosystems and landscapes, extraction of resources, and turning of certain habitats into unliveable spaces for both nonhumans and humans alike (Radomska, Mehrabi & Lykke 2020).

Furthermore, culturally speaking, some deaths are not even recognised as deaths in the first place. As philosopher Patricia MacCormack writes:

> Where even statistics only occur on abolitionist pages because most humans do not see death of the nonhuman as death; Where female death, racially motivated death, disabled death, LGBTQ death still do not seem to register as their own nations; Where the anthropocentric ego is a single point of perception of the world for an individual to get through and thrive and the Earth as a series of relations will always come second to individual survival, be it as excessive or as daily struggle. (2020: 109)

It is thus both crucial and urgent to zoom in on global as much as local mechanisms of necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) that exert their power over the lives and deaths of human and more-than-human populations, making some deaths more grievable than others (Butler 2004).

Against this background, QDS calls for a rethinking of death, dying and mourning in their ontological, ethical and political terms, attuned to the present and whilst doing away with the perpetuation of "the epistemological and symbolic violence (with their practical, real-life consequences) of dismissing some deaths as not 'worth enough', not grievable enough, not even seen as 'deaths' in the full sense of the word" (Radomska, Mehrabi & Lykke 2020: 82). In other words, queering death means striving to approach it in unceasingly norm-critical ways, where "queering" operates as a verb and an adverb, pointing towards a process and a methodology of questioning certainties and consistently disturbing the familiar, undoing 'normative

entanglements and fashion[ing] alternative imaginaries' (Giffney & Hird 2008: 6) beyond the exclusive concern with gender and sexuality.

What follows, QDS is characterised by three major aspects that distinguish it from more conventional death-focused research: (1) its concern with necropolitics and necropowers, that is, the mechanisms of letting certain populations die through the instrumentalisation of 'human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations' characteristic of modernity (Mbembe 2003: 14); (2) its focus on the planetary-scale mechanisms of annihilation of the more-than-human in their ontological, epistemological and, most importantly, ethico-political dimensions; and (3) it critique of normative and exclusionary notions of the human subject, understood along the lines of a series of dichotomous divides characterising modernity (human/nonhuman; cis-/hetero-normative/queered other; 'civilised'/'savage'; etc.), which are prevalent in more traditional approaches to research on death, dying and mourning. In this way, QDS also draws on more and less kindred fields of research: post- and decolonial studies, critical race studies, feminist posthumanities and environmental humanities, critical animal studies, queer studies, feminist studies, critical disability studies, to name a few.

By doing so, QDS mobilises three critical-theoretical entangled and entangling moves: decolonising, posthumanising and queering (Lykke in this special issue; Lykke forthcoming 2022). The decolonising move encompasses both the undoing of necropolitics of post/colonial violence combined with capitalist extractivism, and turning towards pluritopic hermeneutics (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2009). In doing so, decolonising death means refusing to follow the path of Western universalisms and instead engaging with the situated knowledge-seeking practices of indigenous philosophies and cosmologies, which shift towards different, critical-affirmative understandings of death.

The posthumanising move refers to systematic critique and dismantling of the planetary-scale machinery of annihilation of the more-than-human world in its ontological, epistemological and ethico-political magnitude. It encompasses critical analyses of the human/nonhuman divide and power differentials that have allowed for the reduction of the nonhuman to mere resource and instrument for human actions. In consequence, posthumanising death involves problematising philosophical and cultural meanings of extinction (cf. Rose 2012); focusing on environmental violence, environmental grief, and nonhuman death manufactured *en masse* through

anthropocentric habits of consumption and extractivist destruction. Furthermore, it entails taking seriously the issues of responsibility, accountability and care for/in dying more-than-human worlds, while remaining grounded in radical critiques of human exceptionalism (Haraway 2008). One way to mobilise posthumanising death is by way of deterritorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari 2004), where our understanding of death is no longer anchored in a value ascribed to the human subject, but instead moves towards "the multiplex, intra- and interacting ecologies of the non/living" (Radomska 2020: 131), characterised by "strange new becomings, new polyvocalities" (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 211).

Finally, the queering move of QDS refers to both (1) open-ended deconstruction of normativities in their various incarnations (e.g. Chen 2012), and (2) deconstructing and abolishing of heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity, binary gender and sexuality systems, governed by reproductive biopowers and reproductive futurism (e.g. Edelman 2008). Consequently, queering death in QDS ranges from unpacking and problematising modern Western ontologies of death and the life/death binary, grounded in Western philosophical and theological dualisms, to the critical analyses of the ways in which misogyny, trans- and queerphobia lead to 'social death', and how violence towards non-normative individuals strives to mark their lives and deaths as 'non-grievable' (Radomska and Lykke forthcoming).

In sum, through its three-partite analytics, QDS provides theoretical, methodological and ethico-political frameworks that are both crucial and necessary if, in a systematic manner, we are to analyse, critique and *resist* the entangled structures of global necropolitics – further amplified by the ongoing environmental, socio-economic and geo-political crises – and the accompanying systems of oppression: racism, sexism, speciesism, classism, and ableism, to name a few. Perhaps, if we follow this analytical path, it will open for us a critical and creative space for ontological and ethical reflection and different kinds of narratives in the times of global environmental disruption, violence and injustice, when 'our common present always exists in the wake of a complicated past, and ahead, to a common future that may best be understood as an ongoing end' (Ensor 2016: 55).

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Death as vibrancy

From the beginning, queer theory has articulated the terms, queer/queering, as open-ended and fluid categories. Therefore, I do not opt for only one fixed way of talking about queering death. I define queer/queering, preferably to be used in its processual verbform, as terms which, first of all, refer to a general undoing of all kinds of norms, normativities and underlying structures. However, I also see such a definition as but one instant within a multiple spectrum, in which another instant is made up of meanings specifically related to the undoing of heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity, and the gender binary. For me, queer/queering death at the latter end of the spectrum of meanings implies a situating and specifying of the genealogies of my embodied, queerfeminine desires. In this instant, I explore my urge to queer death, and the ways in which it is personally grounded in my queerfeminine desires to reconnect with my passed away beloved queermasculine, lesbian life partner. I take these queerfeminine desires as a queer-femme-inist (Dahl 2012) point of departure for my political, theoretical and ethical work to queer death. In sum, my work to queer death scales (zoom in/out) (Jain & Stacey 2015; Lykke 2019a) between a personal point of departure and over-arching ethico-political perspectives.

In my forthcoming book *Vibrant Death. A Posthuman Phenomenology of Mourning* (Lykke 2022), I follow this scaling practice insofar as I build an ethico-political figuration of death as vibrant from the personal story of my queerfeminine desires to reconnect with my passed away partner, now turned to ashes mixed with sand in a seabed built of algae (species: diatoms) 55 mio years ago. Diatoms are queer critters. They defy categorizations as either plants or animals (Allen *et al.* 2011). They are also old and wise. They have been around on the Earth for around 150 million years, and living diatoms are still today filling the waters of the planet, including the waters, where my beloved's ashes are scattered. Diatoms belong to the species of phytoplankton, which, like terrestrial plants, contains chlorophyll, transforms light to chemical energy through photosynthesis, and produces oxygen. Living diatoms are today reported annually to generate about 20% of the planet's oxygen. In 2011 it was discovered that diatoms, earlier considered plant-like due to their ability to photosynthesize, also have an urea cycle making them able to excrete nitrogen and metabolize in ways which, until then, were assumed to characterize only animals

and animal-like creatures (Allen *et al.* 2011). An alien, non-human, but very vibrant and queer world, abounding with living and fossilized diatoms, makes up the watery assemblages of which my beloved's ashes have become part (Lykke 2019b). Symphysizing (i.e. bodily empathizing, Lykke 2018) with my beloved's non-human remains and the waters where the ashes are scattered, I explore my position of excessive mourner to contemplate the concepts of life/death and human/non-human, taking lessons to reontologize them. Reflecting on this world, and trying to co-become with it, brought me to end my book (Lykke 2022) with a queering question: What if every critter's death was vibrant?

Implied in this question, is the argument that life/death and human/non-human should be seen as continuous, and not as dichotomously separated. I ground this argument in an immanence philosophical, vitalist materialist and spiritualist materialist framework (Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2006, 2013; Anzaldua 2015). I argue that life and death have been made into opposites by Western modernity, in its entanglement with Christianity and Cartesianism, and their celebration of destructive linear thought and contempt for flesh and matter, human as well as non-human. Therefore, queer/queering death means for me to approach death radically differently, i.e. to understand death as part of a life-death continuum, and to work from embodied desires to spiritually materially recognize and honour the ways in which decomposing and growing are totally entangled in each other – what feminist biophilosopher Marietta Radomska (2020) articulated as matter's being in a state of non/living. Rethinking death like this means to unlearn the epistemic habits of the sovereign human subject (often materializing in white, heteropatriarchally acting bodies who pursue (their own) immortality, while arrogantly sustaining norms and structures which make most other categories of bodies exploitable and disposable). Instead we should learn to understand ourselves as part of an egalitarian planetary kinship of vulnerable and mortal bodies, human and non-human, organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate.

Along these over-arching lines, I find it crucial to intersectionally combine queering with posthumanizing and decolonizing (see also Radomska in this special issue). Decolonizing means making visible and undoing the necropowers and necropolitics of colonialism, capitalism, and racism, which haunt societies, pushing forward structurally enforced distinctions between disposable/non-disposable, grievable/non-grievable bodies. This

perspective is entangled with a posthumanizing one, insofar as disposable/non-disposable, grievable/non-grievable bodies are to be understood not only within the framework of hierarchical human-human relations, but also against the background of a general casting of all non-human critters as in principle disposable, exploitable, and non-grievable. Entangling with decolonizing and posthumanizing efforts to undo necropolitical structures, queering death means making visible and critiquing not only norms and normativities, but also underlying structures which keep up norms and normativities. However, staying in a critical mode is not enough. The search for alternatives is crucial as well. The critique of structural and normativizing aspects of capitalist, post/colonical and speciesist necropolitics, the arrogant making live and letting die of vast (human and non-human) populations of disposable bodies must go hand in hand with efforts to create elsewhere-spaces for doing things otherwise (Lykke 2019a). My question: what if every critter's death was vibrant (Lykke 2022) is critically-affirmatively addressing the search for such open-ended spaces and timescapes for thinking and acting differently.

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What concreteness will do to resolve the uncertain

Talking about (queer) death we often find ourselves chewing through frontiers put in place by conventional ideas about what life is. To illustrate, I will use an aspect of my own research,[1] which – while with no intention to dismiss the importance of insights harbored in this field at large – wonders what happens if one reads the biomedical realization of grief as diagnosis as a response to something else?[2]

"Complicated Grief" (CG),[3] write Shear *et al.*, "entails harmful dysfunc-

1 Hillerup Hansen forthcoming.

2 Grief was added to *the International Classification of Diseases* (ICD) in 2018 and is awaiting entry into *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM).

3 That is, grief symptoms that do not wane or disappear after a set period of time. Here is an example of how "[p]rolonged and intensified acute grief" will have the bereaved show "symptoms of strong yearning for the person who died, frequent thoughts or images of the deceased person, feelings of intense loneliness or emptiness and a feeling that life without this person has no

tion in that a normal healing process has been derailed [… it] reflects an underlying psychobiological dysfunction" (2011: 3); "CG is a recognizable syndrome that can be reliably identified with several rating scales […]" (*Ibid.*: 4).[4]

This definition signals, first, to the influence biomedicine has had on psychiatry broadly.[5] Looking to the molecular to decipher pathology, biomedicine has established a causal relationship between the brain and the mind, making mental illness a reflection of its presumed biological basis (Rose 2001: 197-8).[6] Secondly, in this framing of the biological as cause[7] surfaces biomedicine's (neo)vitalist understanding of and investment in human life qua its organic capacity to live (*Ibid.*: 42).[8]

Couched in this causality, the argument that predominantly follows grief's rendering as pathology – namely, *for* the necessary, even inevitable, return of the "bereaved subject" to perceived normalcy (e.g. Shear *et al.* 2013; Zisook *et al.* 2012) – comes to deliver a normatively framed level of life energy as a neutral and uncontestable (because biologically wired)

purpose or meaning. Complications also lead to dysfunctional thoughts, maladaptive behaviours and emotion dysregulation such as troubling ruminations about circumstances or consequences of the death, persistent feelings of shock, disbelief or anger about the death, feelings of estrangement from other people and changes in behaviour focused on excessive avoidance of reminders of the loss or the opposite, excessive proximity seeking to try and feel closer to the deceased, sometimes focused on wishes to die or suicidal behaviour." (Shear *et al.* 2011: 3-4) See also Zisook *et al.*'s definition of 'complicated bereavement' (2012: 426).

4 This is a version of the general definition of grief one encounters in the research literature that has come out of the fields of medicine, psychiatry and public health before, but concentrating around, the removal of the 'Bereavement Exclusion' from the 2013-edition of the DSM.

5 While Shear *et al.* include "behavioral" and "psychological" aspects in their definition of CG (2011: 3), the centrality of their exemplary alignment of "psychobiological dysfunction" with "brain" and "underlying biology" (*Ibid.*: 5) makes the dominance of, what Nikolas Rose calls, biomedicine's "molecular" (2001: 215-6, 253-4) lens apparent. Rushing to aid this point is the context in which this alignment emerges where the treatment of, so called, "complicated grief" with anti-depressants has become possible with a much more pervasive push toward the use of psychopharmacology to treat mental illness (Rabinow & Rose 2006; Horwitz & Wakefield 2007).

6 In the words of Rose "mind is what brain does" (198). The term 'underlying' should therefore not be read as an indication of an older or more classical understanding of the brain as this deep and abstract phenomenon (130; Sedgwick 1981: 255) but rather as a 1:1 relation and mechanics in which the biological appears to be the control room that decides what is given expression, externally, as mental 'dys/functioning'.

7 Thus denoting a relation of impact *and* the biological as engine or vehicle i.e., as that which sets things into motion.

8 Elaborating the quality of this investment in the context of biomedicine's 'molecular' approach to the human body, Rose writes, "what is at issue is vitality at the level of the organism, where the very meaning and limits of life itself are subject to political contestation" (ibidem.).

fact of human life.[9] Still, the rather impressive epistemological feat, that is the realization of grief as diagnosis, manages something more. For hints of *what,* one need look no further than to a queer uptake of another vitalist discourse. This is, Freudian psychoanalysis (or its theorizations) illustrated, in the context of my work, by Leo Bersani.[10]

Wanting more from Freud's concept of drive than a theory of "normative sexual development" (1987: 217), Bersani picks up Freud's vitalist understanding of sex drive *as* libidinal or life force where it gestures to sex's "value of powerlessness" because denoting a "radical disintegration and humiliation of the self" (ibidem.).[11] Approaching sexual pleasure (*jouissance*) as but one expression of life as energetic force, Bersani makes an afterthought of the subject who, as the case of grief's biomedicalization well exemplifies, usually stands as a transcendental marker of (human) being in a Western tradition of philosophy and knowledge production.[12]

While left rather unexplored for another urgent point about the deeply violent nature of the Symbolic, the space of possibility left open by (my reverse engineering of) Bersani's reading of Freud holds out an intriguing insight.[13] Namely, that life is always more than or in excess of its capture in human form.[14] Noticeably provided by an alternative use of vitalism, this concept of life offers a different ontological point of departure than what its biomedical rendering – through the route of the subject's return to

9 What I mean to stress here is how a vitalist concept of life is influenced by normative ideations of how life should be *lived,* specifically, by contemporary ideals of happiness and wellbeing. See for example Cvetkovich 2012; Ahmed 2013; Shildrick 2015.

10 Interestingly Freud appears in the biomedical literature on grief (e.g. Shear *et al.* 2011). Because of the general shunning of psychoanalysis from the field of biomedicine, I do tend to think of his function as leverage for a biomedical point – which, by the way, has nothing to do with his concept of mourning (and melancholia) and the argument he makes in relation to it – as an indication of his near-pop cultural status more than it reflects a sincere intellectual and scientific alliance. This intriguing juncture remains, however, one of the reasons why I find it relevant to bring psychoanalytic insights to bear on a contemporary biomedical discourse.

11 This is a super speedy and condensed version of a much more elaborate reading (Hillerup Hansen forthcoming).

12 Loyal to the theoretical environment his argument is embedded in, and also to have it host a dose of critical insight on the kind of violence this concept denotes, Bersani names the subject a "proud subjectivity" (222).

13 The space I name ontological possibility, Bersani only remarks on in passing and by reference to Freud's returning speculations on sexual pleasure (217) as thresholds of intensities that have "the organization of the self [...] momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes" (*Ibid.*).

14 For examples of different (from this and each other) routes that remark on a similar point about the excess of animacy and life, respectively, see Chen 2011; Alaimo 2008.

'normalcy' – makes available.

Thus, Bersani points to the range a concept of vitalism traverses while he illustrates how life is not a neutral phenomenon. It is molded and often with great violence.[15] Consequently, the subject begins to look more like a model to capture what life *is*/should be, which in turn leaves me speculating if the troubling yet impressive epistemological feat of bringing grief as diagnosis into being also holds another quality?[16]

With the rendering of grief as "biological dysfunction" an abstract phenomenon, entailing ontological openness and existential uncertainty beyond what can be captured and resolved medically, is *made* concrete, physical, specific. Meaning, in describing grief in biological terms (physical) and defining it as 'syndrome' (specific), these reparative efforts may (also) be seeking to mend the blow of uncertainty loss impacts – either for the first time or over again – not just into a specific life but a steady (ontologically speaking), fixable (epistemologically speaking) world.[17]

Gauged through this prism, a biomedical literature's confident parading of a solution appears as a near-anxious measure of (self)protection against an, indeed overwhelming, ontological openness. With biomedicine serving as but one example, my symptomatic reading of what concreteness does to avert or resolve the abstract, open and uncertain, comes from a place of compassion toward a relatable need to repair (so as to feel safe and/or make things better). That said, this reading means to lean iinto the space of possibility highlighted above to explore what forms and modalities being may take (i.e. the range of existence).

15 Variations over this critical insight may be found in black studies (e.g. Wynter 2015) as well as anti- and posthumanism (e.g. Braidotti 2013).

16 Offering an, in this context, uncommon reading of the aggressions unleashed at gay men in particular during the early years of the US AIDS epidemic, Bersani sees in homophobia the 'symbolic' itself being triggered by and surging to calm 'excessive' energies into a malleable form. Transposed to the biomedical realization of grief, to my mind, this insight has the subject appear as at once the result of and a formula used for the eradication of unorganized life energies, rather than (as is the implied position in the biomedical logic of reparation) a natural state of being at which reparative return is aimed.

17 Here I am pointing both to a representationalist account of reality defined by ontologically inherent and independently existing objects (Barad 2003) as well as to an embodied sense of safety with/in the world that finds support in a broad generic range, spanning from scientific discourse (the biomedical being but one example) to knowledge and narrative more broadly or commonly, such as the kind of stories we tell, so as to convince, ourselves that 'everything will be OK'. Such embodied sense of safety is also very much a question of privilege and the material conditions in place to envelop some lives in more stability, comfort and protection than others.

In ending, here are some avenues this reading opens, which my research tracks. Textures to explore the flexing and morphing modalities of being unfold as the affective and sensory experiences of the, so called, 'bereaved subject' who slips from and jolts out of a 'normal' level of life.[18] So too does the 'deceased' – who, when marked as "hallucination" (e.g. Castelnovo *et al.* 2015), is altogether dismissed as nonexistent – offer site to explore the forms presence might take when not forced to appear in terms physical and at the present moment.[19]

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Queer objectivity as a response to denials of death

When I was around nine years-old I followed my dad – as I often did after he picked me up from school – through the basement of the family business he co-owned with my grandpa Lyle, toward my dad's tiny, cluttered office on the other side of the boiler room. The trip to his office took us past a penny candy machine that stood against the wall in a shared, basement office space with doors to the boiler room, the casket display room, the service elevator, and the small, two-table "prep room". On this day, Bruce, the only licensed mortician employed by my dad and grandpa, stood over a dead human body. "Hey Bruce!" I called, glancing through the ever-open prep room door. (This was a work space, and the only door that was *always* closed was the one that separated this space from the lushly carpeted, amber lit casket display room, through which "families" – my dad's customers – walked to shop for caskets.) No more than a few steps into the

[18] I am by no means trying to make a positive spin on what are, arguably, difficult and taxing experiences related to grief (the same way arguing they are modes of resistance, vis-à-vis the expectations that shape neoliberal subjecthood, can have the unfortunate effect of romanticizing depression or other mental health struggles). What I am, however, trying to signal is a (reading) 'otherwise' whose critical and affirmative potencies are not defined by dichotomies such as positive/negative, good/bad, resistance/coercion etc. As example, I am too briefly recapping my alternative reading of grief's symptomatic profile – which can be found elsewhere in full length (Hillerup Hansen forthcoming) – as a way to reconfigure affective and sensory experiences related to grief beyond their function as diagnostic index (cf. footnote 3).

[19] I am pointing to Jacques Derrida's characterization of a metaphysics of presence, founded, he argues, in the verifiable "physical presence and time of the present" (1996; see also Derrida 2012).

boiler room I stopped dead in my tracks. What did I just see? Retracing my path, I stood before the open prep room to survey the scene.

Wearing little more than a white apron to protect his dress shirt, tie, and suit pants – no gown, cap, face shield, goggles, or shoe coverings, for this was the late 1970s, roughly a decade before the advent of what John Troyer calls the "HIV/AIDS Corpse" (2020: 59) and its concomitant PPE. Bruce stood facing me on the opposite side of a white, ceramic table that tilted slightly to my right toward a sink lying far too low for comfortably washing hands. This sink had for decades received various bodily fluids, as well as some of the embalming fluids used to prepare and preserve bodies for viewing. At the slightly raised end of the table the head of a dead man sat raised on a hard plastic, rose-colored head rest. The skin was pulled back from the man's open rib cage, revealing muscle, bone, and an empty torso. An organ donor lay on the table.

For the first time in my life, it struck me that the normalcy of human corpses in my daily experience was very abnormal (though I did not have the capacity to think it queer). The things with which I had grown so familiar – dead bodies in various states of dress or undress, black body bags with broad, rough zippers, the smell of embalming fluids (for me inseparable from the fusty, chalky taste of stale penny candy), the sights and sounds of grieving people, hearses, the back doors and insides of nursing homes, hospital morgues and loading docks, cannulas, trochars, bristly pink eye caps, those uncomfortable-looking rose-colored head rests, collapsible casket trucks skirted in ruffled red velvet, organ music, eulogies, and flower arrangements heavy with lilies and gladiolas – these things were now emerging from the background of my childhood, and they were growing more powerful. I soon learned that I could wield my familiarity with the dead to make people feel uncomfortable and to make people laugh – often both at the same time. As a middle schooler, playful jokes about cannibalism and necrophilia were the spellcraft through which I controlled the narratives, fantasies, and affects surrounding the mysterious source of my family's livelihood.

But the power I wielded as an adolescent was coiled in the privilege of a birthright: a birthright that granted access to the dead, and that permitted movement through *all* the spaces of the funeral home. I could walk through walls. More literally, I could walk through ever-closed doors that separated the "front stage" spaces (staged for public rituals of grief and

consumption) from the "back stage" spaces (reserved for professional rites of knowing and production). Being able to see – and to touch, smell, hear, and taste (in penny candy, in my fingertips) – all the spaces and textures of the funeral home meant that, in *my* experience, very little was forbidden. Moreover, as a straight, cisgender, white, male I cannot claim to *be* queer in any unproblematic sense. There! I just came clean. (I also just got dirty – like "[subject] matter out of place"(Douglas 1966).) How to sort this. Donna Haraway teaches me here.

> Vision is *always* a question of the power to see – and perhaps the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood [and flesh] were my eyes crafted? (Haraway 1988: 585)

It is perhaps a stroke of moral luck that my seeing eyes were crafted by a *donor* – by someone who (I presume) *willingly* gave his flesh to others. My eyes were crafted, or, more precisely, 'roughed-in', by willing flesh and blood. But that fortunate logic only goes so far. The donor's flesh was exceptionally accessible, but his body was one among hundreds that I had the power to see. Still, my view was not "unmarked" and "self-identical" (*Ibid.*). I saw dead flesh from a position of a funeral service insider: a normative position powered by social, legal, cultural, professional, economic, and material networks. The funeral-industrial complex wields potent necropower. Yet my position was (and remains) marked as deviant. I was becoming aware of a split through myself that mimicked the boundaries between the front and back stage spaces of the funeral home: a split not unlike the one my then-six-year-old daughter pointed to when, during our third day together in Santiago, Dominican Republic, she asked, "Dad, would I be me if I wasn't *me*?" Would I be me if I had grown up differently? Would I be me if I had never seen dead bodies with these powerful, deviant eyes? Something opens up in the passage between "I" and "me". George Herbert Mead (2015 [1934]) found "generalized others" moving through that passage. María Lugones (1987) found room to move, play, and love in that space. Donna Haraway (1988) found space for objectivity in that opening. Queer theorists explore a seemingly infinite source of social-creative potential in the passage between an "I" and "me" that are free to associate or dissociate, or to collaborate or contend with ever-evolving social, political, biological, ethical, and sexual normativities.

What sorts of *necro*-normativities and *thanato*-normativities will emerge in response to the question, "what do we talk about when we talk about queer death?" Is there anything special about the normativities surrounding death and "dead matter" (Schwartz 2015)? Or are matters of death and dead matter just arbitrarily bounded objects of inquiry or domains of action?

In 1991, while in college, I briefly worked as a live-in night attendant and embalming assistant at a Fargo, North Dakota funeral home, where I was expected to do a wide variety of jobs, including lawn mowing, hearse and limousine washing, vacuuming, furniture dusting, answering phones, assisting with funerals and visitations, body removals (from private homes, nursing homes, hospitals, roadsides, train stations, etc.), and assisting licensed embalmers with their techno-artistry. One reason I quit this job was because, in my employers' eyes, each of my tasks was considered (and compensated) the same as any of the others. Yet, it seemed to me there were important differences between vacuuming a floor and aspirating a dead body, between washing a car and washing a corpse. After I quit the funeral home, I took a job as an after-hours infectious waste janitor at a Fargo hospital. My job, which I shared with two or three others, was to collect the red bags, the contents of red, plastic sharps containers, and the waste from the chemotherapy room. These things were not handled by the "regular" janitorial staff. There are different kinds of waste and different kinds of "cleaning up". Here I found some recognition of the differences that went unmarked in the Fargo funeral home. Functions and structures matter.

When we talk about queer death, do we talk about a *special* site for queering? Do we talk about *unique* agencies and practices? Do we talk about hitherto underexplored and underappreciated forms of experience, labor, embodiment, and ways of knowing? Do we talk about whom and what have been excluded (and *by* whom and *by* what) from our individual and collective recognitions of, and encounters with, death? We talk about all of these things, and talking about all of these things holds forth the possibility, I want to suggest, of *queer objectivity* – an onto-ethic-epistem-ology (Barad 2007) of conversation and exchange: not an objectivity that reduces death and the dead body to passively inert objects for collective conversation and analysis; not an objectivity that approaches death as a resource; not an objectivity that fails to privilege perspectives that warrant

privilege; and not an objectivity that hypostatizes disruption as the ultimate guide to life, death, reality, and imagination. Rather, queer objectivity recognizes death as an actor – sometimes a collaborator, sometimes an adversary, sometimes a fellow traveler – that has its say in ever-shifting assemblages of humans, more-than-humans, and technologies at a variety of scales: individual, social, ecological, planetary. Death plays the intruder, whose interruptions cryonicist "immortalists" (Farman 2020) seek to silence. Death's prolific production of corpses during the COVID-19 pandemic has taxed governments, grievers, dyers, first responders, and "last responders" (Rosenfeld 2021). Death marks bodies as those that may die, those that must die, those that may be forgotten, or those that must be remembered. Death isn't impartial. And the study of death should reflect that fact. It makes sense for queer objectivity to privilege non-normative voices – especially the voices of those who challenge dominant norms of gender and sexuality – for it is in privileging non-normative voices that the contours of death's partiality get seen and felt most clearly and most deeply.

It has been over thirty years since I have touched a dead human body, but less than ten years since I transitioned from a philosophy department to a Science and Technology Studies (STS) department, and, in so doing, discovered death studies. As a philosopher I wrote and taught about both epistemology (including feminist epistemology) and normative and applied ethics. As an STS and death studies scholar, I have translated these interests into teaching and writing about technological expertise, gender, bodies, and labor with respect to the processing and disposal of dead human bodies. Given my background, it should come as no surprise that my STS/death studies scholarship foregrounds questions about professionalization, labor, and expertise. Funeral industrialists (including funeral directors, embalmers, cremationists, and cemetery operators) have an interest in marking themselves as occupants of a distinctive social and professional domain – the domain of "death care".

There are multiple means by which funeral industrialists delimit the bounds of their professional jurisdiction and cultural authority over death care. Evoking the Weberian concepts of "status groups" and "castes", Spencer Cahill (1999) shows how mortuary science students at a North American community college deploy their deviant familiarity with dead human flesh as a "mark of honor" or "nobility" (117) that sets them apart

from a generalized other that is in turn marked by "pathological death denial" (113).

> This rhetoric of death denial and public ignorance was central to these students' professionalization. It transforms the stigma of their chosen occupational identity into a mark of honor: funeral directors' familiarity with and knowledge of death and its aftermath set them not only apart from but above the death denying lay public. (Cahill 1999: 114)

Memorable appeals to a purported cultural pathology of "death denial" include both Ernest Becker (1973) and Philippe Ariès (1981), and the rhetoric of death denial remains alive and well. Proponents of the contemporary, U.S. home funeral movement use the term to set themselves apart not only from a generalized other, but also from the normative institutions and practices of funeral industrialists (Olson 2016). Champions of "death positivity", too, use death denial as a foil for their own ability and willingness to discuss the particularities and practicalities of death, dying, and the disposition of human remains (Doughty 2021). As Lyn Lofland (2019 [1978]) points out, death denial repeatedly gets evoked as the proper antagonist to higher, nobler, or more *authentic* relationships with death. Lofland is skeptical of the reality – let alone the pathological nature – of death denial, but, she notes, "the importance" of the rhetoric of death denial " . . . is not its 'truth' but its utility" as a tool for challenging "the 'conventional view of death'" or "the conventional wisdom about death" (73).

Queer death studies, too, can make use of death denial as a tool for challenging normativites that dominate death studies. Queer death studies can strategically deploy death denial as a point of leverage for critiquing powerful, partial perspectives that really do *deny* non-normative perspectives on (and experiences of) death, dying, and the disposal of dead human bodies. Queer death studies can reveal the *truth* of death denial's realities by responding to the voices and fleshes of those whose relationships with death have been denied. In doing so, queer death can avoid *caste*-ing itself as a status group by refusing the heroic goal of authenticity and embracing, instead, the attentive exchange of *queer objectivity*.

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The queer lack of a chthonic instinct

Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard opens his celebrated novel *A Death in the Family* (2009) with the observation that the sight of a corpse is taboo and that we as a society do the utmost to hide the dead body from public view. Why can't a dead body be on display for an hour or two? Why must it immediately be removed or covered? He writes that it is "as though we possessed some kind of chthonic instinct, something deep within us that urges us to move death down to the earth whence we came" (2009: 7).

The use of the word "chthonic", derived from the Greek word *khthonios* meaning "of the earth", is curious (Fontelieu 2010: 152). Chthonic refers to what lies underneath the Earth's surface, that is, in the underworld (Fairbanks 1900: 242). The Greeks worshipped both Chthonic gods such as Hades and Persephone who flourished in darkness, as well as the Olympian deities that are associated with light. But as Burckett and Marinatos point out, "the semiotics of light and darkness are nothing if not complex in Greek thought" (2010: xv). For the Greeks, light may represent life, order, and vision, and darkness evil, violence, and ignorance; but the line separating the two was often blurred (Burckett & Marinatos 2010: xv). This is because there is a surprising duality to the term: chthonic evokes both abundance (light) *and* a state of darkness (Fontelieu 2010: 152). As Burkett and Marinatos wryly intimate: "creatures of darkness … need to surface or communicate their existence in the world of light" (2010: xvii). The chthonic deities were connected to souls and for this reason they evoked both dread and hope as the Greeks sought their blessings for the journey into the afterlife (Fairbanks 1900: 252). By worshipping chthonic deities, Greeks were, according to Fontelieu, "participating in a relationship with the projected darker parts of their own nature" (2010: 152).

In classical studies, Fontaine has traced the dualism of light and darkness in the Greeks and beyond and argues that dualistic thought can be found in all places and at all times, suggesting that it is necessary to make sense of the world (1986). Succumbing to the depths of the underworld, and the light/dark dualism that such a descent implies, is a metaphor that has extended beyond classical studies and religion and into the disciplinary areas of psychoanalysis and literary studies. Fontelieu reads the Greek worship of Chthonic cults and darkness through a psychoanalytical lens and suggests it was liberating for the Greeks insofar as it acknowledged

the darker parts of human nature:

> Today, rather than a reverential attitude toward the awesome power of the chthonic force, even in psychological systems and religions, much of this drive is the target for a life long battle to contain, banish, or defeat it in oneself and in society. Unlike the Greek chthonic cults, today darkness is not worshipped, it is feared. Denial of the dark side of the soul (dark did not mean evil to the chthonic cults, but implied an insufficiency of illumination) inevitably creates projection of one's own unacknowledged urges onto others. (2010: 152)

Fontelieu's reading of the Chthonic realm is drawn from Jungian psychoanalytic theory that also toys with a dualism between darkness and light. According to Jung: "Sexuality is of the greatest importance as the expression of the chthonic spirit [which] is 'the other face of God,' the dark-side of the God-Image" (1968: 168). The chthonic realm can function as a constructive site where Jung's individuation process can be accomplished: the unification of the Self is attained by journeying towards the underground of human consciousness. Literary theory has adopted the Jungian idea that individuation is achieved through unique psychological phases. As Kiliçarslan describes the process: "The *Chthonios* is where archetypes reside and wait to be explored through mythological descent into the underground (*Katabasis*) which begins with the persona and ends at the Self, the deepest layer of the psyche" (2008: 55). By descending into the underworld characters can "face their true identity", revealing their subconscious desires and motivations as they "voyage towards self-realization" (Kiliçarslan 2008: 55-56).

If descending into the underworld is such a fundamental part of achieving self-realization, whether in individuals or texts, it is telling that societies tend to banish darkness from plain sight. Knausgaard's contention that we are possessed by "some kind of chthonic instinct … that urges *us* to move death down to the earth whence we came" (my emphasis) is therefore an apt metaphor to describe modernity's quest for lightness (2009: 7). But the "us" in Knausgaard's formulation not only acts as a universalizing totality – we are all one, we all share a *chthonic instinct* that makes us human – but also, I suggest, erases queer subjects that do not always have the privilege of being able to "move death down to the earth" and into the underworld. Here, then, lies a simple provocation: Queer subjects, as much as they would like to "move death down to the earth", are continually

reminded that their existence unsettles and exceeds the binary between life and death. Or to paraphrase Burkett and Marinatos, the semiotics of light and darkness are nothing if not complex in queer lives (2010: xv). I am not referring to death here as a finality, even though for many queer subjects death is often final (HIV/AIDS, transphobic femicide, hangings), but rather as a symbol that queer subjects experience as a looming presence. Queer subjects, because of their very queerness, not only do not have a chthonic instinct but are rather defined by a *lack* of such an instinct.

By saying that queers lack a chthonic instinct I am not mirroring Freud's contention that "the goal of all life is death" (1922). Nor am I aligning my argument with Edelman's conjecture of a politics of the death drive (though I share his assertion that "queerness can never define an identity, it can only ever disturb one") (2004: 17). Instead, my argument is that for many queer subjects death is unavoidable, inescapable, impossible to "move down to the earth". It is the queer subject's apartness that makes the presence of death so very present. It begins with the apartness experienced in childhood. Then adolescence. Then adulthood. It seeps into the cracks exposed in the shame that that apartness often provokes (Downs 2012).

My own childhood was defined by a looming presence of death that was experienced as a pre-trauma, a *catastrophe yet-to-come*. I longed for death in order to avoid the catastrophe of having my queerness exposed. And death was always preferable to the shame that the exposure of my sexuality would wreak on both my Self and my family. For many queer subjects death is thus a long-standing companion. Queer subjects do not have the privilege of resorting to a chthonic instinct, to move death to the earth, as death is so intimately tied to our fantasies.

As well as a catastrophe yet-to-come, queer subjects may also experience death in the reverse. Death is no longer *our* wish-fulfilment but rather the wish-fulfilment of others. When my queerness was exposed to my father and I told him that I had *always* been queer, he responded: "I wish you had told me earlier. I would have thrown you to the sharks". You get so accustomed to your own queer death fantasies that you are shocked when others verbalize the same fantasy back at you. But the shock does not lie in the words themselves but in the confirmation of the fantasy itself. Telling a queer subject that they would be better off dead simply confirms that their pre-trauma was not imagined but part of their lived experience of darkness. The queer figure thus becomes the creature of darkness that needs

to surface to communicate their existence in the world of light (Burckett & Marinatos 2010, xvii). But it is difficult for light to penetrate when queer subjects are forced to constantly project the darker parts of their own nature (Fontelieu 2010: 152).

Fontelieu argues modern societies have sought to banish the state of darkness from our psychological systems and religions (2010: 152). She contends that in contemporary societies today, "only if the darker aspects of the personality are defeated does the transformation end in a better life" (2010: 152). But for queer subjects darkness is inescapable. We do not have the capacity to dream that a better life is possible by emerging into the light. We are perennially stuck between light and darkness.

In his *Cruising Utopia* José Esteban Muñoz posits that "queerness is not yet here" (2009: 1). By this he meant that queerness is about a future potentiality and the "rejection of the here and now" (2009: 1). By setting up queerness as an ontological object of hope, a utopia, he underlined how queerness can be "distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (2009: 1). It is perhaps because "we are not yet queer" that we lack a chthonic instinct (2009: 1). But if we agree with Munóz's assertion that "queerness is always in the horizon" (2009: 11) then the queer figure can delight in provoking both dread and hope, joy and despair. We might not have a chthonic instinct but our queer horizons provide us with the potential to radically re-engage with the darker parts of our own nature. Let there be light. Let there be darkness. We are the shadow. Your shadow. Us.

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