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

Edited by Mattia Petricola

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Introduction: Researching Queer Death

Abstract: The present article serves as an introduction to the dossier *What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?*, edited by M. Petricola. This introduction briefly interrogates the premises, scope, and objectives of Queer Death Studies (QDS) in such a way as to complement the views expressed by the contributors to this collection. I will begin to discuss the premises on which QDS are based in a preamble focused on Italo Calvino's book *Mr. Palomar.* Section one will provide a more systematic and analytical perspective on these same premises. I will move on to reconstruct some crucial moments in the genealogy of QDS in Section two and conclude by sketching a research program for QDS in Section three.

Keywords: thanatology; death studies; queer theory; identity; category theory.

The six-part dossier to which these few pages serve as an introduction attempts to map some regions of the area of inquiry that sits at the crossroads of death studies (or thanatology) and queer studies. The multi-authored articles that follow, each made up of five to seven short essays, are meant to be read by (and accessible to) scholars from both these fields. They aim to give the reader an idea of what kind of questions one might address when researching queer death and what theories, methods, and hermeneutical tools one might adopt when answering those questions. The articles' titles (*1/ Theories and definitions; 2/ LGBTQ+ necropolitics; 3/ Queering death beyond the human; 4/ Queering death in the medical and health humanities; 5/ Writing and filming queer deaths; 6/ New perspectives in queer death studies*) already provide a preliminary map of the field.

The present introduction will not summarize the contents of the dossier – this task is covered by the articles' abstracts. Rather, it will try to briefly interrogate the premises, scope, and objectives of Queer Death Studies (abbreviated from now on as QDS) in such a way as to complement the views expressed by the contributors to this collection. I will begin to discuss the premises on which QDS are based in a preamble focused on Italo Calvino's book *Mr. Palomar.* Section one will provide a more systematic

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and analytical perspective on these same premises. I will move on to reconstruct some crucial moments in the genealogy of QDS in Section two and conclude by sketching a research program for QDS in Section 3.

Preamble: learning to be dead

This preamble draws its title from the last chapter of Italo Calvino's 1983 collection of short fictions *Mr. Palomar*, in which the protagonist "decides that from now on he will act as if he were dead, to see how the world gets along without him" (Calvino 1999 [1983]: 108). Mr. Palomar soon begins to discover that "being dead is less easy than it might seem" (*Ibidem*). How should he think about his relation with the world of the living? How is he supposed to conceptualize his afterlife identity? How should he define himself? And in relation to who/what?

> The dead should no longer give a damn about anything because it is not up to them to think about it any more; and even if that may seem immoral, it is in this irresponsibility that the dead find their gaiety (110).

> The problem is not the change in what he does but in what he is, or more specifically in what he is as far as the world is concerned. Before, by "world" he meant the world plus himself; now it is a question of himself plus the world minus him (109).

> So he might as well get used to it: for Palomar, being dead means resigning himself to the disappointment in finding himself the same in a definitive state, which he can no longer hope to change (110).

> Therefore Palomar prepares to become a grouchy dead man, reluctant to submit to the sentence to remain exactly as he is; but he is unwilling to give up anything of himself, even if it is a burden (125).

This train of thought, in the end, takes Palomar further and further beyond his death. Firstly, he contemplates the extinction of the human species, then he travels to the end of time itself:

> Thinking of his own death, Palomar already thinks of that of the last survivors of the human species or of its derivations or heirs. On the terrestrial globe, devastated and deserted, explorers from another planet land; they decipher the clues recorded in the hieroglyphics of the pyramids and in the punched cards of the

electronic calculators; the memory of the human race is reborn from its ashes and is spread through the inhabited zones of the universe. And so, after one postponement or another, the moment comes when it is time to wear out and be extinguished in an empty sky, when the last material evidence of the memory of living will degenerate in a flash of heat, or will crystallize its atoms in the chill of an immobile order (125).

Mr. Palomar's musings might seem a little more than an idle, quintessentially post-modern conceptual game. However, behind them lies an only apparently absurd question that could serve as a crucial starting point for QDS as an intellectual and critical project: how do we learn to be dead?

This question, in turn, might be broken up into sub-questions as: how do we learn to categorize someone as dead? What does categorizing someone as dead imply (for us as individuals, for a group of people, for a whole culture)? How do we learn to rethink our identity and the identities of others when they begin to shift from life to death? How do we learn to *acknowledge* death?

1 Queer, death, queer death: some theoretical premises

Death is not a natural event. This might appear as a provocative statement; in fact, this is the basic premise of a number of schools of thought within the field of thanatology. If we think of death as natural, we fail to acknowledge that death is, first and foremost, a social construct whose shape and structure change endlessly across time and space. Attaching an adjective to the word 'death' – natural, biological, universal, necessary, among countless others – often (always?) implies inscribing death within a system of knowledge, that is, according to Michel Foucault, within a system of power. If we think of death as an event, we fail to acknowledge the *process* of dying and, in more general terms, the different temporalities along which dying, death, mourning, and disposal unfold.

Since the primary aim of every social construct is that of categorizing the individuals of a given social group by assigning *identities* to them, the word "dead" can be said to refer to a social identity – whose exact structure and implications, once again, change dramatically from one culture to another. According to queer death studies, identities are not simply and passively possessed, but rather actively *performed* by the members of a social group. One needs to learn how to enact, embody, and recognize an identity – all

activities which, in turn, require knowledge and training. As an intellectual and critical endeavor, queer studies can be seen as based not only on the premise that identities are performances, but also on the idea that *every* identity construct should be problematized and deconstructed. From this perspective, queer studies and LGBTQ+ studies are not synonyms. In the words of Carmen Dell'Aversano, queer

> does not simply maintain that it is OK to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender [...] but states that any construction of identity (including LGBT ones) is a performance constituting a subject which does not "exist" prior to it, and encourages to bring into being (both as objects of desire, of fantasy and of theoretical reflection and as concrete existential and political possibilities) alternative modes of performance (2010: 74-75).

Adopting an analogously wide and inclusive framework, Radomska, Mehrabi and Lykke (2019) define queer death studies as a field

> addressing issues of death, dying, mourning and afterlife in a queering, relentlessly norm-critical mode, questioning ontologies, epistemologies and ethics, as well as bio- and necropolitical agendas, while affirmatively looking for alternatives (5).

In more concrete terms, this means that

> QDS attends, among other things, to issues of diverse historical, cultural, social, political and economic conditions; to the entangled relations between human and nonhuman others in the current context of planetary environmental disruption; and to the differential experiences of marginalised communities, groups and individuals who are excluded from hegemonic stories and discourses on death, dying, grief and mourning (Radomska, Mehrabi & Lykke 2020: 88).

From a methodological perspective, as conceptualized by Radomska, Mehrabi and Lykke, QDS are based on the idea that "death becomes meaningful in terms of assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari 2004) and intra-actions (Barad 2007)".

By looking at this description of QDS in the light of the premises that I posited earlier, QDS could be framed, in general terms, as a field tackling such questions as (among many others): which power-knowledge systems arrogate to themselves the right to situate the members of a given culture

along the life-death continuum? In other words, who *owns* this continuum? Who decides how to structure and define it? Which performances contribute to defining and structuring the identities along this continuum? What happens if someone (or something) cannot or *does not want to* adhere to these performances and identities?

In this sense, QDS can be defined as a hermeneutic stance aimed at problematizing and deconstructing the identities that define death, dying, mourning, and disposal within a given social group by analyzing the performances on which these identities depend. I will explore the implications of this definition later on; first, I will briefly investigate the origins of QDS.

2 Where do Queer Death Studies come from?

Obviously, the definitions of QDS formulated by Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke between 2019 and 2020 did not emerge from a vacuum. Scholars and activists have been working at the intersection of thanatology and queer at least since the 1980s. As the contributions that follow will prove extensively, a seminal text for queer theory like Leo Bersani's *Is the rectum a grave?* can be considered, without hesitation, a pioneering work of QDS. Originally written as a review of Watney 1987, Bersani's essay dialogues with Foucault's history of sexuality, Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, and the theory of BDSM in order to study

> what might be called a frenzied epic of displacements in the discourse on sexuality and on AIDS. The government […] is more interested in those who may eventually be threatened by AIDS than in those stricken with it. There are hospitals in which concern for the safety of patients who have not been exposed to HIV takes precedence over caring for those suffering from an AIDS-related disease. Attention is turned away from the kinds of sex people practice to a moralistic discourse about promiscuity. The impulse to kill gays comes out as a rage against gay killers deliberately spreading a deadly virus among the "general public" (Bersani 1987: 220).

Drawing on Watney's notion of the rectum as grave, Bersani embraces a disruptive, antisocial, apocalyptic view of the relation between queerness and death by affirming that

> if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared – differently – by men and women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be

celebrated for its very potential for death. Tragically, AIDS has literalized that potential as the certainty of biological death, and therefore reinforced the heterosexual association of anal sex with a self-annihilation originally and primarily identified with the fantasmatic mystery of an insatiable, unstoppable female sexuality. It may, finally, be in the gay man's rectum that he demolishes his own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with a murderous judgment against him (222).

Such an apocalyptic view of queer death has been revived, from a Freudian-Lacanian perspective, by Lee Edelman in another classic of queer theory, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).

Fundamental contributions to the field that we define today as QDS were also provided by another key figure for the development of queer studies like Judith Butler, who posited one of the main theoretical tenets of QDS in *Precarious Life* (2004):

[s]ome lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (XIV-XV)

One year before the publication of *Precarious Life*, postcolonial thinker Achille Mbembe (2003) had coined terms like "necropolitics", "necropower", and "death-worlds", that is, "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead" (Mbembe 2019 [2016]: 92). Formulated in the context of postcolonial studies, Mbembe's theory has become an essential part of QDS' theoretical arsenal (see, for example, Haritaworn, Kuntsman & Posocco 2014).

These are just a few examples of how we could investigate and reconstruct the cultural genealogy (or, rather, the cultural genealogies) of QDS in all their richness and plurality. Attempting to draw such genealogies could indeed be a major task in the context of a research program for QDS. In the next and final section, I will focus on what this research program might look like.

Notes towards a research program for Queer Death Studies

Defining QDS as the project of problematizing and deconstructing the identities that define death, dying, mourning, and disposal within a given social group by analyzing the performances on which these identities depend implies that QDS can develop along two main lines of research. The first line, rooted in the premise that identities can be defined as networks of traits, could deconstruct the mechanisms through which certain networks of traits create socially recognizable and valued identities while other networks generate dysphoric or socially devalued identities – for example, the trait "human" makes a life much more grievable than the trait "farm animal" or "glacier". This line of inquiry might also benefit from the application of the branch of philosophy known as category theory (Rosch 1999; Lakoff 1987) to the study of social constructs.

The second line of inquiry, rooted in the premise that identity traits depend on performances, could deconstruct, on a more concrete and "hands-on" level, how specific performances are enacted, recognized, and associated to certain traits, as well as how traits are assigned to actual bodies of groups of bodies. For example: what happens if we examine the concrete performances through which the representatives of the medical power-knowledge system determine the clinical death of a patient (from checking the lack of pulse and breathing to ascertaining the absence of brain signals through a brain scan) from the perspective of QDS? Or the performances through which a death certificate signed by a medic leads to the creation of legal documents? Or the ways of expressing grief that are considered inadequate, embarrassing or obscene in a given social group?

These two lines of inquiry, of course, are closely intertwined and involved in a constant process of cross-fertilization. Given this framework, the potential objects of inquiry are countless: medical cases in which situating a patient along the life-death spectrum represents a particularly complex task (like coma or consciousness disorders); the environmental cost of human health (see Standefer 2020), for example in the cases of cancer therapy or COVID-19 vaccines; the relation between health and environmental humanities; the construction of what Susan Merrill Squier (2004) defines "liminal lives" (embryos and stem cells, among others); the relation between human and non-human practices of grief; the application

of QDS to design and architecture, from the making of caskets to the making of cemeteries; practices of ecological grief like those described in Talk Death (2020) and Milman (2021); the possibility to theorize the presence of a "necrophiliac gaze" in art (example might include, among many others, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ophelia* and Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat*); how art and fiction can help us re-imagine and re-construct the thanatological imagination of our time (RADOMSKA 2016; PETRICOLA 2018).

We have just begun to scratch the surface.

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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.

KEYWORDS: Thanatology, Death Studies, Queer Theory, Mourning, Grief.

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

pass or don't pass. We count as lives or don't count contingent on our pass-ability. 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 sub-jects? 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 resis-tances of creativity against anthropocentric definitions of life. Embracing precarity, treacherous to the dominant value of the dominant being. Trai-tors 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 dossier; 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 & 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/colonial 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-

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[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)

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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

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

2/ LGBTQ+ necropolitics

Abstract: This is part 2 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, gender studies, and LGBT+ studies and tackle questions such as: how can queer death studies problematise heteronormative/cisnormative constructions of dying, death, and mourning? How can queer death studies approach the post-mortem manipulation of transgender identities? How can this discipline change the current cultural perception of the link between queerness and suicide?
The present article includes the following contributions: – Alasuutari, V., Queering the heteronormative and cisnormative lifeworld of death; – Whitestone S., Queering as identity preservation: transgender identity after death; – Goret Hansen L., When I talk about queer death, I talk about trans-necropolitics and suicide prevention; – Jaworski K., Notes towards rethinking the agency of queer youth suicide; – Doletskaya O., Queer death and victimhood in Russia: 'westernised queer activism'; – Zubillaga-Pow J., Lesbian *Liebestod*: sapphic suicide in a Chinese society.

Keywords: Thanatology, Death Studies, Queer Studies, Suicide, Grief.

Queering the heteronormative and cisnormative lifeworld of death

One of the norm-critical angles through which queer death studies (QDS) shake the established ontologies of death is to explore and question heteronormativity and cisnormativity related to death, loss, and grief. Death is an inescapable part of the lifeworld, understood here in a Habermasian sense as a culturally transmitted and organized stock of knowledge about life and its principles (Habermas 1987). This means that the traditions of thought and action guiding other aspects of the lifeworld are present in the context of death as well, with different kinds of normativities being no exception. Building further on the Habermasian articulation, I argue that this stock of knowledge guides people towards unproblematized notions of life and death that are culturally taken for granted (ibid: 124-125). However,

what seems to be "'always already' familiar" (ibid: 125) about death in the prescriptive continuum of the lifeworld may not always apply. As I will show in this essay, the socio-cultural practices of death and bereavement are filtered through the normative ideation of what it means to be human, what it means to die as a human, and what counts as a grievable loss for humans caring for each other. This ideation is guided by heteronormative and cisnormative presumptions of life and relationships, making queer and trans experiences of death and loss often invisible and unaccounted for in various institutional contexts, bereavement support services, and established death rituals (Alasuutari 2020a).

As life in itself is highly relational (Roseneil & Ketokivi 2016), what is significant in human death does not only concern the dying individual but also other humans (and other life forms) in their vicinity. To study death is often to study those who have experienced death as a loss of another (e.g. Alasuutari 2020a; Lykke 2015; 2018; Jonsson 2019). With a vast variety of intimate relations, our losses take on varying forms. However, not all types of loss attract an equal amount of attention (in research or otherwise) or even sympathy from others who are still alive.

Instead of embracing this multiplicity of intimate relating and subsequently the multiplicity of death-related losses, institutionally death is often seen as a family matter. Losses that matter the most are considered to be losses within a heteronormative nuclear family structure: the death of a (married) spouse, a child, a parent or a sibling (Doka 2002). These types of loss are both legally and socially recognized as losses worth grieving. For instance, the loss of a family member (of this kind) may justify one receiving paid bereavement leave from work, organizing the funeral of the deceased in culture-bound ways, and inheriting their property based on legislative rights. While such legislation is often designed for those who have a job, who can afford funeral costs, and who have something to inherit – being thus indifferent to class differences (see e.g. Seeck 2017) – it is also designed for those who build their intimate relationships in the "right way", that is, following the heteronormative family script. This is apparent in bereavement support groups that are more often available to those who have lost a spouse or a child than, say, a friend. Moreover, such groups may be divided by the binary categories of gender, following the idea that there is something essentially different in male and female grieving (Doka & Martin 2011). An alignment to the family norms can also be seen in the

visual legacies of gravescapes, highlighting the heteronormative belonging in the form of the shared graves of heterosexual couples and larger family units with shared bloodlines (Dunn 2016; Alasuutari 2020a). But what if life – and therefore the deaths we inescapably encounter during that life – does not follow the heteronormative and cisnormative script?

According to Doka's (2002) sociological theory on disenfranchised grief, grief that follows other kinds of losses is not regarded as equally valid, intense, or in Butler's terms (2004), grievable. This shows up in LGBTQ people's bereavement stories as a lack of socio-legal recognition, exclusion, and mitigation of pain (McNutt & Yakushko 2013). Following these observations, queer death can mean death that escapes the heteronormative matrix and family structure as well as the cisnormative notions of gender. It instead takes place within other forms of intimate relating and being in the world. Studying queer death in this sense may mean, for example, studying how people leading queer and trans lives experience the death of their intimate others in a world that does not always recognize them, their relationships, or the complications caused in connection to death by the marginalization operating in social institutions and cultural habits. Even though the legal recognition of same-sex couples and possibilities for queer reproduction and family-making have recently increased, particularly in many Western countries (e.g. Dahl 2018), in the context of death the marginalization and disenfranchisement of people, whose ways of relating take non-normative or queer forms, has not entirely vanished. For example, culturally established death rituals that follow a religious protocol may be strongly centered on a heteronormative family which leaves little or no space for variation and respect for other kinds of intimacies. This makes it possible for the parents or siblings of the deceased to exclude other mourners from such rituals, making the others vulnerable to their whims and dependent on their goodwill (Alasuutari 2020a).

The gravescape, in turn, poses a question of relational and individual remembrance and their heteronormative and cisnormative limits. These limits manifest in the lack of visible queer monumentality in cemeteries (Dunn 2016), in the rarity of shared graves embodying queer belonging (Alasuutari 2020a) and in the names inscribed in gravestones. In the case of trans people, these names do not always respect the deceased and accurately depict the names used in life (Witten 2009; Israeli-Nevo 2019). This silencing practice makes trans lives and legacies invisible in and beyond

death. As noted by Israeli-Nevo (2019: 177), it is "both an ontology and an opportunity for the hegemonic order to restructure, neglect, and erase the gender resistance of their trans being". The same is true when trans people are posthumously misgendered in public, as is known to happen in the police and media reports of trans homicides (Seely 2021).

However, disenfranchisement is not always a binary issue but rather a question of context and varying volume. While one's grief might be disenfranchised in one context, it may be enfranchised in another, and vice versa (Alasuutari 2020a; 2020b). Disenfranchisement is thus not only significant when absolute but also when it happens in varying intensities in the details of death's institutional and interpersonal encounters. Making space in the analysis for the varieties of dis/enfranchisement in both its practical and affective dimensions makes such an analysis more attuned to the variety of hardships encountered by LGBTQ people in the normative lifeworld of death. Moreover, such an approach allows to explore the affirmative possibilities of doing death differently.

Following this idea, studying queer death can also focus on how death can be approached in affirmative and supportive ways as a part of queer and trans lives and community building. QDS can explore, for example, how queer families of choice and friendship become of highlighted importance in times of death and bereavement. They may step in to patch up the gaps in support left behind by the institutionalized sources of support that are not always accessible, nor particularly LGBTQ-friendly, including the welfare state, religious institutions and/or families of origin (Alasuutari 2020a; Israeli-Nevo 2019). Additionally, QDS can attune to the queering of rituals, showing how old and established rituals carrying normative burdens (like church funerals with strict rules of attendance based on normative understandings of kinship) can be either modified or completely set aside in order to build new queerly affirmative rituals that better reflect the life of the deceased and their intimate others (Lykke 2015; Alasuutari 2020a). Moreover, QDS may reflect on how remembrance builds post-mortem forms of intimacy that linger on affectively long after the dead intimate other has left the material world (Alasuutari 2021), queering what it means to care for others not only in life but also beyond death.

In the varied world of QDS, the term queer does not limit itself to norm-transgressing identity categories as importantly noted by Radomska, Mehrabi and Lykke (2019; 2020). Therefore, it is worth noting that even when

studying death in relation to people identifying as LGBTQ, what is interesting for a queer death studies scholar is not necessarily the identity categories as such. Instead, as I have argued here, the focus may be on different kinds of social positions, their intersections, and societally and culturally operating marginalizations that position queer and trans people differently from the heterosexual and cisgender "mainstream". When investigating death as an inseparable part of the lifeworld and its underlying logics, it is possible to explore how being differently positioned in life may make one differently positioned in death as well. This is not only a marginalized position but, as argued here, it may also entail important possibilities of queering death and its normativities in personally meaningful ways, respecting the individuality of those who have been lost and those who remain mourning. Paying attention to queer death and queering the heteronormative and cisnormative lifeworld of death allows QDS scholars to further explore this positioning and its affective consequences in death's proximity.

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Queering as identity preservation: transgender identity after death

To be queer is to be doubted. Challenged. Diminished. Erased. In response, the "living" queer must engage in a constant, often vigorous, identity negotiation with agents of the dominant (and doubting) culture. Consequently, the queer identity becomes particularly salient upon the moment of death, for that is the moment when the queer individual becomes incapable of further negotiating or defending their identity. Instead, at the moment of death, agents and institutions of the dominant culture (families, governmental bodies, churches, mortuaries) become empowered to enact the deceased's identity for them. Predictably, the queer deceased's identity is often reframed in a manner that denies or diminishes their queerness in favor of an identity that more readily conforms to white, cis-hetero conventions and affirms white, cis-hetero-dominated social hierarchies.

In the eyes of their loved ones, a trans person's transition is often experienced as movement into a state of being that challenges both social

convention and family norms. To de-transition that loved one would then bring the errant family member back into harmony with the family's expectations. In a sense then, the family can be seen as intentionally moving the deceased from a state of ungrievability to one of grievability (Butler 2004, 2009).

In my own work (Whitestone *et al.* 2020), I explore the phenomenon wherein transgender and non-binary individuals (TNB) are de-transitioned by their families upon their deaths. Transgender lives are notably and sadly precarious (Kidd & Witten 2010), but transgender identities may be even more so. Post-mortem de-transitioning – as recorded in technologies of public mourning such as obituaries, gravestones, cemeteries, funeral rituals, and online remembrances – represents a symbolically violent negation of both the individual's identity and of the authenticity of the non-conforming identity itself.

Perhaps counterintuitively, it is not the mis-memorialized subject who experiences harm and injury in these instances. (To the best of our knowledge, the deceased are not aware of the manner in which their identity is treated after their death. Nor do we assume that they experience pain or harm because of it.) Instead, it is the members of the deceased's community who experience insult and devaluation. Members of the marginalized communities from whence the deceased came – in this case, the transgender community – witness these acts of disrespect and denial, and are reminded of (1) the precarity of their own identities and (2) the low esteem with which their identity is held by society at large.

Weaver (2018) investigated the negative reactions posted to social media regarding the inaccurate public memorializations dedicated to deceased trans women, Jennifer Gable and Leelah Alcorn. Weaver quotes Smith (2015) who sadly realizes that we (as a community) were not only unable to prevent Alcorn's tragic death by suicide, but were "equally powerless to prevent her family from erasing her chosen identity further" (Weaver: 3). One of Gable's Facebook friends responded to her de-transitioning with remarks of "disgusted" and "so very sad" (Rothaus 2014).

In my own study, several trans participants reacted with unchecked anger at the thought of being de-transitioned after their death. One respondent remarked, "That would be terrible. I would get out of my coffin and kill every one of those motherfuckers. I will lose my shit on [the family]." Another respondent concurred, "…If someone did that to me, I'd have to

come back and haunt them for the rest of their life" (Whitestone *et al.*: 325). These reactions underscore the heightened emotions associated with non-consensual, post-mortem de-transitioning and of the injurious feelings experienced by the broader transgender community when such an event occurs.

In the case of trans identity, it is possible for individuals to use legal means to plan ahead and appoint a *designated agent* to manage the disposition of their body and affairs. However, many trans people do not have access to information about end-of-life decision-making, nor do they have access – physically or financially – to legal counsel. Consequently, the fate of the identities of TNB people after death lies most often with their loved ones and family members. The Smith comment above illustrates the helplessness of queer friends and community members to defend their trans siblings in the face of cis-friendly and hetero-friendly laws and policies. As long as laws and legal authorities fail to recognize queer interpersonal bonds and chosen families, and insist on prioritizing blood relationships (regardless of the disposition of those blood relationships), transgender identity after death will remain at-risk.

Therefore, when we speak of "queering death," I believe we speak of attempts to dismantle systems, policies and conventions that prevent or inhibit queer access to that most common of human goals – a death with dignity. The at-risk nature of queer identities (and specifically TNB identities) compels us to question and confront such cis-hetero thinking. If, as Crimp (1989) maintains, mourning becomes militancy, then mourning troubled by intentional acts of post-mortem distortion, devaluation, and/or erasure demands a great sense of urgency. Queering death cannot stop at observations of difference. It must engage in tangible acts of systemic change and remedy.

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When I talk about queer death, I talk about trans-necropolitics and suicide prevention

1. Introduction

These days, when I talk about queer death I talk about my master's thesis on suicide prevention for trans children and young people[1] in Denmark. I usually talk about the findings of my thesis; how my interviews and literature reviews support findings on i.a. 1) the importance of parental support in early life, 2) how access to trans-specific healthcare, including gender-affirming treatments, serves as suicide prevention, and 3) that people who did not have access and support early in life, are more likely to attempt or complete suicide later in life (Turban *et al.* 2020). However, I often end up finding myself presenting the theories that serve to explain, or outline, a 'politics of suicide' at length.I.e. the context in which I talk about my current association with queer death. This side-track usually starts off with the mentioning of a common point of reference; biopolitics, allowing me to talk about necropolitics, which then leads me to trans necropolitics. This, in turn, leads to critical suicidology and finally the relationality of misery. By that time, if my audience is still with me, I'll finally make a connection to trans liveability and some more tangible ideas of what can be done in practice, to make lives liveable rather than non-liveable. By having such conversations I hope to provide some understanding as to why access to gender-affirming care is essential in effective suicide prevention for trans CYP, not only in the contexts in which it has been researched, but in a Danish setting too. In this essay I would like to focus, deliberately, on some of the key theories I applied in my thesis concerning: a) trans necropolitics, b) the relationality of misery, and c) the risk which a perceived lack of futurity presents to a liveable life. Finally, I aim to direct some attention to the issue of deficient coronial data-collection, in cases of trans suicidality.

But first, I briefly share a little bit of my journey towards working with queer death and the topic of suicide prevention for trans CYP in Denmark.

2. Queering Suicidology

Queer death to me, at this point in time, is evidently a matter of suicidology. Yet suicidology as a discipline inhabits traditions of pathologisation

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[1] "children and young people" reffered to as 'CYP' from this point onwards.

and the active undermining of any agency and means of rationality in people who have experienced suicide ideation. Yet a new understanding of suicide prevention as approached through a critical suicidology increasingly spreads its messages of a new, holistic and norm-critical practice in both research and hands-on suicide prevention projects. It further introduces a vital change of paradigm, which demolishes underlying assumptions and damaging understandings of neurodiversity, agency, liveability and political neutrality invoked through an individualising approach to suicide ideation (White 2017). Queer death studies and critical suicidology is connected not only through death, but also in their subversion. Where queer death studies are described as inherently critical to structural and western cultural understandings of death (Radomska *et al.* 2020), the greatest points of potential in critical suicidology builds on like-minded understandings, i.e. rooted in intersectional thought, seeking to support unprecedented acknowledgement of silenced, pathologised, suicidal others within academia as well as in practical suicide prevention efforts (Critical Suicide Studies Network 2019).

As a result, analyses of the demographics of suicide statistics are gifted with a tool to decipher otherwise puzzling occurrences, such as the 'gender paradox', in which more women than men attempt suicide. Yet the suicide mortality rate is higher in men (Lester 2014: 13). When writing my bachelor's thesis in philosophy, my work centred on masculinities and suicide, the fatality of western masculine ideals and the emotionally silencing, yet explosive, effects of hegemonic masculinity as theorised by Raewyn Connell (Connell *et al.* 2005). Unknowingly, I was already meshing a critical suicidology with queer understandings of non-liveability and death. My work served as my personal introduction to the field of suicidology. In the summer of 2020, when writing my master's thesis in Gendering Practices, I was finally confident in utilising critical suicidology as a vital part of the theoretical and methodological framework.

It is due to this focus, that these days, what I talk about when I talk about suicide prevention, is lack of focus on transgender children and young people in the world at large, but in particular in my country of origin, Denmark. When deciding the topic of my master's thesis, being a part of the Copenhagen queer community in conjunction with having worked with the British trans CYP charitable organisation 'Mermaids' shaped the direction of my focus.

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Due to some literature and knowledge being produced internationally on the topic of trans suicidality and suicide prevention over the past years, it was concerning to me, that this knowledge seemingly isn't utilised and recognised within the Danish healthcare system. With ongoing debates on trans rights, and in particular trans CYP rights, I wanted to bring international knowledge to the Danish table. In doing so, I politicise suicide prevention and re-frame access to gender-affirming care as a means of ensuring liveability rather than, as claimed by some, unnecessary luxury, a waste of public healthcare's limited resources or even child abuse (Fuusager *et al.* 2019).

To do so, I endeavoured on a journey of building the above mentioned theoretical framework which encompasses queer rage, bio and –necropolitics, trans necropolitics, and critical suicidology. With these theories I sought to outline the politics of suicide relevant to an understanding of access to universal (trans) healthcare as vital to effective suicide prevention, in a country where trans youth mortality rates and suicide ideation had not yet been studied nor widely recognised (Goret 2020).

3. Trans necropolitics and the relationality of misery[2]

Due to the nature of this being a brief introduction to what I talk about when I talk about queer death, I shall focus on only two different aspects of my theoretical framework. First I briefly introduce trans necropolitics which serves to centre trans-specific politics of death, and subsequently, I briefly describe a theory built on critical suicidology which introduces some essential points as to how we understand suicidality and non-liveability.

Trans-necropolitics, as outlined by Jaime Alonso Caravaca-Morera and Maria Itayra Padhila, builds on Achille Mbembe's necropolitics and factor-in trans-specific adversities as they seek to uncover the "relation between the cisnormative social policies and the invisibility and (physical and symbolic) death of trans entities through their life histories." (Caravaca-Morera *et al.* 2018: 1) Death is induced, not only directly at the hands or tools of state institutions in the shape of death-sentences or police-brutality, but more often through the biopolitical (non)distribution of life chances, the thought is. The deaths of lives made unliveable are understood to be an issue of a structural and political kind, rather than an individualistic

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[2]   This section contains paragraphs from my master's thesis, Goret 2020: 10-17.

and solely psychopathological one. Their study provides a combination of content analysis of life as well as death stories of transgender Costa Ricans and Brazilians, and an articulated insight to the contemporary relations of necropolitics and postcolonial powers. In their study, several testimonies are highlighted, most notably expressions of suffering, suicidal thoughts and suicide bereavement. Expulsion from families, threats and experiences of violence and stigmatisation, among other factors, contribute to the high prevalence of suicidality, according to the study. They quote an anonymous trans woman from Costa Rica:

> *They do not kill us directly, but they force us to kill ourselves. […] one of them jumped in front of a car and the other two hung themselves. But these are not suicides, they are murders, everyone has this blood on their hands, it is the fault of everyone, of the government, of society, of the whole country.* (Caravaca-Morera *et al.* 2018: 6)

To better grasp some aspects of the complexity of that which the interviewee refers to as 'indirect murder', the work of critical suicidologist Rob Cover can provide some insight. Cover theorises the concepts of futurity and the relationality of misery. He problematizes how any consideration of cultural, social and structural contexts in regards to suicidality is often wrongfully limited to gaining an understanding of marginalised suicide ideation, when it could be beneficially applied to suicidology and suicide prevention in majority populations as well (Cover 2016: 91).

Cover finds that a common factor contributing to suicidality is a perceived *lack of futurity*. The very capacity to aspire to perform according to culturally normative standards of achievements of a regular life cycle is lost when any perceived chance of futurity is. Futurity and the capacity to hope for normality, stability and positive or neutral progression in terms of quality of life, are found to be key components of a liveable life (Cover 2016: 100). As standards and norms of life aspirations, achievements and belonging are based in "Neoliberal discourses of normativisation" (Cover 2016: 105) which demands minority groups, such as queers, to "produce and articulate themselves through narrow, regimented regimes of sexual truth that are compatible with dominant sexual assumptions" (Cover 2016: 105), failing to participate and live by the same standards as one's peers, economically and socially, can lead to beliefs of being less well off in relation to one's peers.

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Marginalised people in particular are at risk; the wish to better one's life chances, due to cultural condition or as means of survival, and thereby relating oneself to a community whose standards and modes of living one doesn't have access to, produces *a goal of belonging*. When lacking chances of closing the gap between one's situation and the situation of one's peers, or losing the very desire to attain things, one believes they should desire or aspire to, "there is a risk of frustrated aspiration and relative misery" (Cover 2016: 107). These can in turn, together with the lack of the capability to aspire and perceived or institutionalised lack of futurity, be understood as a causal factor in suicides. But this concept of *relationality* is not only relevant to marginalised lives, it is also essential when trying to understand suicide as prevalent in all economic classes of society, and when explaining the high suicide rates of the wealthy West, and particularly in middle aged White, cis men, who may otherwise be understood to enjoy liveable lives with plentiful life chances. As such, the capacity to aspire for futurity and perceiving life chances and liveability as a possible part of ones' future, depends on *relative misery* in context of the living standards of one's (perceived) peers, rather than a global cross-cultural scale of satisfaction in life.

4. Trans suicidality and suicide prevention

 While writing my bachelor's thesis on the fatality of Western ideals of masculinity I found that the majority of studies on suicidality in general populations, take gender and sex for granted as concepts, and any discussion of the categorisation or distinction between cis and –transgender people is absent. When looking at literature reviews on suicidality in transgender populations, alarming rates of suicide ideation, attempts and completed suicides are apparent, and even more so than in the countless studies on suicide in cis men. I addressed two such literature reviews for my master's thesis, wherein the highest finding of prevalence of suicide attempts in a given sample was 45% (Marshall *et al.* 2016: 65). The other literature review points out that gathering data on completed suicides within trans populations would be valuable, but difficult and even impossible, as coronial data does not include trans identities, and additionally may even record assigned gender, rather than the actual gender of the deceased. Correctly registered data on completed suicides could help map the most vulnerable parts of the LGBTQ communities. Issues of low quality or absent data

within suicidology is however a world- and population wide issue. The WHO states that "it is likely that under-reporting and misclassification are greater problems for suicide than for most other causes of death" and they encourages each country to work towards improving suicide-monitoring in order to provide effective suicide prevention and strategies (WHO 2019). Data on suicidality levels during different stages of trans people's lives and what stressors and protective factors are present, in terms of age and transition-process, would also be of tremendous value for trans specific suicide prevention strategies and practices.

This, as well as the duty of the state in regards to suicide prevention and the redistribution of life chances, WHO recommendations, anti-trans discourse, white washing of trans issues, the figure of the transgender child as discussed by Jack Halberstam, Danish suicide research politics and much more is what I talk about when I talk about queer death.

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Notes towards rethinking the agency of queer youth suicide

When we talk about queer death, we need to talk about the task of challenging the notion that LGBTQ sexualities *cause* suicide among young people. The queer subject, often understood along the anthropocentric lines, continues to be associated with death, represented as either the cause of death per se, or a dead end in terms of reproductive futurism (Bersani 1987; Dollimore 1998; Edelman 2004). This problematic framing of the queer subject as 'a bearer of death' is nothing new (Butler 1996: 61). Homophobic media representations of LGBTQ people living with AIDS often frame them as the living undead (Hanson 1991; Nunokawa 1991).

In the context of queer youth suicide, the problematic framing of the queer subject is difficult to challenge and critique. Existing research continually reports that LGBTQ young people are three to four times likely to experience suicide in comparison with their heterosexual counterpart (Bryan & Mayock 2017; Ciszek 2014; Cover 2012a, 2012b; McDermott & Roen 2016; Ream 2019; Skerrett, Kõlves & De Leo 2015). This alarming

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reality happens because of homophobic bullying, lack of support, relationship breakdowns, loneliness, alcohol and drug abuse, and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Aranmolate, Bogan, Hoard & Mawson 2017; Berona, Horwitz, Czyz & King 2020; Greydanus 2017; McDermott & Roen 2016; McDermott, Roen & Scourfield 2008; Nicolas & Howard 1998; Pullen 2004).

The problems queer young people face are real, as is the discursive life of statistics, their circulation and the circulation of assumptions about what it means to be queer and young. As Waidzunas (2012) shows, the statistic regarding queer youth suicide originated as an assessment of risk made by a social worker in a U.S government report. While the statistic contributed to generating much needed institutional reforms in the U.S since the late 1980s, and inspired many studies on LGBTQ suicide across a range of disciplines such as psychiatry, psychology, sociology, social work, media studies and cultural studies, it is remarkable, Waidzunas argues (2012: 201), how numbers that "began their career as mere estimates...are now presented as common sense facts." The quandary with the discursive life of numbers I am addressing here is not whether they are well crafted, and whether they "objectively" represent reality. Nor is the quandary about what Hacking (2004, 106) calls "dynamic nomalism," namely, the making up of people at the same time as human classifications are invented. While such issues are important to address, the problem for Queer Death Studies (QDS) is that we need to talk about the way numbers contribute to the framing of queer young subjects as wounded, alone and without a liveable future (Cover 2012a, 2012b; 2013a, 2013b, 2016, 2020; Talburt 2004a, 2004b).

Thus, the challenge for QDS is not to forget the reality many queer young people face in still heteronormative societies, while remaining critical of the deployment of statistics and thinking through what it means to be a young LGBTQ person making sense of their being in the world, with such making often diverse, and outside both heteronormative and homonormative norms (Cover 2013a, 2015; Duggan 2002; Stryker 2008). In this sense, those of us who are responding to queer youth suicide need to tread a fine line, and draw on research tools that challenge the normativity of numbers without denying their strategic usefulness. Otherwise, we will continue to inadvertently strengthen the powerful instrumentality of not only numbers, but also norms that frame and regulate queer sexualities

as pathological, and queer subjectivities as doomed to die by deaths such as suicide.

Alongside the problem with causality is the problem with the way young queer subjects are represented more broadly. This is often apparent in well-meaning initiatives such as the *It Gets Better* (IGB) project, which was developed to offer hope to alienated queer young people, initially through the social media medium, YouTube (Savage & Miller 2011). As Cover (2012a, 2013b), Goltz (2013), Grzanka and Mann (2014), and Muller (2011) argue in various ways, the IGB project is framed by a neoliberal notion of the human subject, who happens to be gay, but also male, white and middle class, who more often than not lives with a partner in an urban setting, has a career and relative wealth, all of which enable a certain level of self-sufficiency. This in itself is a false promise laced with cruel optimism (Berlant 2011), because of the diversity of queer lives along race, class and gender lines, and because the optimism of life getting better is unrealistic due to structural and ideological inequalities. Queer Death Studies, in its transdisciplinary formation, is well-positioned to question normative and exclusionary ideas of this notion of human subjectivity, precisely because, among a variety of things, its focus is on challenging "the conventional normativities, assumptions, expectations and regimes of truths that are brought to life and made evident by death, dying and mourning" (Radomska, Mehrabi & Lykke 2020: 88).

My suggestion, then, is that we need to talk about, and pay attention to, not only the framing of queer youth suicide and queer subjectivities, but also the notion of agency, and what it is like for LGBTQ young people to exercise agency. By agency, I do not mean the capacity to act that a person possesses, as if agency is something human beings possess by virtue of being human. Instead, agency is performative in a Butlerian (1990, 1993) sense in so far as it becomes apparent in the way bodily practices cite and reiterate existing discourses via cultural and social norms. In this way, existing discourses produce effects of gender, sexuality, race, class and so on. Thus, agency is possible because what we do and how we do things with and through our bodies draws "upon and reengage[s] conventions which have gained their power precisely through a *sedimented iterability*" (Butler, 1995: 134, original emphasis). In other words, agency is present, but its presence is located at the very moment of a practice brought into being through performative actions rather than residing in a prediscursive

subject as its source (Butler 1993, 1995). Such an understanding of agency, however, is not complete, as what is material and cultural is active thanks to what Barad (2007) refers to as intra-action, which "recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather *emerge through*, their inter-action" (Barad 2007: 33, emphasis added). Thus, the exercise of agency, vis-à-vis agential realism, is possible because of "*mutual entanglement*" (Barad 2007: 3, original emphasis), or the way different materials, people, ideas and contexts constantly change, blend, mutate, influence and work inseparably in the course of bringing objects and subjects into being (Alaimo 2008; Hickey-Moody 2020; Tuana 2008).

Adopting a performative intra-active approach to agency, I think, will help us to work out how queer subjectivities are not inherently death bound, but instead are material effects of discourses that frame and regulate them as death bound. Furthermore, adopting such an approach will help us to work out how vulnerable young people still have a voice, because vulnerability does not automatically mean voicelessness, and the human subject is not the only site of its study in queer youth suicide. Perhaps, then, we can begin to imagine different futures in which queer life itself is no longer causally bound to death.

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Queer death and victimhood in Russia: 'westernised queer activism'

Those who do not fulfill the normative idea of a white, upper or middle-class, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied, tend to be ignored in dominant stories of death, loss, grief and mourning. Although queer individuals have been largely excluded from Death Studies, death has always been at the core of queer theory and the gender and sexuality research around the world (Radomska *et al.* 2020). Largely fueled by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which whipped out an entire generation of gay men and other members of the queer community, 'Western' LGBTQ+ activism often relies on queer deaths in its public narratives. As queer and gay lives have historically been stigmatized and seen as 'non-grievable lives',

there is a lot of literature and media accounts of queer grief and reflection on the complexities of deaths in the LGBTQ+ community (Radomska *et al.* 2020). However, here I want to focus on a 'non-Western' perspective of queer death and grieving, in the unique cultural context of ex-Soviet countries. Scholars have discussed the lack of research of Eastern European and ex-Soviet localities in queer and reproductive studies (Kahlina 2015; Mizielinska 2020). In this work I want to explore which queer stories represented in the public discussions in Russia and what is the role queer deaths play in this conversation.

Russia is a famously hostile state to its LGBTQ+ citizens (Buyantueva 2018; Wilkinson 2014; Zhabenko 2014). Over the past two decades the pool of anti-queer legislation in Russia has been imminently growing with such additions as the 2013 Dima Yakovlev law which bans adoption by same-sex couples and the 'anti-gay propaganda law' which criminalises what it calls 'propaganda of non-traditional relationships to minors' (FL-135, article 5, 2013). This law in particular has allowed for children to be relinquished from their gay and queer parents under pretences of the parents 'propagating' 'non-traditional relationships' to their children (Wilkinson 2018). Many queer families and activists like Masha Gessen have emigrated, fearing for the wellbeing of their families (Golunov 2019; Gessen 2019). This 'war on queerness', as scholars have called it, has been targeting queer parenthood and queer livelihoods as a particular focal point of the 'traditional family values' narrative which in the past decade has become Vladimir Putin's claim to almost indisputable power (Wilkinson 2014; 2018). However, the past few years have also become a 'renaissance' of queer culture, art and queer visibility in Russia. Online activism and the emergence of diverse independent media provides a different perspective and amplifies queer voices for the first time in more than twenty years of Putin's rule. Online queer journals like *O-zine* and *The Calvert Journal* and social media platforms have allowed queer stories to seep through the homophobic censorship of the state and into the eyes and ears of the Russian people.

Homosexuality is firmly understood by the Russian State as dangerous behaviour that threatens Russia's future as a nation, it is anti-Christian and 'Westernised' (Wilkinson 2014). Russia positions itself as opposed to 'Gayropa' (a mocking term for the European countries that accept LGBTQ+ rights), the European 'tolerance' and LGBTQ+ 'propaganda' (Suchland 2018). As Mizielinska (2011, 2020) notes while talking about a

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similar state-led narrative in Poland, queer identities are often seen as a kind of 'Western extravagance' in opposition to Polish (post-socialist) traditional values. However, ex-Soviet states, particularly personalist autocracies, like late Putin Russia, are known to have a particular official rhetoric that might not necessarily coincide with societal attitudes (Waller 2018). Following other scholars (Buyantueva 2018; Wilkinson 2014) I argue that Russia's homophobia is politicised and state-sanctioned, tied closely to Putin's claim to power. While the government introduces new ways of portraying queer people as 'unfit' parents and 'unfit' citizens, independent media and public discussions revolve are more open to 'liberal' changes (Dergachev 2019). Thus, Russia is at a crossroads. While the population is engaging with neoliberal ideas while the government still exemplifies paternalistic and neo-traditionalist politics as it introduces more anti-queer legislation.

As queer issues in Russia become more and more visible, the stories of queer suffering and victimhood prevail. In this work I want to investigate two cases of queer Russian deaths vocalised in Russian (and international) media. First, the murder of Yelena Grigoryeva, an LGBT-activist, in 2018. Second, the Chechnya anti-gay purges which started in 2017 and were widely publicised in the 2019 HBO documentary 'Welcome to Chechnya', recently shortlisted for an Oscar for best documentary. I want to focus on the ways both cases felt for the community and the impact they made on the international and local discussions of queer rights.

An individual queer death which shook the community to its core is the murder of Yelena Grigoryeva, an LGBT-activist who was stabbed to death in St Petersburg outside her flat after receiving death threats and being denied help from the police (Walker 2019). Yelena's death was not a direct act of state terror, but the government's reaction to it is hard to describe in any other way. The refusal of the police to investigate the death threats she had been receiving prior to her death as well as the inaction in investigating her death convey a clear message: violence against women, particularly queer women, is normalised by the state. The other message was that activism is unacceptable, voicing protest is frowned upon, the only way to live a queer life is staying quiet about it. This is very much a Soviet logic of 'open secrets' which has largely been adapted by the queer community in post-Soviet times, particularly in the 90s and the early 00s). Russia has inherited Soviet duality of official and unofficial rules which

often contradict each other (Yurchak 2006). As the famous Russian saying illustrates: 'Russia is a country of unread laws and unwritten rules.' Queer people are forced to navigate this gap between the official laws and the unwritten rules: the realities of queer lives in Russia lie outside the Western-style politics of 'out' and 'proud' (Goodfellow 2015). There is always a notion of what to reveal and what to conceal which dates back to the Soviet conceptions of 'open secrets', an idea that something can be known to everyone and not talked about openly at the same time (Ledeneva 2011). Many testimonials of LGBT folk mention that they avoid 'protruding' their sexuality, wearing it on their sleeves, showing it off. The case of Yelena's death plays into those old Soviet ideas of keeping identities to yourself as advocating publicly can be dangerous. Yelena's murderer has never been charged.

From an individual death to a mass murder case, the Chechnya's 'anti-gay purges' have appeared in international news since 2018 (Gessen 2018; Roth 2019). The purges have been happening for much longer. Chechnya is a deeply patriarchal and religious region of Russia which *de facto* makes independent political decisions although *de jure* remains a part of Russia. The Head of Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov has been known to express homophobic, sexist and nationalist sentiments to journalists, other politicians and on social media (Roth 2019). Since 2017, maybe earlier, there has been torturing and killing of gay and queer men and women in Chechnya. LGBT organisations like the Russian LGBT Network have been trying to rescue these people as President Putin has been forced by other international leaders to investigate the issue. He never has.

Welcome to Chechnya is a documentary which focuses on the gay men and women prosecuted during the purges as they are resettled and, ultimately, leave the country to seek asylum in various European countries. Met with praise from the English-speaking public, the documentary faced criticism from the Russian queer community and activists. The documentary used a deepfake technology otherwise referred to as the 'digital transplant' technique, in which volunteers' faces are digitally grafted onto those for whom public exposure might threaten their lives (Richards 2020). However, some Russian activists online have expressed concern citing anonymous sources and activists inside Chechnya stating that the anonymising technology was ineffective as the families of documentary participants in Chechnya have recognised them. This can

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cause great harm not only to those who appear in the documentary, but also their families who are still in Chechnya. Although this discussion has travelled around activist telegram channels, group chats and twitter threads, it has not resulted in a wider public discussions among film critics or LGBTQ+ organisations.

This brings up questions of 'white saviour' activism and 'Western' queer activism and the ways in which LGBTQ+ activism in non-Western countries is 'forced' into a 'Western' mould by 'Western' investors. As we see elsewhere, much of 'non-Western' queer activism is heavily influenced by 'Western' activism trends and narratives which often fall flat in representing the complex 'non-Western' queer reality (Dave 2012). This is particularly true in Russia and other Eastern European and ex-Soviet countries (Dogadina 2019; Wilkinson 2014). As 'Welcome to Chechnya' shows, the livelihoods of queer people are encapsulated in the imminent dangers they face. The international media cycle is only interested in very specific Russian queer stories (of suffering or escape) portraying queer Russians as 'pitiable victims' until they emigrate to a ('Western') country where they can finally live openly and be their true selves. There is a paradox of Russian queer deaths being so highly visible and thus deeming invisible existing queer lives. Queer deaths feel like a tragedy that keeps happening in Russia, and it requires international media and political attention. Simultaneously, death becomes the only definition which describes Russian queer reality in the eyes of international public media. Queer people, particularly Russian or Eastern European queer people, are only visible when they are dead.

As a Russian queer woman and an academic who studies Russian and ex-Soviet queer experiences, I wonder if the queer deaths and victimhood that we get to see in the 'West' are a reflection of bigger issues. Alongside other scholars (Dave 2012; Mizielinska 2020), I find an imbalance in queer studies where conversations are often overly focused on 'Western' experiences and skewed towards 'Western' happiness and 'non-Western' suffering. From international academic and media discussions, it seems that the only thing a queer person can do in Russia is to die from the hands of the homophobic oppressive regime. However, in reality, many queer people choose to stay in Russia, have families, raise children, make art and thrive in their support bubbles with the help of their communities. As queer death studies discuss grievable and non-grievable lives (Radomska *et al.* 2020), I

want to pose the question: do we perceive queer lives in certain localities as griavable before they even die?

Anthropology as a discipline has a tendency to overly emphasise the "harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience" both in theory and in ethnography (Ortner 2016: 49). As anthropologists like Ortner call for 'activist research' to replace the 'misery porn', to reflect on the colonial, racial and class dimensions of researching human suffering, I seek to explore the complexity of Russian queer experience. I advocate for queer studies to reflect, as anthropology does, on the ways 'non-Western' queer livelihoods are represented in international activist discourses and move towards a productive pessimism in research rather than focusing on the tragic events in 'non-Western' queer lives and deaths.

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Lesbian *Liebestod*: Sapphic suicide in a Chinese society

This brief contribution provides an East Asian perspective to the foundation of Queer Death Studies. More specifically, this intervention addresses what Donna Haraway calls the response-ability of "collective knowing and doing" (Haraway 2016: 34) from a material and temporal perspective. On the one hand, this implies that some objects can give signification to the actual demise of human life. On the other hand, this means that queer passions and actions across the *longue durée* can cultivate new traditions in the modern project of queer world-making. This onto-epistemological practice of knowing and doing/being stimulates a responsive correlation (as well as a contradiction) between vital destruction and creation. Such an oxymoronic juxtaposition underscores the sociological ontology of death as a symbolic and assembled construct, which in itself characterises death's role in present-day society (Kiong 2004; Heng 2020). It is precisely because these separate theoretical inductions of symbolism and assemblage are aligned congruently with the "collective knowing and doing" that death and dying in East Asia, whether heteronormative or queer, gain impetus by responding to social and cultural developments. As I will highlight later in this essay, the simultaneous suicides of young

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women across the Southeast Asian polity of Singapore will buttress this perspective.

In East Asian mythology, there is a matchmaking deity known as "the old man under the moon". According to his book of marriages, compiled on the seventh day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, he would tie red strings around the ankles of prospective lovers. As the trend of arranged marriages gets replaced by the freedom to choose one's own partner, humans now chart their own destiny by tying red strings on each other. Chinese Singaporeans who believe in the notion of reincarnation still practice this little ritual, especially in moments that involve separation and desperation.

From my ongoing research, that focuses on the cultural history of LGBT lives in Singapore (Zubillaga-Pow & Yue 2012), I learned that some Chinese women who are attracted to women rely on such traditional aspects of spiritual practice in the hope of changing their destiny. The spate of suicides over the past decade has created a substantial amount of media commotions and coffee-shop quibbles. From drowning in reservoirs to jumping off buildings, the methods and demographics of people who committed suicide consist mostly of: 1) people in their twenties; 2) elderly or foreign laborers, usually Chinese by race. While figures provided by the Singapore Department of Statistics indicates that suicide rates between 2006-2015 hover between 350 to 460 episodes per year, the World Health Organization, differentiating the gender ratio, indicates 15 suicides among men and 8 among women for every 100,000 persons per year (WHO 2014: 23; Singapore Department of Statistics 2016). Specialists at the Singapore Institute of Mental Health have also pinpointed problematic relations with peers or family members as the most common reason for suicide attempts among young people (Chee 2010). Recent quantitative research on suicidal thoughts and projects in East Asia also shows that young women in industrialized cities represent the most suicidal social category (Blum, Sudhinaraset & Emerson 2012).

Given these premises, the juxtaposition of Chinese spirituality and female same-sex affairs can be subsumed under what I call "red-thread suicide". We know that, in addition to the legend of the matchmaking deity, adherents of ancient Chinese traditions believe that red objects can ward off evil spirits. For example, the Chinese would wear red clothing during the first few days of the Chinese New Year or put on red undergarments

during one's birth-year within the twelve-year cycle of the Chinese zodiac. However, Chinese supernatural beliefs also acknowledge that someone who commits suicide when dressed in red will return as a vengeful spirit. Others believe that the red string will ensure that the souls remain bound together in the netherworld (Koh 2011). Among the most famous cases is that of a 34 year-old cancer-stricken woman who tied a red string around her two infant daughters' wrists to her own before jumping off a housing block in March 2004 (Vijayan & Fong 2004). Another case involves a 32 year-old housewife and her three-year-old son, who were found drowned in a reservoir. They were both dressed in red and had their wrists bound together with a red thread and their fingernails painted red. The newspaper reports later revealed the woman to be "distraught over marital problems, which involved an impending divorce and custody [lawsuit]" (Anonymous 2011). The day on which the suicide was committed, September 2011, was coincidentally the day just before the autumnal equinox.

Two other events, occurring a decade apart, also provide us with more information on the necro-spiritual aspects of same-sex lovers. On 16 April 2001, two women wearing red T-shirts with a red thread around their ring fingers committed suicide by jumping off a block of flats. At age 20, the younger of the two women was supposedly undecided between her boy-friend and her 31 year-old girlfriend (Chong 2001). However, a critical read-ing of the situation via a mythological perspective potentially uncovers her sexual preference. The two women were probably resentful of the pressure to form heterosexual relationships or were being rejected by their families. What further reinforces the interpretation of this particular relationship as an amorous one was the subsequent reaction by the team members of the local women's group RedQueen, who undertook professional training to set up a free and confidential counselling service for women who are attracted to other women.

Another instance of a red-thread suicide took place on 8 February 2012, the 17th day of the Lunar New Year (Fong 2012). Two university students aged 20 and 24 took their lives by suffocating themselves with fumes in an isolated chalet. The investigation found out that they had planned their sui-cides by booking the chalet online and drafting their own media statement (Anwar 2013). They checked in just after the first fifteen days of the New Year festivities as observed by the Chinese, and a photograph provided by *The Straits Times* shows two beds with dark red bed-sheets and pillows

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Figure 1 – "Furniture inside the Aloha Resort chalet in Changi, Singapore". Source: https://www.asiaone.com/static/multimedia/gallery/120209_changi/pic4.html

(Figure 1). It might appear as more than a coincidence that this chalet was chosen over all the others .

As these mournful events show, mythology and traditional beliefs can become a necropolitical medium for women who find themselves under psychological pressure and for women who are attracted to other women to communicate with each other, as well as with society at large. The phenomenon of the "red-thread suicide" gradually takes on an onto-epistemological meaning: it brings women who are attracted to other women closer to one another and closer to us. Returning to Donna Haraway, our collective response-ability involves the immediate recognition of these symbols of death. These indicators present themselves as tangible material; they crystallise over time through imprints and impressions.

By analysing red-thread suicides among women in East Asia, one can trace both the plans and processes of self-annihilation. Objects are procured, letters are written, locations are recced and reserved. The recurrence of these activities as assembled by different bodies fabricate an ontology of the necropolitical. By transitioning from the realm of life and that of death, the homosexual subjects *qua* agents defy and resist the prevailing social and legal discrimination against queer assemblages, thus creating a new genealogy of knowing and being/doing queer.

This regeneration and revitalisation of queer symbols within East Asian societies and beyond is a critical response-ability for many young women who are attracted to women. Through their self-destruction, they have constructed the socio-political agency of their bodies and lives. Their impetus toward death is one that is driven by nothing but queer passion and the freedom to love. In a nutshell, the onto-epistemology of Sapphic suicides arguably lies in the *Liebestod*, that is, in the love-death.

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

3/ Queering death beyond the human

ABSTRACT: This is part 3 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, critical animal studies, and the posthumanities and tackle questions such as: how can queer death studies deconstruct our perception of non-human deaths? How can we rethink human death from a non-anthropocentric perspective? And how can queer death studies approach the COVID-19 pandemic?

The present article includes the following contributions: – Beccaro C. and Tuckett M., The life cycle of the agaonidae wasp: death, queerness, and the shattering of the human; – Langhi R., Corpses are remains: queering human/animal boundaries across death; – Véliz S., Tilting points of reference: how nonhuman death narratives unsettle research; – Varino S., (Un)doing viral time: queer temporalities of living & dying in pandemic times; – Pevere M., Recalcitrant by nature: queering death through biological art practice.

KEYWORDS: Thanatology, Death Studies, Queer Studies, Animal studies, Posthumanism.

THE LIFE CYCLE OF THE AGAONIDAE WASP:
DEATH, QUEERNESS, AND THE SHATTERING OF THE HUMAN[1]

A human hand passes by and reaches for a fig – concealed under the skin, an erotic event unfolds. Inside the burgundy flesh-like fruit, a network of flowers converge; each yearning to be pollinated. Back on the surface, a female wasp gravitates towards the bulbous fruit. A wasp of the Agaonidae family, to be precise, otherwise known as the fig wasp: a member of a colony of wasps who engage in pollination mutualism with the fig tree (PADMANABAN 2016). The sweet stickiness of the fig's aroma acts as an invitation. With some effort, the wasp penetrates the fig at the stem, breaking its wings as it comes inside it: a bittersweet release. Trapped, the wasp quivers at the sight

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[1] Some of the ideas in this paper were borne out of a collaborative short-length film project with Margaux Fitoussi and Alexa Hagerty. We thank them for their work and creative reflections.

of unpollinated flowers. It dusts off the pollen from its birth-fig. It lays eggs inside some of the flowers' seeds. Finished, the wasp dies. The seeds nourish the wasp's offspring, while the pollen deposited by the vector wasp allows the seeds to flourish. Still in the fig's ripe chamber, the male wasps hatch and seek mates (Wheeler 2020). As martyrs, they dig out escape routes for their female counterparts. Wingless, they too, find death inside or near the fig's softness while the female wasps, full and fed, cruise for a new fig.

Biologists assert that the fig acts as a trap where the wasp dies (Pereira *et al.* 2010). "The'' wasp being the first wasp in our tale, the original wasp, one might say. But is this really *the* wasp? The stages described in the wasp's life cycle are nothing like that of the human's. *The* human, we are taught in elementary school, travels from infant, to child, to adolescent, to adult and eventually to the grave. The neat pictures in text books show an individual, or perhaps, in a more expansive rendition, a nuclear family. The life cycle of the Agaonidae wasp, however, cannot be told in such singular fashion; for in the telling, the subject flickers from female to male, first generation to third, between dead and alive. The wasp is deeply enmeshed in its swarm and in the flesh of the fig.

So, does the wasp die in the fig or is it born there? Moreover, is this the life cycle of the wasp or the fig? This confusion arises from a scientific impulse to explore, discover, and classify the wasp, the fig, the human, (the queer?). A wasp, singular, dies in the fig. She is undone in the fig. Physically, her wings are dismembered and metaphysically she dies. Any individuality is undone in the fig. And yet, *the* wasp, the wasp as a swarm, as a colony, as a collective, thrives in the fig. And the fig thrives with the wasp. An individualized notion of the wasp, of the fig, cannot exist – their lifecycle is codependent. This doesn't make them *vulnerable*, quite the opposite, in fact. Like the King who survives the death of his body to be reborn in his heir, the wasp, we are tempted to say, never dies! (see Kantorowitz 1998).

Queer sex, with its inflections of unproductiveness and of wastefulness, has been articulated as a kind of death drive (Edelman 2004). After all, in death, the productive potential of life is indeed said to be put to an end! Yet, queer theorist Leo Bersani suggests that the malaise, revealed in certain attitudes towards queer erotics and death, might be better understood otherwise. Not as a sense of terror regarding one's own futurlessness; but rather, as a state where pleasure and ecstasy are the vehicle through which the subject of the self is lost. The penetrated rectum, he celebrates, is the site of the breakdown

of the human defined through a masculinist trope. An undoing of categories and individuals which amounts to what queerness itself is: that which "transverses the human", running across it and away from it (Luciano & Chen 2015: 189). The original and ultimate "drag", one might say, which mocks at every encounter anthropocentric classifications. Queer, as that which undoes distinctions and redraws alliances. What is death then, as a moment that shatters the integrity of the self, if it is not what is already queer?

Characterized, perhaps, by the wish to re-inscribe death with human control, the Western funeral industrial complex aims to sanitize death (Hagerty 2014). Burial practices centered on embalming the dead are marked by a desire to whisk away the dead body (Mitford 1963). The corpse as an uncanny and even polluting object is the body in decay. Simultaneously you and not you, the corpse tinkers with the boundaries between the human and non-human. It occupies a quasi-state of non-identity. The semi-medicalized practice of embalming works to slow down this decay and freeze the transgression of death on the body. We might characterize this as an urge to tilt death *away* from death's queerness. At the limits of Western medicine, death shifts the body from person to object and we are forced to confront whether we are the organic matter that decays into the ground. These questions are familiar to queer bodies who have long pondered the mattering of matter.

In the mutualistic relationship of figs and wasps, the separation between the living and the corpse, between life and death, between "a fig" and "a wasp" (and perhaps, "a hand") is undermined. It is precisely this relationship that has provided us with an understanding that the quality of the embrace (between the fig and the wasp) is exactly what we talk about when we talk about a queer death: a site of breaking down, pregnant with potential.

The fig to the wasp is not unlike the rectum to the queer: a place of "losing sight" (Bersani 1987: 222).

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Corpses are remains:
queering human/animal boundaries across death

The field of Critical Animal Studies is deeply involved in an anti-speciesist approach to the inhabitants of the planet for a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the Otherness that escapes the boundaries of the human. By taking into account the worldly necessities of plants, non-human animals, as well as entire ecosystems, these studies have underlined how a double standard operates a divide in the continuum of the living creatures. Yet I argue that the real discrepancy does not take place in the realm of life, but in the one related to death. In what follows, I will briefly outline the different treatment designated to human and non-human animals and why things must change.

As Butler states, some deaths are more grievable than others (2014), even within the non-human animal community. While the human corpse is concealed, too many animal's dead bodies are exposed and pornographically desired as a lusty nourishment. People strive to be euthanized, pets may be "put down" or "put to sleep", but the majority of animals is "destroyed". Furthermore, human corpses undergo a process of sublimation by being buried or cremated while animals increase their market value when they produce a fully exploitable dead body. Carol J. Adams has described the deployment of this disposable commodity as the "absent referent" (1990), addressing an interlocking system of oppression that reinforces itself by stating that to be fully alive, one needs to take pleasure in consuming the death of another.

Highlighting even further the dichotomy human/animal, the absent referent is the *conditio sine qua non* for assembling a necropolitics that takes pride in the exhibition of pieces of dead animal bodies, while a corpse induces shame or performs as a taboo. Corpses must not be seen; the ongoing process of death must be disguised by the undertaker and decomposition must happen out of sight. That is why Sally Mann's photobook *What remains,* which displays , among others, the picture of her beloved greyhound Eva a year after she had died and been buried, strikes such a deep chord. As Alice Kuzniar (2006) suggests: "[…] although Sally Mann might be accused of uncovering and publicly displaying what is intensely personal, namely, the remains of a loved one, by representing finitude and loss she militates against how grief over a pet is socially foreclosed."

Within this double standard, human bodies are a taboo, suggesting the notion that people working with them are creepy, gloomy, or possibly paraphiliac. In Italy, the law that allows body donation for research and education (L.20/2020) has gone almost unnoticed. The anatomical donation is still perceived as sacrilegious or at least useless:

> The promotion of a pro-PMBD culture and the adoption of measures to regulate this practice for scientific purposes may not only improve physicians' anatomical and surgical education, but also significantly reduce the number of animals sacrificed . Such policies may consequently narrow the gap between Italy and many other countries where there is a good availability of donated bodies for educational purposes. As physicians can play a pivotal role in promoting PMBD and also be a good vehicle of information for patients and relatives, students should be directly trained in this matter. (Ciliberti *et al.* 2018: 6)

Yet this practice would not only save lots of animal (and human) lives, as the study of death is strictly inherent to major knowledge about life, but it would also be crucial in exposing how some treatments to conceal bodies are polluting the planet. Greener practices, such as alkaline hydrolysis and natural burial ought to be encouraged by environmentalist associations, as cremating one corpse take up to three hours and the necessary heat releases great amounts of carbon dioxide and mercury into the atmosphere, while conventional burial is even more polluting, as the anaerobic decomposition of bodies generates methane and occupies soil.

On the contrary, animal flesh, which becomes meat, is something to show, offer as a gift, and produce in as much quantity as possible. Furthermore, animal experimentation is far from being eradicated. The sacrifice of thousands of animals in the name of science is perceived as a sad necessity, but no real alternative has been undertaken, despite the effort of the animalists community and the fact that these tests are not only useless but ineffective, as Peter Singer and Tom Regan, among many others, have clearly displayed throughout their works and advocacy. Derrida describes sacrifice as the "noncriminal putting to death" of the other, not only animals, but also humans marked as animals. According to Derrida (1992), animal sacrifice is the symbol of a generalized carnivorous violence, a "carnophallogocentrism", modelled upon the virile strength of the adult male. These carnophallogocentric discourses perpetuate domination and assimilation of the other. Derrida, in an interview with Jean Luc Nancy called "Il

faut bien manger*", states that sacrifice is one instance of the subject, that doesn't recognize what is not a "normal adult male," the standard against which the moral worth of others is measured .

Everybody, alive or dead, should be treated with respect and dignity. Working with a dead body without interfering with the process of death is not disrespectful, whereas deliberately putting to death a living creature is despicable. I would thus conclude by stating that queering the boundaries of death by refusing double standards of bereavement and promoting a more accessible contact with dead bodies, while simultaneously learning to respect the previous lives they contained. It would be advisable to prevent further cruel deaths to the detriment of nonhuman animals and to encourage technologies for body disposal that could be more carbon neutral and eco-friendly.

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Tilting points of reference:
how nonhuman death narratives unsettle research[2]

I am researching at a library in a school. A girl is with me. Art materials, sketchbooks, and a bunch of unopened picturebooks are in front of us. The girl tells me about how good she is at repairing keychains by drawing the lock's mechanism, and how she learned to fix them. I am eager to start the session because the library is never this quiet, and because this is my doctoral research, and this girl is one of my first encounters. Eventually, I tell her that this research is about how children and adults read about death. I explain the materials on the table (picturebooks about death, art materials to use as she wishes, the tape recorder where I collect her "voice)." She takes one of the picturebooks (*I am Death* by Elisabeth Helland and Marine Scheider), opens it up, and reads the first verse out loud:

I am death.
As life is life.
I am death

Fig. 1 – Quote from the book *Life and I: A Story About Death* by Elisabeth Helland Larsen and Marine Schneider, Little Gestalten Publisher, 2016.

Then she closes the book and puts it away. In the following 45 minutes, she tells me the story of her dogs. It is difficult for me to follow the narrative because things happen without a cause, and characters show up without introduction, the girl throwing around names of dogs and more dogs. I am using emergent listening (Davies 2016) as a strategy against myself and internalized research practices. This disposition forces the research assemblage (Fox & Alldred 2015) that I am entangled with, to listen, and not to interrupt. The research assemblage is also committed to what Karin Murris (2016) proposes as ontoepistemic injustice, that produces children, and many others, as incapable of producing knowledge. With emergent listening as my primary strategy of posthuman research, I keep silent, aching for interrupting and get to the "data" I am interested in.

In this girl's narrative, the dogs run through very narrow passages and tiny houses. There is one dog called Telma that is born in the girl´s house. Telma is a prominent entity in the story, moving through the genealogies of the woman in the girl´s family: "it first was my aunt´s, then my mother´s, and then Telma was mine, for the rest of my life she was mine." However, the girl´s family cannot take care of the dogs because food and care are expensive, and the garden, says the child, is non-existent, with enough

space for just one tree. A family member ends up taking care of the dogs, because this person lives in the countryside. Now Telma is so far away from the girl´s house that they can only visit her using a car that the girl´s family does not have. A visual map showing the distances between both houses is materialized with ink and lines, and the words "serca" (a misspell of the word close in spanish) and lejos (far away) place the countryside (the big square at the center) as difficult to reach.
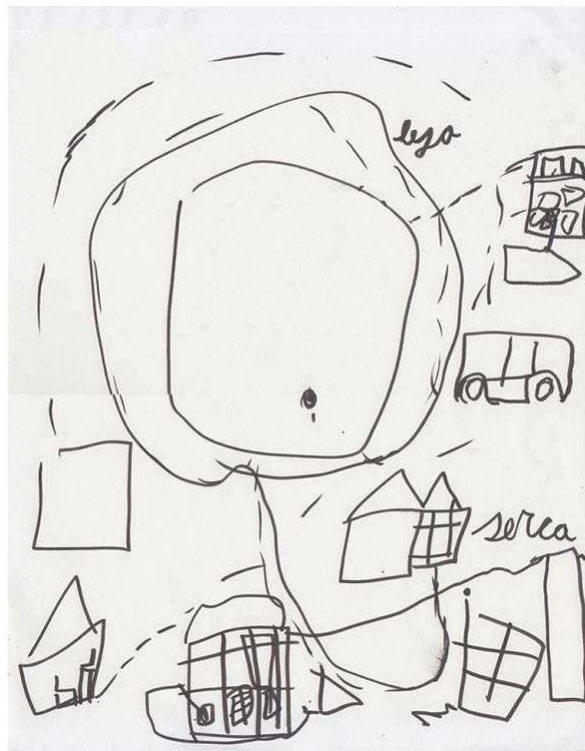
Fig. 2 – Drawing of the interviewed girl, P.D.

At the center of this drawing rests a big black dot. The girl tells me that this is a point of reference, useful when you are lost. This brings the research's point of reference, the neoliberal production of knowledge, to the fore. My doctoral thesis is about how schools produce readers as the recipient of sanitized narratives, regulating which deaths are proper for children to talk about. At this point in the encounter, and despite my methodological positioning, I think that this confusing story is not about reading, nor about death. I believe that I am failing to produce "data"; therefore, I betray the emergent listening and ask her why she tells me this story. She says that this is a story about the death of her dog, Telma.

The big black dot at the center of the drawing is a nonhuman death.

Nonhuman death was materialized and given meaning (Radomska, Mehrabi & Likke 2020) by the drawings/maps, the conversation, and the logics of the research assemblage, among others. The conception of human death as exceptional (Radomska, Mehrabi & Likke 2020) and the only narrative of death that counted (Radomska, Mehrabi & Likke 2019) made the dogs' story unintelligible for research. I thought that the dogs were anecdotic, negating them the agentic capability to tell a story because I was invested in narratives of human exceptionalism. The dog's genealogy, the impossibility to care for them, the "outsourcing" of care to others expressed as more capable or more wealthy exposed a kind of grief that started way before Telma became the big black dot in the drawing. As Telma's dead body materialized as a point of reference, it tilted what I understood as research.

Literary reception studies are centered on the subjectivity of the readers; therefore, what matters for research is how the reader echoes the book in ways that are considered meaningful. The picturebooks' subject was death, therefore, my research would have happily received straightforward engagements with the matter, centered around human mourning and grief narratives. For this field, an encounter that fails to engage the reader with the book is considered disposable data. My research was interested in posthuman research and postqualitative approaches, which demanded attention to affects and flows, inhuman and nonhuman encounters. However, my design was qualitative, mirroring the methodological mainstream in the field. After all, I designed the research focused on interviews and focus groups and collective and private readings. Honestly, I was interested in human subjectivity and only marginally in matter and materialities. However, the event weighted in my field of research, refusing to be reduced to humanist frameworks that would read it as normative grief for the loss of a pet, or as an individual reception of a literary work.

My research collapses; the black dot in the drawing weights, attracts, and reorganizes all of the research's assumptions. Queer death studies reshape the story of Telma from a failed engagement with literature to a narrative of resisting normative biopolitics and emotions associated with grief (Hansen 2017), not centered on human subjectivity as the "grieving subject." Telma's story produced spatial temporalities where the realms of the living and the dead, the present and absent, were indistinguishable (Shildrick 2020) and revolved around inhuman intimacy and kinship (Weaver

2015). Moreover, the story of Telma emerges as profoundly entangled with necropolitics of nonhuman lives as disposable and marginally grievable. With this encounter, I became posthuman.

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(Un)doing viral time: queer temporalities of living & dying in pandemic times

I want to find ways to keep addressing the question: How might we queer the temporal scales of viral time? Without wanting to suggest a seamless queer lineage of viral temporalities, I do want to engage with a genealogy of continuities and discontinuities from the coronavirus pandemic to the multiple temporalities (and spatialities/geographies) of the AIDS crisis.

Historian of science Edna Bonhomme asks another question that helps me to (re)formulate this one: "What Makes Us Sick?" (Bonhomme 2020) As one of the core questions fueling Bonhomme's research, it engages with material and social structures of injustice and inequality in the context of pandemic politics and in relation to histories of public health. How do specific conditions foster health and wellbeing for some living bodies while forcing others, in particular racialized and gendered minorities, to endure unlivable lives of disease and death? Physical safety and access to environmental resources, from clean air and water to nourishing food, are crucial for disease prevention, as are low levels of exposure to pathogens and toxic substances. Viral time is thus *also* environmental time, the time of the living world that bodies occupy and move through in myriad ways, my body and yours, the bodies of those who can and the bodies of those who cannot read this text.

Covid temporalities are a moving object that is constantly shifting in scale and tempo. From an initially inexplicable epidemic of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China, to the new viral variants spreading at an alarming rate, the pandemic seems to exponentially quicken the pulse of time at certain temporal nodes, and then to slow down days and nights to a seamless succession of domestic scenes for those privileged enough to be

able to protect themselves by staying home, or to seemingly interminable stretches of time for those working impossibly long shifts as essential workers, waiting for care in crowded emergency rooms, breathing in and out through tubes what rationed oxygen they have been assigned.

The pandemic has brought to the fore how the margins matter, as marginalized and oppressed groups continue to bear the brunt of Covid cases and deaths, particularly BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color), alongside disabled, chronically ill and elderly people. The pandemic has challenged affluent nations with brutal, heartbreaking lessons in minoritarian and intersectional politics of vulnerability. It has interrupted grand narratives of technological progress or biomedical prowess, as industrialized nations struggle to provide basic protective equipment for hospital staff, oxygen supplies are rationed, and ventilators and hospital beds remain scarce. Much like equipment and supplies must be carefully rationed, so must *time*. The emergency temporalities of crisis mode, with a dizzying succession of sensorial stimuli and cognitive demands, affect everyone in different ways, from healthcare centers saturated with fear and hope, to the daily "doomscroll" making endless demands on the capacity to process information, respond and adapt.

Queer theories of time offer myriad ways of considering the odd temporalities of the pandemic as an interruption/disruption, breaking down the linear narratives of straight time. As Mel Chen points out in "Feminisms in the Air" (2020), published in *Signs Journal* on the coronavirus pandemic, while the situation seems unprecedented, there is actually a great deal about it that feels oddly familiar, as if we were living out all our worse collective fears about infection, contagion, outbreak. It does not take much probing to find various historical precedents either, both in the distant and near past, from the 1918 flu pandemic to typhus, syphilis, diphtheria, poliomyelitis, Ebola or malaria epidemics. Masks, in particular, may remind us of not so distant (historically and geographically) events: swine and avian flu outbreaks, high pollution levels, chemical warfare, or even speculative scenarios of climate calamity from science fiction. Masks mark this time: what I am calling "covid masks," the broad range of masks worn by non-medical staff, from makeshift swathes of cotton cloth adjustable to the face with an elastic ribbon, to N97 or FFP2 grade filtering masks, share and recite a long genealogy of protective masking practices functioning as prosthetic forms of embodiment.

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Masks have been a source of intense anxiety since the beginning of the pandemic. Covid denialist movements and protests have tended to focus on the right to *not* wear a mask in public with the same conviction that public health campaigns have used in their efforts to advocate for widespread mask wearing as one of the most effective measures to prevent the spread of covid-19. I contend that these polarized responses have more to do with attitudes towards the "natural" and the "artificial" than with biomedical data or the actual covering up of faces. Instead of presuming that certain forms of prosthetic embodiment are better (i.e. more natural or benign) than others, it might be worth clarifying which forms of prosthetic embodiment one might prefer and why. For example, to claim a preference for unmasked faces and unvaccinated bodies, or for neglecting hygiene and social distancing measures, and an indifference to mounting numbers of infected bodies left to die, might seem justified based on a dislike of ageing, disabled, immune-compromised bodies whose contribution to capitalism is minimal and whose costs to the state are massive. On the other hand, it might express a dislike for state sanctioned measures based on scientific evidence and even encapsulate a desire to actualize the ideal of "natural" human bodies properly adapted to their mostly benign natural surroundings, always capable of activating an adequate immune response that does not jeopardize the survival of the individual. Viral time is thus also embodied, material time: the time of internal bodily mechanisms attuned to the agency of nonhuman life and of the object practices we engage in to sustain life, from weaving cloth to producing tight nets filtering pathogenic particles, from extracting latex to produce condoms to developing the complex biotechnologies that have produced retroviral drugs alongside a plethora of covid vaccines, both of which are widely available only in wealthy nations with subsidized healthcare systems. Viral time is the time of waiting for the pharmaceutical, biochemical intervention of "drugs into bodies," one of the most iconic ACT UP slogans. Waiting to become a prosthetic body in order to survive a plague, an outbreak of global proportions, bodies are protected via the rudimentary physical barriers of masks and condoms, placed on the surface of the body to isolate it from the exterior and contain its interior, until far more elaborate mechanisms intervene inside the body to facilitate responses to pathogenic RNA chains that will prevent death and hopefullyfoster life.

The coronavirus pandemic does not encompass only the devastating consequences, lethal for millions of people, of developing covid-19 but, much like the AIDS crisis, a far-reaching pandemic of economic and affective, embodied uncertainty: about lockdown measures, the financial consequences of prevention measures, the efficacy of (which kinds of) masks, about the mechanisms of disease transmission, about pathogenesis, about risk factors and the safety of a vaccine and/or its long-term efficacy. Because I am writing genealogically without a firm commitment to finding instances of repetition and resemblance, but rather invested in how difference and divergence are also genealogically diffracted across events, I take an approach informed by historical materialism, material and visual histories, and transdisciplinary methods in history of science and medicine. The book project I am currently working on at the University of Potsdam about the long histories of the coronavirus pandemic expands on ideas I have pursued elsewhere (VARINO 2017, 2019) about models of immunity that are ecologically attuned, accounting for the myriad ways in which contact with the material, affective and social environmental impact the mechanisms of immunity. With a focus on the specificity of object practices deployed in disease prevention and transmission, I am also writing about the very concrete materiality of death and dying, the materiality of multiple temporal registers, pulsating at the core of human and nonhuman bodies striving to stay alive.

Paying close attention to how time structures a hyper-networked phenomenon like a global pandemic also informs a queer thanatology oriented towards embodied temporalities. Does the coronavirus pandemic begin with the first reported cases of covid-19 clinical scenarios, months before the disease was officially recognized by the World Health Organization? Does it begin with the first animal to human transmission of the virus, whether or not that led to a human body becoming sick? Does it begin with the long history of coronaviruses inhabiting (at times human) organisms? Does its temporality begin with the first coronavirus coming into being as a mutation over millions of years of protein chains replicating and transmitting their genetic material? Or do we want to investigate further the origin story of the novel coronavirus disease of 2019, probing deeper into how a virus carried by a number of mammals made its way into human bodies? Do we want to turn our attention to the space of a lab, of a seafood market, or of the forest? Do we want to think about deforestation, the

meat industry, and how nonhuman animals are trafficked and circulated as consumer goods?

Engaging more deeply with temporality when queering death might also mark a turn towards the methods and materials of historical research, which can inform and enrich the methodological and theoretical repertoire of queer death studies as an emerging discipline. For example, focusing on understudied or neglected areas of medical and scientific history might reveal much about how the physical labor of maintaining life and caring for the dying is unevenly carried out by those with lower social status, whereas the emotional labor of mourning might be reserved for the more privileged. Similarly, a focus on the historicity of materials and object practices offers tangible, concrete evidence of their contingency and relationality, and the necessity of linguistic and epistemological systems in order to produce and circulate knowledge. Issues of epistemic justice, of access to care, and of the right to live and the right to die, are all salient from both a temporal and historical angle. Thinking about covid-19 in relation to AIDS is also to revisit ancient temporalities, still reverberating today both in highly specific, localized geopolitical contexts, and in the global dissemination of more standardized biomedical knowledge, crucial for contemporary understandings of disease, death, vulnerability, disability and debility, as well as the bio(in)securities of risk and prevention gripping the attention of nation states.

Or are the multiple temporalities of the pandemic better described in physiological terms, as viral particles enter a vast range of living human bodies through the mouth and nose, in bodies more or less hospitable to it, more or less prone to forming an immunological response, more or less capable of hosting it, more or less likely to form alliances with it, more or less likely to handle a full-blown immunological response of high fever, respiratory symptoms, increased heart rate, possibly with ensuing neurological symptoms? Or should we turn to the epistemological temporalities of viral models of pathogenesis within the history of immunological and biomedical knowledge production? Which temporalities do we (me and anyone reading these words) prefer, which ones matter most to us and why? A queer thanatology has to articulate how the queerness of living and dying is implicated in the daily fabric of social life from the very concrete lived experiences and vastly disparate demands on living bodies.

Attending to the multiple temporalities of the pandemic matters. Accounting for the long geological histories of viruses on earth alongside the biotemporalities of body time or the interconnected genealogies of epidemic, contagious, transmissible disease. It exposes networks of in/organic, non/human phenomena distributed across time and space, material linguistic nodes. how embodied phenomena are deeply intertwined with structural exclusions, how disparate geopolitical regions and epochs are in fact closely related, how the illusion of the autonomous, rational, able-bodied subject of modernity has harmed those who cannot enact it. The historical repetitions of racist exclusions, the racial and gendered division of care labor both in clinical and domestic settings, the classed economic privileges of physical distancing, confinement and containment. Understanding these histories enables more situated, embodied responses. Every living body carries these histories in their genetic makeup, in their physiological responses, in the environments they inhabit. It is remarkably important to keep retelling these stories, to keep reciting the long histories they are embedded in. Queer death studies mobilizes an arsenal of transdisciplinary theoretical strategies to (un)do temporality in myriad ways, considering how death as a crucially temporal phenomenon relates to the haunting of historical time, geological time, body time, material time, affective time, outer space time. Virality is an ongoing, unfolding process, as volatile and unbearable as death/life itself.

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Recalcitrant by nature:
queering death through biological art practice

Writing about biological art practice and its inherent connection with queering death in times of the COVID-19 pandemic is an unsettling endeavour. As a practitioner in the field and PhD candidate, I have encountered a series of converging impairments caused by the pandemic that prevented me from hands-on practice in biological laboratories that I would otherwise do for both doctoral research and exhibitions. I have not accessed a biolab for more than a year. In the meantime, the world outside has become

familiar with the language, ideas and rituals of laboratories. Protocols that characterize work with biological materials – such as the now famous method of washing hands, avoiding touching one's face, using disinfectant, or wearing gloves – have become everyday companions outside the lab. Scientific jargon has crept into mundane conversation.

Biological arts remains a field with morphing boundaries. Its core moves along multiple trajectories that traverse engagement with living biological matter, including ethics (Zurr & Catts 2004), multispecies ecologies (Bates 2013), manipulation of organisms or parts of them (Menezes 2003), entwinement with biotechnology (Gessert 2010; Alistar & Pevere 2020), and more-than-human agency (Schubert 2017; Rapp 2020).

A queer reading of biological art practice may draw upon the theorization of the "non/living" (Radomska 2016) as a category that transgresses normative understanding of life as opposed to death, and hence opens a space where both are intertwined processes. Biotechnologically supported artworks, but also entities such as viruses, fall into this non-normative space. Theorizations of the queer character of nature (Hird 2004; Giffney & Hird 2008; Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson 2010; Bates 2019) further expand the focus from sexuality and gender, while acknowledging it, to an ongoing process of challenging normativities and binaries otherwise applied to the understanding of what many still call nature. By focusing on the perverse intimacies of biological matter, human and more-than-human agency, biotechnology, and contamination, biological arts may act as a lens that blows up and enacts diffraction (Barad 2007) along these lines.

Death traverses biological art practice. One inoculates cultures and kills them; artworks involving living matter are exposed to death, contamination, unruliness, resistance. One can negotiate with biological matter, yet it remains recalcitrant. There is always the possibility that it may suffer from parasites and pathogens, get sick, die, rot (Pevere 2018). If we expand the focus from the agencialities of human and more-than-human kinds at play within a single artwork, and look at biological material in the piece within broader naturalcultural imbrications, it becomes clear how it is not only the biomaterial which "may suffer from parasites and pathogens, get sick, die, rot". Other entities, including symbionts and pathogens, may steer the story of one art piece. This happened with one of my recent artworks from the series *Wombs*. This series ponders possible environmental implications of hormonal contraceptives by weaving together the leaky character of

my body and of more-than-human others, such as asexual bacteria and hermaphroditic slugs. The plural form of the title refers to multiple manifestations – of bodies and the artwork. *W .02*, one piece from the series, features a hybrid culture of epithelial cells extracted from my vaginal duct and slug egg series: a non/living artwork.
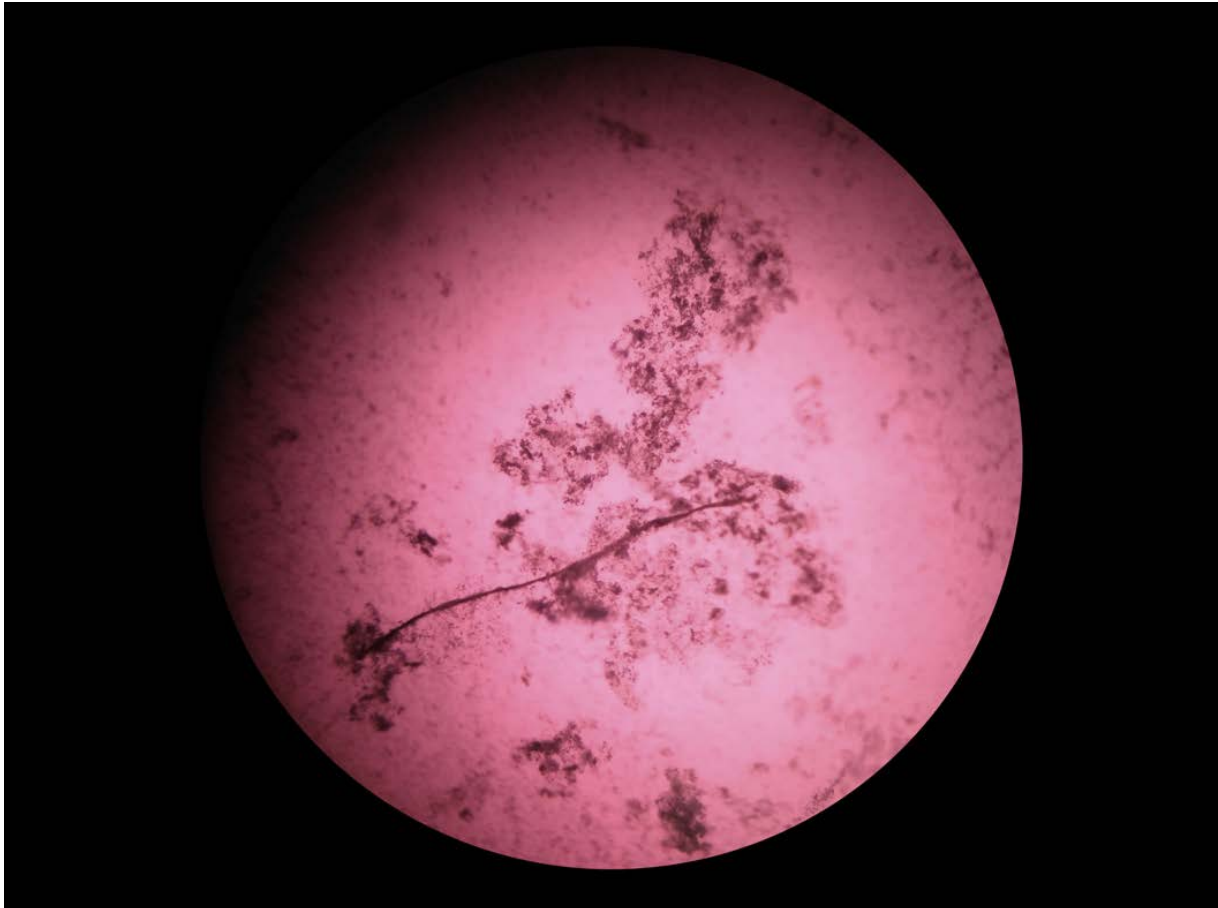
Fig. 1 – From the series "Wombs". Epithelial cell forming tissue under microscope. Picture credit by Margherita Pevere 2019.

Because of converging impairments that prevented me to work in biolabs, *W .02* has remained interrupted. No batches of living cells were left after the first exhibition, and the plans to prepare and stock new batches are shattered by the current ecological complexity. There is an irreducible ambivalence in this situation, which is both a bitter halt to my research and the "problem" of a privileged person. The pandemic affects human cohorts with severe consequences to the lives of many – human and non-human. The impossibility of exhibiting an artwork that involves human and slug cells may remain marginal to many. Yet, this impossibility of working

reveals precisely the naturcultural fabric the piece operates in: an inter-weaving of ecological, sanitary, political, and jurisdictional realities. This impossibility reveals and amplifies the specific imbrications expressed in biological arts.

Fig. 2 – From the series "Wombs". Details of vials with dried cells. Picture credit by Margherita Pevere 2021.

Yet, this sounds like an all-too-human dimension. The impossibility of exhibiting one artwork or continuing research around it may be frustrating if one thinks in human terms. The looming deaths of fellow humans remains tragic, obviously. I still cultivate the hope to retrieve and exhibit *W.02* again in the future, however the complexities unveiled by biological arts and the radical openness articulated by queer theory (Giffney & Hird 2008; Dell'Aversano 2010; Radomska *et al.* 2019) conjure a different way of thinking to what happened to the artwork. The artwork has manifested itself differently, and by doing so has opened a critical space of reflection and performativity. An artwork which cannot be exhibited reveals vulnerability (Shildrick 2002; Daigle 2018; Radomska *et al.* 2021) and calls for negotiations, rather than being a failure.

A queer reading of the experience and processuality of more-than-human death in biological art practice may help sketch a mode of embracing the recalcitrant performativity of biological and biotechnological matters. Symbionts, chimeras and holobionts manifest their intricacies in the process of dying. In all its complexity and ethical ramifications, such awareness may help celebrate, cherish, and care for the commonalities that living, non/living, and dying beings are part of.

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

4/ Queering death in the medical and health humanities

ABSTRACT: This is part 4 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, queer studies, and the medical/health humanities and tackle questions such as: how can queer death studies deconstruct the health-illness binary? How can we rethink the experience of cancer from the perspective of queer death studies? How can this discipline help us focus on "peripheral" deaths like fetal death and pregnancy loss?
The present article includes the following contributions: – Kirey-Sitnikova Y., Bridging queer death studies with public health science; – Böcker J., Queering fetal death and pregnancy loss; – Werner A., Re/orienting to death: queer phenomenology, terminal cancer, and anticipatory regimes; – Tzouva P., Towards a queer death: breaking free of cancerland; – Clay S., A queer account of self-care: autopoiesis through auto-annihilation.

KEYWORDS: Thanatology, Death Studies, Queer Studies, Medical Humanities, Health Humanities.

BRIDGING QUEER DEATH STUDIES WITH PUBLIC HEALTH SCIENCE

As a trans/queer activist with 11 years of experience, I have seen enough criticism directed at health practitioners. For several years I was among the few persons in Russia speaking against trans pathologization, gatekeeping practices and compulsory medical interventions, finding inspiration in trans/gender studies, critical theory, social sciences and humanities in general. Unfortunately, much of this criticism misses its target, as many health practitioners, even those acting with the best intentions, lack training to understand the complex language in which their faults are explained by the activists and academics. Mutually incommensurable theoretical frameworks and worldviews make it virtually impossible to establish constructive dialogue between adherents on both sides. Getting an education in public health thus became an extension of my activism aimed to understand the

field I have been critical of and practice this science in a more meaningful and responsible way. The following is my attempt to bridge the fields of Public Health and Queer Studies via Queer Death Studies (QDS) in a number of ways which came up during my present research in trans health.

1. What is death in public health and health economics?

The science and art of Public Health is grounded in the understanding of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (World Health Organization 1947). This definition reintroduced a holistic approach to health which for three centuries since the Cartesian revolution had been subsided by a positivist understanding of a disease as a deviation from the biological norm (Ahmed *et al.* 1979). Both health and disease are biosocial constructs that do not exist in a binary opposition towards each other but include many dimensions articulated differently depending on, for example, class and culture (*Ibid.*). This deconstructionist mode of thinking parallels the blurring of the life/death binary found in QDS.

However, when trying to operationalize and quantify "health", we still find ourselves in a familiar continuum in which more health means less disease, and vice versa. The opposite endpoint of imaginary "perfect health" is "death" which for Public Health is understood as a special type of a disease – the worst "disease" one can get. Two common metrics of health illustrate this point.

Disability-adjusted life years (DALY) is used to measure population-wide disease burden (Murray 1994). It is calculated as a sum of *years lived with disability* (YLD) and *years of life lost* (YLL). To calculate YLD, one uses *disability weights* which are tabulated for common diseases (disabilities) in a range between 0 (perfect health) and 1 (death). A related, utility-based metric called Quality-adjusted life years (QALY) also relies on weights in a range between 0 and 1, but 0 is assigned to "death" and 1 to "perfect health" (Torrance & Feeny 1989). Interestingly, QALY weights might go down below zero – indicating that certain health states may be perceived as "worse than dead", raising a number of philosophical and practical issues (Roudijk *et al.* 2018).

Morbidity and mortality go hand in hand in many other ways. For example, the International Classification of Diseases began as a list of causes of death, while non-fatal conditions were added in later revisions (Anderson

2011). To provide another example, in health economics evaluation, Markov models are widely used. In these models, individuals move between health states with certain transition probabilities. Among other health states, the model usually includes "death" – the probability of staying in this state is 100% once you get there. Aggregation of morbidity and mortality has been questioned on the grounds of their incommensurability (SOLBERG *et al.* 2018), but the mode of thinking delineated above still prevails.

2. IS NECROPOWER A USEFUL CONCEPT IN PUBLIC HEALTH?

If death is considered among the health conditions, how can theoretical concepts of QDS be applied to issues of health and disease? Public Health and especially its subfield of Epidemiology has for decades been criticized for not accounting for power relations in its practices of data collection, categorization and calculation (LUPTON 1995). Its theoretical approaches were called into question for focusing on an individual body as a problem separate from social relations in which it is immersed (WING 1994). This critique is partly out of date, as insights from social sciences are increasingly incorporated into the theory and practice of Public Health, including the development of social epidemiology, integration of intersectional analysis, embodiment theory, to name a few trends (WEMRELL *et al.* 2016). Political epidemiology has emerged as a subdiscipline aimed to account for the role of political factors (political systems, political economy) in shaping health inequalities (BECKFIELD & KRIEGER 2009). While the latter research incorporates the notion of power, the concept of biopower in its Foucauldian sense is lacking. Several factors might explain epidemiologists' reluctance to employ biopower analysis in their work. First, despite Public Health becoming more interdisciplinary than ever, humanities are still too far away, and biopower in particular is too vague a concept to be operationalized. Second, the concept of biopower has been (and continues to be) applied against the science of Public Health itself, which is rendered as an instrument of control over populations in the name of life and health.

On the other hand, necropower as a power that drives living beings closer to death might better align with epidemiological thinking focused more on risk factors than protective factors. Sovereignty is not only exercised through letting certain people die while making others live (as in the mainstream analysis of biopower), they also expose them to conditions leading to disease and death (MBEMBE 2003). Whereas Mbembe's analysis

focuses on more visible articulations of violence, a related concept of slow violence (Nixon 2011) considers mundane, everyday exposure to factors detrimental to one's health, such as environmental degradation. Both concepts can be used to explain causation, especially in fields such as environmental and social epidemiology where studies need to rely on observation while experimental designs are often impossible. While several frameworks for incorporation of qualitative research into epidemiology have been proposed (Bannister-Tyrrell & Meiqari 2020), their practical implementation remains a distant future.

Transgender issues are a good example to illustrate the gap between the current state of epidemiology and QDS. Some epidemiological studies show effectiveness of trans-specific medical procedures, such as hormone replacement therapy and surgeries, in improving psycho-social outcomes and mental health (Murad *et al.* 2010; Costa & Colizzi 2016). Focusing narrowly on medical interventions, this research routinely excludes social context in which trans people live outside the gender clinic, such as pervasive discrimination and violence leading to slow death. On the other hand, necropower has been invoked in relation to trans lives in other academic texts (e.g. Snorton & Haritaworn 2013). However, I was not able to find a study where these two modes on looking at trans issues intersect. It would be interesting to examine how medical interventions aimed to alter one's perception in a certain gender act as protective factors against necropower of everyday transphobia. Which social (and not just biomedical) pathways lead to improved mental health? How medical diagnosis of transsexualism/ gender dysphoria renders some trans individuals exposed to necropower while disciplining others through biopower?

3. Counting all deaths equally in health economics

A different intervention inspired by QDS brings us closer to Health Economics. Cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA) is the most common type of health economics evaluation, aimed to compare different types of treatment, or in many cases treatment and no treatment. Differential costs of two types of treatment and their effectiveness (often expressed as DALYs or QALYs) are used to calculate incremental cost-effectiveness ratio (ICER):

$$ICER = \frac{cost_1 - cost_2}{effect_1 - effect_2}$$

ICERs are commonly calculated in two so-called perspectives: a healthcare

perspective includes costs and benefits for the healthcare system, while a societal perspective is broader and additionally encompasses costs and benefits for other spheres, such as employment, education, criminal justice, etc. But none of these perspectives addresses environmental impact of health interventions. In the "effect" part, quality and longevity of life is calculated for humans only. Likewise, the "costs" part covers costs for humans. That means that deaths of animals during drug development are not accounted for, just as degradation of habitats as a result of environmental damage associated with the production of drugs and medical equipment. To account for these consequences, one might modify the equation above as follows:

a. Costs. In line with ecological economics thinking, ecological damage should be included not as "externalities" but as environmental costs.

b. Effects. Non-human deaths and disability should be included in the calculations of effect (for example, in calculating DALYs).

c. Both of the above approaches may be combined.

To determine cost-effectiveness of a treatment, we further need to compare the resulting ICER with the willingness-to-pay (WTP) which is the maximal amount the society is ready to pay for prolonging life and improve health of an individual. Several countries now have standardized WTP: for Sweden it is 500,000 SEK/QALY, for the UK – between £20,000 and £30,000/QALY. But if environmental costs are included, will WTP stay the same? And who is responsible for determining how many non-human lives we are willing to sacrifice per QALY of a human being?

4. Conclusion

Aforementioned are just two ways in which QDS could enrich Public Health Science. Bringing together these diverse conceptual frameworks is a tricky endeavor complicated by disciplinary barriers. Those can be overcome at an individual level by emerging oneself in the theory of a field one has no formal training in. But a structural change in academia is needed to facilitate transdisciplinary research of this kind.

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Queering foetal death and pregnancy loss

On a naïve social constructionist starting point I began to research experiences of miscarriage and stillbirth for my PhD project some years ago. I considered the terms miscarriage and stillbirth to refer to clear medical facts – foetal deaths at different points during pregnancy or birth – and I thought only the ways of dealing with the incident would differ by history, culture and biography. Using a grounded theory approach, I ended up studying how, in fact, a miscarried or stillborn foetus is perceived, (de)constructed, and dealt with as a deceased human being, a *child* lost by its *parents*. I had to let go of my assumptions on the factuality of (death at the) beginning of a human life.

I realized there is a "cultural void" (Sawicka 2017: 233) surrounding pregnancy loss experiences like miscarriage, stillbirth, late termination and perinatal death. They go along with stigma, isolation and communicative taboos rather than with social routines and rituals. In ritual theory abrupt and 'unsuccessful' endings of pregnancies can be seen as incomplete rituals, leaving the formerly pregnant person and the foetus in a "liminal space between different states of being" (Kuberska *et al.* 2020: 150). Both have an uncertain status, the stillborn foetus may be seen as "something between a baby and 'human tissue'" (*ibid*). According to the modern subject-object dualism, it will be either buried or disposed with clinical waste.

Below, I share some observations of heteronormative (necro)politics, connected with pregnancy loss activism, that aim for official recognition and for parental rights to decide about foetal remains (Böcker 2021). Based on this, I point out what queering death and loss around the beginning of a human life could mean instead.

Heteronormative (necro)politics of pregnancy loss activism

In many countries all over the world activism accounts for filling the social and ritual void surrounding pregnancy loss. In Germany, where my research focus lies, it ranges from local support groups of volunteers who sew small-size clothes for stillborns out of wedding dresses to nation-wide networks and activities to raise awareness around pregnancy loss and to change clinical standards and federal laws.

One of these initiatives, "Petition Sternenkinder [Angel babies]",

achieved a change of the Civil Status Law.[1] The married couple Barbara and Mario Martin – who lost three children during pregnancy – brought in a draft law via the petition committee of the German Parliament in 2009. The draft law was meant to establish a civil status for miscarried foetuses. The goal was for parents to have the choice to officially register and to bury them. Until then, pregnancy tissue and miscarried foetuses were usually discarded as clinical waste and no official record was kept. More than 40,000 people signed the petition. In 2013 the draft law was unanimously adopted by the German parliament. The decision was accompanied by standing ovations for the Martins who had lobbied for the amendment many months.

Miscarried foetuses now can be legally recognised. Bereaved parents may name, register them at a local Civil Registry Office and bury them. Although the law amendment might have enforced overdue parental rights, it implies heteronormative implications and consequences on which I will now expound.

First, there is a new obligation for hospitals to inform about funeral rights and possibilities in case of a miscarriage, whereupon individuals must decide about the foetal remains. Women and couples experiencing a miscarriage might be troubled in a new sense now: they now must legally decide if they want to bury what they have, or will have, miscarried, a foetus or unborn child, with which they may or may not have bonded. At the same time, they are confronted with a growing cultural expectation to do so: to name, bury, and mourn the unborn, their child, and consider themselves as *bereaved parents*.

My research indicates a hegemonic discourse and practice of informing that is foetus-centred and implies foetal parenthood (Böcker 2021). The actual decision-making process is accompanied by feeling rules and role expectations, especially those of a *bereaved mother*. To put it more drastically, every failed pregnancy may mean a deceased child and bereaved parenthood now. There is also, to some extent, a rhetorical proximity to anti-abortion activists who use the concept "death of an unborn". Some Catholic hospitals, especially, use *pro-life* rhetoric to inform about new funeral options and services related to "gravesites for unborn life".

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[1]   The Civil Status Law, in German "Personenstandsrecht", regulates every person's family status including name, date of birth and date of death. The law distinguishes between live-birth, stillbirth, and miscarriage.

Second, if effected individuals decide against a funeral – that is they don't arrange an individual funeral themselves – hospitals are legally obliged "to collect and to bury miscarried foetuses and unborn children under dignified conditions". Mostly in practice, the hospitals collect the miscarried foetuses and pregnancy tissue, and local Christian communities organise a cremation and burial as well as a small funeral service. This, by the way, also applies to foetuses who were miscarried by Muslim women.

Third, the requirement to officially register a miscarriage reveals how firmly legal parenthood is still bound (bound again?) to the idea of biological parenthood. The minimum requirement to legally declare the foetus as a family member, and to give it a prospective name, is proof of a former pregnancy and a medical professional's attestation about its end. Since, in Germany, married homosexuals have to adopt their (partner's biological) child after birth, live-birth to be precise here, for homosexual parents there is no legal way for both to be registered as the parents of a miscarried child. On the other hand, since in most German states every *parent* can arrange a funeral after any kind of pregnancy loss, a husband – who is the father of his wife's children by law – is now legally enabled to arrange a foetal funeral, regardless of his wife's wishes. Miscarried children of married heterosexual couples seem to be, to put it in the words of Butler (2004: 30), "more grievable than others". This is especially startling because the amendment was praised in media as a concession of individuals' rights to self-determination after pregnancy loss.

Queering foetal death and pregnancy loss acknowledgment

Effected women, couples, and the extended families, have to give meaning to the situation, define the miscarried/stillborn/child, define what life/death means to them, find a parental/non-parental identity, and decide on the next steps – all against the background of being responsible for self-care, future feelings of regret and a successful bereavement process.

Queering death around a human life's beginning means to understand to whom that life held meaning – its planning, hoping and preparing for, its coming into being – and to define *what* was that meaning. In this regard, we need queer forms of recognition and acknowledgement after pregnancy loss. The subject-object-dualism applied to the foetus still opposes an officially registered *death of an unborn child* who is buried with dignity to *human tissue* that may be disposed as clinical waste.

In fact, many effected subjects have highly individual, sophisticated and ambiguous conceptions and feelings of what they have lost. For example, they consider their miscarried/stillborn child somehow magical, a kind of divine encounter, acknowledging non-human personhood. Or they might be in a situation to await their beloved child *and* decide for a late termination due to medical reasons. So far this is a moral contradiction, but we need ways to acknowledge these losses as significant without tying them to foetal personhood. After loss some parents want to write a memorial card for their aborted child and send it to friends and family, yet many won't because they feel – and may be held – responsible for their not coming into being.

Non-normative practices of mourning miscarried and stillborn babies, like this, are sanctioned in two ways. On the one hand, they are still "unacknowledged and stigmatized loss[es]" (Werner-Lin & Moro 2004) because the unborn isn't seen as a human being and grievable loss. On the other hand, some of the recent changes in official recognition seem to reserve bereavement and mourning after miscarriage and stillbirth for those who are considered *real parents.* Apart from the question, what a valuable and grievable life and loss is, we therefore also have to discuss *who has a right to grieve.*

Thus, we also talk about acknowledging "reproductive loss" (Earle *et al.* 2012) in non-mainstream families and communities. Losses by members of the LGBTQIA* community are likely to be acknowledged less, because they match a mainstream expectation that they won't become biological parents. However, single-mothers, surrogate mothers, lesbians and trans men have miscarriages and stillbirths, too. Their pregnancy losses are often especially painful because the efforts and costs to conceive are particularly high. Members of the queer community may not want to go for an official state record of their miscarriage or a birth certificate, but it is striking they don't have the same legal right to do so.

In Berlin Schöneberg there is "an enchanted cemetery ... where the Grimm Brothers, stillborn babies and gay men are resting in peace" (Lambda Prod 2016). The old graveyard is famous for being a last home for many (well-known) gays who died from HIV/AIDS in the 1980s. Today, it is also famous for its beautiful "Garten der Sternenkinder [Garden of Angels]", a gravesite for stillborn children. It looks a little bit like a playground and is sometimes used like one by siblings of the dead. Offering a place for

the invisible and stigmatized – dead and mourners alike – the graveyard enables community-building and a re-evaluation of what can be considered grievable losses.

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Re/Orienting to death: queer phenomenology, terminal cancer, and anticipatory regimes

My partner and I drive 3 and a half hours from our remote rural town to the regional cancer centre where I meet my oncologist once a month to discuss my treatment, my blood tests and scan results. We leave the home we hand-built together, drive through farmland, climb a winding forested mountain pass, and emerge from the forest onto the Monaro plain – a barren, brown landscape of huge granite boulders, wind-tortured gum trees, skinny sheep grazing, dead and decaying road-killed wombats and kangaroos lining the sides of the highway.

On the drive we are encapsulated. Physically in our car, hurtling down a highway towards a destination that only exists for us as a site of medicalised examination and information-gathering. We are also encapsulated emotionally and temporally. We are absorbed in our grief and anxiety, knowing that one day we will make this drive together and my oncologist will tell us that the treatment that is currently keeping my metasticised cancer 'under control' has stopped working, and that the cancer will now continue spreading until it consumes me and I am gone.

The knowledge that this news is coming, one day, maybe soon, fills us with dread and also with wonder. It orients our time, inscribes the ways that we imagine our futures. In the days leading up to the appointments we are gentle with one another. We don't often speak about what might be revealed at the appointment, but we feel its maybe-immanence thick in the air, in our embraces, when we fuck. We try to shield our children from our anxiety, try to make their life 'normal', arrange play-dates for the days we are at appointments, to distract them/us from what will come.

Our anxiety peaks as we turn off the highway into the outskirts of the city. The road weaves through bland outer suburbia, ringed by desolate

hills, closer and closer to the hospital. We share a Valium. We pass through the covid checkpoint and check in at hospital reception. My appointments are on clinic days at a public hospital: a day full of appointments for all of the patients who don't have private health insurance. It's incredibly busy (so many people, so much cancer), so we wait, sometimes for a long time, smiling at the chemo patients, nodding knowingly at other patients waiting, averting our eyes and choking back tears when we see someone leaving an appointment in tears. We hold hands, knit, read, chat and wait.

The waiting… is… heavy.

I ponder this waiting, I ponder what I'm now waiting for. I *feel* Margaret Waltz's assertion that medical waiting is a site of "temporal domination" which upholds power structures, most significantly those related to class and gender (2017: 818). My class determines my access to medical treatments, access to doctors. As a public patient, my wait times are long, and my appointments are short, as my oncologist rushes to get through all of the patients she must see in a clinic day. But perhaps more than the physical embodiment of waiting in waiting rooms, I am cognizant of, and haunted by, the *waiting for death* that a terminal diagnosis orients me towards. In this, I *feel* Dylan Trigg's observation that temporal experience is bodily and, more acutely, that "the drawn temporality of waiting has less to do with the objective status of the environment, and more to do with a projection *toward the future*" (2012: 31 emphasis added).

As I make these long drives and do my daily, sometimes all-consuming waiting (in waiting rooms, in doctors' offices, in scanning machines, in hospital, on the phone, in bed at 3am, alert with pharmaceutical- and anxiety-induced insomnia) I ponder the ways that I have, upon receipt of this strangely solid and also nebulous diagnosis, been reoriented. The time frame imparted to terminal subjects by our doctors, the expected number of weeks/months/years, imposes limits on the ways we imagine our future, with a concomitant habituation towards medical institutions and the clinical gaze of medical professionals.[2] The cancer-industrial complex in general and processes of prognostication in particular, yoke terminal subjects to a vanishing future that is simultaneously fuelled by hope and also inherently hopeless. Medical institutions (both as physical structures

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[2]   Katherine Kenny points out the very important ways that the 'terminal subject' "derives its ontological being" from the medical establishment and associated institutional gazes (Kenny, 382)

and socio-cultural phenomenon) and terminal diagnoses (as literal numbers which redefine the ways that terminal subjects may imagine our lives *and* as socio-cultural phenomenon which are attended by a series of inscribing narratives) orient terminal subjects within the phenomenological complex of body, place and time (Schmidt 2018).

Sara Ahmed, in her work on queer phenomenology, asks us: "What difference does it make what we are oriented toward?" (2006). While Ahmed is talking specifically here about orientation towards objects, I would like to expand this question to consider other orientations, such as those enforced by the anticipatory regimes of late capitalism. As Vincanne Adams describes, under neoliberal late capitalism, anticipation is an "epistemic orientation toward the future" (2009: 254) which enables "the production of possible futures that are lived and felt as inevitable in the present, rendering hope and fear as important political vectors" (2009: 248). We are socialised to orient ourselves towards certain things: straightness, as Ahmed points out, but also 'the future', as in Adams' "politics of temporality" (2009: 246). But the future we orient towards seldom includes death, which is of course the ultimate future certainty. Ahmed points out that "orientations are about the directions we take that put some things and not others in our reach" (2006: 552). A terminal diagnosis orients a patient towards death, and puts an adherence to future-oriented chrononormativity 'out of reach'. If, as Ahmed suggests, queering may be understood as the making visible and taking notice of that which is invisible or overlooked, then the diagnosis of terminal illness and the associated prognostication of life expectancy is a deeply queering phenomenon.

> For a life to count as a good life, it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. Such points accumulate, creating the impression of a straight line. To follow such a line might be a way to become straight, by not deviating at any point. (Ahmed 2006: 554)

Terminality presents an oblique slant to this heteronormative line, thereby queering the life course. Ahmed suggests that queer moments (or in this case, the queering processes of terminal diagnoses), in their obliquity, inhibit the actions of the body, thereby limiting its capacity to "extend into phenomenal space," forcing the body to straighten, in order to continue

its occupation of that space, since spaces are oriented around the straight body, and exclude other bodies. (2006: 561). Heteronormativity then, is a "straightening device, which rereads the 'slant' of queer desire" (Ahmed 2006: 562). Similarly, teleological anticipatory modes which exclude death from life narratives, exclude terminal subjects from being able to imagine life. Future orientation, whereby anticipation becomes a "moral economy" (Adams 2009: 249) excludes terminal subjects.

Dylan Trigg articulates a sensation of disempowerment and a crisis of vulnerability for self-identity as a result of facing the uncanny, when we "*no longer feel at ease within ourselves*" (Trigg 2012: 47 emphasis added). This sense of dis-ease is deeply familiar to me. Cancer, and specifically terminal cancer, produces this effect, especially for subjects who are not "ill". I 'know', because of multitudes of medical tests and examinations, that I have a number of cancers in my body that will, in the not-distant future, bring about my death. But I do not experience these cancers. What I experience is an orientation towards death, and an orientation towards the cancer-industrial complex, in the form of daily, weekly and monthly medications, injections, blood tests and scans. Because of this orientation I experience a slanting away from the chrononormative life-lines offered to me by future-oriented late capitalism and a (further) queering of my life course. As Ahmed, following Frantz Fanon, points out, such disorientation calls into crisis my involvement in the world (2006b), and results in what Katherine Kenny calls "precarious selfhood" (2017: 374). My ability to normatively imagine a future for myself, as I have been culturally compelled to do, via the cultural narratives and moral imperatives of "working towards", "saving for", "waiting for the right time", "preparing for", has been interrupted by terminal diagnosis. A distinct absence of cultural narratives around preparing for or waiting for death means that my own existence within the "timescape of terminality" is characterised by a sense of wading through "thick time³" (Neimanis 2014), or a sense of being "out of time" (Adams 2009: 255). To some degree I 'know my future' (I will soon die from cancer), but I am also living in a state of disturbed stasis, characterised by the heavy waiting, and the temporal and affective incoherence

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³   Neimanis articulates thick time as a "transcorporeal stretching between present, future and past". While her conceptualisation refers to human responses to and interations with climate change, I think the notion is also useful when considering the spatio-temporal implications of living in prognosis and navigating terminality within the cancer industrial complex.

which Kenny identifies as being fundamental to the experienced reality of cancer. Such radical estrangement from the body that I, as a terminally ill, queer subject experience, is a result of the disorientation offered up by the phenomenal experience of living in prognosis (Jain 2007).

Time is muddied by prognostication. I am disoriented and reoriented by this muddiness. While Ahmed encourages us to consider sexual orientation as a phenomenological question, I extend this to consider future orientation as a phenomenological question, especially when considered in relation to the bodily experience of terminal illness and associated processes. Queer phenomenology, Ahmed argues, functions as a "disorientation device... allowing the oblique to open up another angle on the world" (2006b: 172). Prognostication does this to death, and as such, it queers our relationship with the end of life. It also, perhaps more significantly, draws attention to the ways that neoliberal regimes of anticipatory thinking, future orientation and chrononormativity exclude terminally ill subjects from participation, further dislodging the terminally ill subject's sense of self.

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Towards a queer death: breaking free of cancerland[4]

In their article, "Queer Death Studies: Death, Dying and Mourning from a Queerfeminist Perspective", Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke (2020) explain that "to queer issues of death, dying and mourning means to unhinge certainties, to 'undo normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries' beyond the exclusive concern with gender and sexuality that is often associated with the term 'queer'" (88). They go on to specifically criticize "'proper' responses to biopolitical regimes of health- and life-normativity [...] and normative demands to consider life-threatening diseases from the perspective of a heroic battle against an 'enemy'" (ibid), as it happens with breast cancer. In this context, a "search for different articulations, silenced narratives and marginalised/alternative stories" is important in order to "question(s) and

deconstruct(s) the normativities that often frame contemporary discourses on death, dying and mourning" (ibid:89). Such articulations and voices, in the mainstream of breast cancer understandings and narratives are few and far between[5], a fact that points to the need of looking more closely at what happens in the territory of *Cancerland* (Ehrenreich 2001).

In breast cancer culture, women are dispossessed of their own death, dying, and mourning by the same necropolitical, profit-oriented, life-negating structures[6] that have turned breast cancer into a highly lucrative industry (King 2006; Klawiter 2008; Sulik 2011; Strach 2016). Structures that, moreover, bear the responsibility for circumventing research for the environmental causes of cancer (ibid; see also: Brenner 2016; Richter 2019) and for the marketing of breast cancer in particular as an opportunity to reinvent yourself, re-discover your femininity, and connect to the fighter within (Ehrenreich 2001). This happens not abruptly, but as a natural consequence of a lifetime of necropolitical socialization in the western values of neoliberal individualism and a specific type of white, middle class, heteronormative femininity – a socialization that nearly kills whatever existing possibilities for people to imagine life differently and act upon it. In this context, and in due course, death, dying, and mourning are

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[5] For example, Christina Middlebrook's *Seeing the Crab. A Memoir of Dying Before I Do* (1996). Middlebrook's memoir dispenses with linearity, destabilizes chronology, and recreates in the text the author's experience of fragmentation (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 19-20). Middlebrook castigates the attitude of health professionals who do not call things by their proper name (1996: 7) and attacks "the well-entrenched American denial system" (1996: 135) that radically refuses the reality of illness and death. She asks for recognition (Baena 2017: 6-11) and expresses her fury at the outrageous social expectations to suppress negative emotions and be glad she looks good again after a long time, while she knows she is dying (*Ibid*: 99). A couple more of those rare instances are Miriam Engelberg's *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person: A Memoir in Comics* (2006), which I have examined elsewhere (Tzouva, forthcoming), and Anne Boyer's *The Undying: A Meditation on Modern Illness* (2019) – see Nellie Hermann's very interesting review (2020).

[6] This is what Breast Cancer Action refers to as *the cancer industry*: "The cancer industry consists of corporations, organizations, and agencies that diminish or mask the extent of the cancer problem, fail to protect our health, or divert attention away from the importance of finding the causes of breast cancer and working to prevent the disease. This includes drug companies that, in addition to profiting from cancer treatment drugs, sometimes produce toxic chemicals that may be contributing to the high rates of cancer in this country and increasing rates throughout the world. It also includes the polluting industries that continue to release substances are known or suspected to be dangerous to our health, and the public relations firms and public agencies that protect these polluters. The cancer industry includes organizations like the American Cancer Society that downplay the risk of cancer from pesticides and other environmental factors, and that historically have refused to take a stand on environmental regulation" (Breast Cancer Action (undated))

owned by pink-washed, infantilizing, unabashedly hypocritical and corporate-supported institutions and, therefore, are understood and performed according to their scripts, which promote breast cancer as nothing other than a *bildungsroman* story. In the ultra-prolific genre of breast cancer memoirs (abounding with epiphanies and, in turns, shallow sentimentalism and neoliberal manifestations of a self who will win the battle and emerge more resilient and powerful) breast cancer is imagined as an opportunity for self-development and affirmation of one's will over an insidious invader[7]. All these are set in a world of pink ribbons (and all things pink), teddy bears, marathons for awareness (still awareness?!), snug support groups and comfy sisterhoods, medals for the survivors and survivors' parades, and the most unbearable to watch – because so pitiful and disturbing – commemoration of the dead. Death, dying, and mourning as actions that, in the context of breast cancer, could be charged with political, activist, and ethical presence, are cancelled and disowned as they are appropriated by and put at the service of the necropolitical machine that spreads and exploits people's demise.

Death doesn't seem to really matter, since steps are not taken to effectively address the environmental causes of cancer, even though there is by now serious evidence that environmental factors are linked to the disease (Steingraber 2000; Seager 2003; Brown 2007; Gray *et al.* 2017). Instead, the emphasis is put on individual responsibility and one's personal lifestyle choices (Ehrenreich & Brenner 2001). Despite cancer's

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[7]   One example of such tendencies – a feel-good narrative from a white, upper middle class, heteronormative, and hyper-feminine position – is Marisa Acocella Marchetto's best-selling comic book *Cancer Vixen: A True Story* (2006). The very first sentence already sets the mood and lets the reader know what this is all about: "What happens when a shoe-crazy, lipstick-obsessed, wine-swilling, pasta-slurping, fashion-fanatic, single-forever, about-to-get-married big-city girl cartoonist (me, Marisa Acocella) with a fabulous life finds: A LUMP IN HER BREAST?!? She kicks its ass, of course – and does so in killer five-inch heels" (2006: 1). Another instance, from a very similar perspective, additionally, accentuating the significance of breast prosthesis and motherhood for a woman to be complete, is Geralyn Lucas' *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy* (2004). Lucas' memoir begins with a section titled "The Lipstick Manifesto: Have Courage, Wear Lipstick", which the author closes as follows: "And maybe applying red lipstick is a simple act of courage – to imagine yourself as someone or something you never thought you could be, and somehow, in a carefully applied swipe of beeswax, to become her. Maybe wearing lipstick is the beginning of a revolution inside your head?" (ibid:xv). It, unsurprisingly, ends with a post-reconstruction comment of the delighted protagonist who, having completed her journey, poses topless for the *Self* magazine: "I have finally learned how to strip" (ibid:193). Lucas' story was made into a TV movie (2006) nominated for an Emmy Award. Marchetto's book is going to the screen, as well. For an excellent analysis of both narratives, see Waples' work (2013 and 2014, respectively).

"inexorable increase [...] in industrialized nations" (Ehrenreich 2001: 48) and its occurrence to "women migrants to industrialized countries" who "quickly develop the same breast-cancer rates as those who are native born" (ibid), some of the major players in Cancerland, such as the Komen Foundation and the American Cancer Society, simply do not share these concerns. The money from the donations at the disposal of these institutions amount to an annual budget of millions of dollars, yet the sum that is allocated to research for the actual prevention of cancer is limited to an absolute minimum[8], and the same goes for federal breast cancer funding (Richter 2019: 4). In the meanwhile, "miscellaneous businesses – from tiny distributors of breast-cancer wind chimes and note cards to major corporations seeking a woman-friendly image – benefit in the process, not to mention the breast-cancer industry itself, the estimated \$12-16 billion-a-year business in surgery, "breast health centers," chemotherapy "infusion suites," radiation treatment centers, mammograms, and drugs" (Ehrenreich 2001: 51).

Dying, then, turns into a commercial enterprise feeding the machine that keeps killing women while stuffing the social imaginary with images of fierce battles, heroic survivors, and a revelatory, empowering experience that merits one's gratitude. And, startlingly enough (much more than enough), even an experience not to be missed (Ehrenreich 2001: 49). In this pink, meek landscape, there is no room for "negative" emotions, such as anger, indignation, or outrage, which would have been not only useful in terms of inspiring collective action, but also perfectly justified. On the contrary, the directive is towards their suppression – preferably elimination – and definitely not their expression, which is seen as pathological and as requiring urgent counseling (ibid:50). And while healthy and warranted emotions are restrained, what *is* emphasized is the ultra-feminine character of breast cancer, the importance of looking good as you go through this body-and-soul consuming trial, and the chances you're offered to benefit from initiatives such as the "Look Good… Feel Better"

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[8]   Karuna Jaggar, executive director of Breast Cancer Action, asks: "If Komen is committed to funding research on causes and prevention of breast cancer, why do they allocate less than 4% of the \$1.9 billion (yes, billion) they have raised to these areas?" (Breast Cancer Action 2011). See also: Jill Moffett's article (2003: 293-295) about what kind of research gets the lion's share of the funding, due to the corporate affiliations of major breast cancer advocacy groups. Watch the 2011 documentary Pink Ribbons, Inc. by Léa Pool, based on Samantha King's book (2006).

program by the American Cancer Society[9]. In the meantime, proud and cheerful, dressed in pink, and conforming to the mainstream of Cancerland, women are dying. They are, or could be, dying at the same time as they have been declared "survivors" and been given a medal and bask in the glory of their presumed victory, for we know very well that such a thing as a guaranteed victory over cancer does not exist, and metastases can occur at any point. Yet, at this "marketplace" (ibid:45) dying has no more weight than that, and the attitude towards the dead is not much better either.

Mourning is absolutely not of the kind that would have decency, honesty, and an actual and valuable purpose: to commit people to change things. What it is instead, is the deplorable, despicable combination of kitsch and vulgarity Ehrenreich describes in *Welcome to Cancerland*: "They are said to have "lost their battle" and may be memorialized by photographs carried at races for the cure – our lost, brave sisters, our fallen soldiers. But in the overwhelmingly Darwinian culture that has grown up around breast cancer, martyrs count for little; it is the "survivors" who merit constant honor and acclaim" (ibid:48). This attitude towards the dead is confirmed once more later on in her text, and it is, I believe, no accident that she has chosen precisely this as a closure for her report. At a fund-raising event she attends in her town, survivors parade to music and to loud announcements of their years of survivorship and she wonders: "At what point, in a downwardly sloping breast-cancer career, does one put aside one's survivor regalia and admit to being in fact a die-er?" She thinks then again of the dead and reports back to us from that event a deeply upsetting image: "For the dead are with us even here, though in much diminished form. A series of paper bags, each about the right size for a junior burger and fries, lines the track. On them are the names of the dead, and inside each is a candle that will be lit later, after dark, when the actual relay race begins" (ibid:53). The idea is to commemorate the dead but, in the context of the pink cult, the result can only be superficial, coarse, and deeply disrespectful. This is a case of "how mourning can be reduced to a mere nostalgic, sentimental or utilitarian process – a process that does not challenge or

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[9]   This program offers workshops of beauty tips and free beauty kits to women in treatment for cancer. The emphasis on looking good distracts the women from realizing what is at stake and from taking relevant action, and the free cosmetics in the pink bags given to them are full of carcinogens (Breast Cancer Action 2015).

change the intersecting necropowers that cause planetary-scale death and destruction", as Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke assert (2020: 95).

Conclusion

Breast cancer as a contemporary phenomenon has very broad ramifications and consequences: ethical, political, economic – ultimately, related to power (DeShazer 2013). Writing about it and taking any position through one's affiliations/organizing/public role of any kind should, thus, reflect this acute ethico-political character and the need for urgent and concerted action. A growing number of theorists from areas such as feminism, disability studies, queer theory, and crip theory (Garland Thomson 1996; McRuer 2006; Kosovsky Sedgwick 1992; Sandahl 2003; Clare 2015) suggest a teaming up of different fields in order to give a joint answer to the coming-together of oppressive discourses that strengthen each other. This is unmistakably necessary in the case of breast cancer, which is predominantly an issue of social justice (https://bcaction.org/about/social-justice/). In this light, "the breast cancer movement could forge links with other social justice movements, such as the anti-globalization movement, the peace movement and the environmental justice movement" (Moffett 2003: 287). This activist vision points towards going "beyond breast cancer [...] to highlight the extent to which links between toxic substances and health problems exist [...] and to bring about a more comprehensive implementation of preventative efforts in daily life" (Ley 2009: 201-202).

Such concerns and approaches are not alien to the interdisciplinary field of queer death studies, which "investigates and challenges conventional normativities, assumptions, expectations, and regimes of truths that are brought to life and made evident by current planetary scale necropolitics and its framing of death, dying and mourning in the contemporary world" (Radomska, Mehrabi, & Lykke 2020: 81). The breast cancer cause is "directly linked to the environmental crisis, capitalist and post/colonial extractivist necropolitics, material and symbolic violence, oppression and inequalities, and socio-economic, political and ecological unsustainabilities" (ibid), which is precisely the focus of queer death studies. This, then, could be the field that could function as an intellectual and activist springboard to give a collective answer and take collective action in an era "of life made for death [...] Where female death, racially motivated death, disabled,

death, LGBTQ death still do not seem to register as their own nations" (MacCormack 2020: 108-109).

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A queer account of self-care: autopoiesis through auto-annihilation

In recent years, discussions of self-care have become overwhelmingly dominated by neoliberal values. Articles from mainstream media tend to frame these ideas as desirable and encourage us to engage in consumerism, become "our best self", and adopt a positive and disciplined mindset. Brianna Wiest (2021) from *Thought Catalog* urges us to be "the hero of [our] life, not the victim' and suggests *real* self-care 'is often doing the ugliest thing that you have to do, like sweat through another workout or tell a toxic friend you don't want to see them anymore or get a second job so you can have a savings account…" Caroline Shannon-Karasik (2018), among others (Nazish 2017; O'Neal 2019), take a similar approach to Wiest and presents self-care as practicing yoga, drinking water first thing in the morning, keeping a journal, sleeping, "hav[ing] a mini dance party", shopping, and enjoying food.

Scholars have been quick to identify the neoliberal ideals in this materialistic and vacuous conceptualisation of self-care: responsibility and personal health outcomes are highly individualised, self-worth becomes measured through economic productivity, and bodies, identities, and human life are commodified in highly efficient ways (Ajana 2017; Dilts 2011). The conceptualisation of health within neoliberal forms of self-care draws heavily from the biomedical model. This problematic health model urges individuals to follow normative lifestyles, ensure their body functions in the "correct" way, aspire to an athletic and slim physique, and to be a passive and obedient consumer of the health industry (Metzl 2010; Wade & Halligan 2004).

It is clear that a new approach to self-care is needed, one that not only resists the trap of neoliberalism but also seeks to unravel this system of violence. I offer a queer form of self-care based on Felix Guattari's (1995) notion of "autopoiesis". Guattari describes how we should strive for autopoiesis, a

form of self-becoming that involves incorporating the Other and our surrounding environment to become something greater. We are all connected through this continual state of becoming that affords unexpected connections and creates new assemblages of possibility. Autopoiesis is the "realisation of autonomy" (GUATTARI 1995: 7) because we are no longer bound by rigid ways of being, opening space for creativity and potentiality to flourish. To engage in autopoiesis is to pursue new experiences and examine the world in alternative ways. It is about resisting and dismantling forms of systemic oppression to create an emancipatory future (GUATTARI 1995). A queer self-care praxis based on autopoiesis would incorporate all of these ideas, with an emphasis on the pursuit for agency, embodying personally defined expressions of good health, forging connections with others, and self-becoming.

If we accept this notion of autopoietic self-care as a set of practices grounded in pursuing agency, well-being, connection, and self-becoming, what about self-care practices that involve self-destruction? What might autopoiesis through auto-annihilation look like? Using "viral sex" among gay and queer men as an example, I argue that practices designed to shatter and destroy the self are paradoxically ways that individuals care for themselves and engage in a process of becoming. Self-destruction as a self-care practice is queer in a number of ways: it resists normative definitions of self-care, ruptures preconceived notions of what care might look like, and contributes to the established connection between queerness and the death drive (e.g., DEAN 2008; EDELMAN 2004).

THE VITALITY OF VIRAL SEX

One of the principal health concerns gay and queer men face is HIV infection. There have been international efforts by public health organisations to curb the rate of infection by promoting condom use and regular testing, and encouraging "healthy" lifestyles. However, what about men who desire HIV and position this virus as the erotic focal point of sexual encounters? Gregory Tomso (2008) describes this kind of eroticism as "viral sex" and presents how it is used by queer men as an identity, lifestyle, and tool of resistance against medico-state powers that seek to regulate bodies and identities. Men who desire HIV-infected semen are often identified as "bug-chasers"; those who consensually infect others or provide infectious semen are "gift-givers" (REYNOLDS 2007).

It is by virtue of antiretroviral drugs, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)[10], and other effective HIV therapies that viral sex has become a growing phenomenon in the Western world. This tension between breaking away from medico-state powers whilst also becoming more dependent on these same problematic systems poses a number of issues. Chad Hammond and his co-authors suggest this fraught relationship may aggravate the sense of subjugation some bug-chasers and gift-givers feel, prompting them to seek out more radical and transgressive forms of sex (Hammond, Holmes, & Mercier 2016). Adding to this, Tomso argues that viral sex creates a significant ethical and philosophical dilemma because "caring for those at risk of HIV infection can be seen as a violent limitation of gay men's freedoms" (2004: 89) in addition to creating a public health and biopolitical crisis that ruptures the "state-sponsored violence" of neoliberal governance (2008: 269).

The increasing scholarly work on this unique erotic subculture details the way some queer men use viral sex as an emancipatory practice by actively choosing to become infected with HIV, and then use this new identity as a radical source of queer pride (Reynolds 2007). The erotics of HIV transmission is deliberately abject, and leans heavily on imagery of sexual deviancy, "toxic" or "hazardous waste", "breeding" and becoming "pregnant" with HIV, and re-appropriating HIV-related fear and stigma as tools of empowerment (García-Iglesias 2020; Reynolds 2007). However, viral sex is not just about engaging in transgressive sexual acts to resist and protest the medicalisation of queer bodies and identities by public health; it radically reconfigures the limits of erotic desire and carnal sensation, pushing them to the extreme and creating bodies that "splutter" into a state of suspended meaning and liminality (Longstaff 2019). The erotic exchange of HIV-positive semen can also produce a perverse kind of kinship or "cummunion" (Florêncio 2018): desire and infectious fluids flow between bodies and orifices, displacing the self, dissolving ego-based boundaries, and welcoming in the foreign and strange.

Viral sex is a praxis of necropolitics that seeks to breach the boundaries between life and death (Palm 2019), affirm bodily autonomy, and open up unimagined pleasures and desires. Leo Bersani describes how these unimagined sensations of queer sex can "shatter" the self in a *"jouissance*

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[10] This is a preventative treatment available to HIV-negative "high risk" individuals and can reduce the likelihood of HIV transfer by up to 99% (Anderson *et al.* 2012).

of exploded limits" (2010: 24). That is, queer sex disturbs our psychic relationship to the world and other people, dissolving our sense of self in profound ways. The act of deliberately infecting the body with a virus also becomes a form of self-shattering because it permanently and significantly alters someone's body, identity, and relationship to the world: "[viral sex] is, teleologically considered, the renunciation of what Jean Laplanche has spoken of as the sexual ecstasy of the death drive; it is the ascetic discipline necessary in order to be replaced, inhabited by the other" (Bersani & Phillips 2008: 50-51).

Viruses jump from body to body, mutate and infect, and establish an invisible yet tangible rhizome of connections. To become infected by a virus is a deeply intimate act, and for bug-chasers and gift-givers, it can be a "utopian practice" that "gives a new breath of life" and releases them from the emotional and psychological fear of accidently contracting HIV (Robinson 2013: 120-121). Through the incorporation of alterity and the Other into the body and self, viral sex becomes a form of autopoiesis: the uninfected body is lost, the self is disturbed and unsettled, and the limits of eroticism and the queer body are broken open.

Conclusion

It may sound paradoxical, counter-intuitive, and problematic to argue that individuals can practice self-care through actively engaging in self-destructive behaviours. However, this is clearly possible. I suggest self-care is fundamentally grounded in the pursuit for agency, well-being, embodiment, and becoming something greater, and therefore a form of autopoiesis; to practice self-care is to become yourself and move beyond your sense of self. Autopoietic self-care examines how we use our surrounding environment and intimate connections to nurture ourselves and feel more at home in our bodies. This queer approach to self-care seeks to undo systems of oppression and marginalisation, and to resist normative definitions of health, well-being, and "good" lifestyle choices.

Viral sex is a contentious and socially-fraught practice, but it contains a range of emancipatory potentials. Practicing viral sex can be a legitimate form of queer self-care because it provides individuals with a unique way of performing autopoiesis, gaining a sense of agency, and establishing unexpected social connections. It is also grounded in the pursuit of alternative expressions of well-being that might deviate from normative models

of health. This autopoiesis, paradoxically, comes about through auto-annihilation. The self is shattered so that it may become more. We die so that we may feel alive.

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

5/ Writing and filming queer deaths

Abstract: This is part 5 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, critical animal studies, and the posthumanities and tackle questions such as: how can we re-interpret literature, film, and media products through the lens of queer death studies? And how can we rethink death, dying, and disposal through literature, film, and media?
The present article includes the following contributions: – Adair J.G., The corpse comes out : spectral sexualities and the biographer's impulse; – Berry S., The queer death binary of *Giovanni's Room* remodeled as space for navigating oppression; – Bigongiari G., Queering the life/death dualism through barely alive literary characters; – Hogan M., The promise of a queer afterlife: a counter-proposal to preserving normative singularities in the cloud; – Corradino A.C., Notes on female necrophilia.

Keywords: Death Studies, Queer Studies, Media Studies, Memoir, English literature.

The corpse comes out:
Spectral sexualities and the biographer's impulse

I mine memoir to talk about queer death; biography too often betrays.

For his mother, he wasn't queer until he killed himself. She didn't acquire this knowledge through conversation – we who knew didn't feel inclined to call him out – but rather by way of the clues he carelessly (carefully?) left behind. An assemblage of my letters, micro-Speedos, photos, and an engraved ring left her the unwelcome impression that her son had never truly been straight with/for her. In the absence of a formal declaration that she considered her due, she claimed the right to ventriloquize her dead and newly queer (to her anyway) kid.

When we speak of its death we kill the chimera that is queerness. No longer a slippery, sneaky subjectivity masquerading as a self, death does for some what queer life cannot: solidify. Never mind that the ventriloquist

cannot – and often wishes not to – know the incoherencies, the inconsistencies, the impossibilities of performing our pretended personhoods. And, if a certain sector of the audience didn't see or experience the performance for themselves, can said subject be called queer anyway?

Not that he actually did; he always wriggled away from demands to self-identify, to solidify. That's not to say he didn't own the lack of coherency his mother had always commanded. He reveled in making little sense in the world she engineered by ignoring or willfully misinterpreting nearly everything she encountered experienced. She worked to make each day exactly as the last; to live in a dust-free house; to iron bedsheets into an expansive perfection unsuitable for sleeping, procreating, or perverting.

She wanted a son as unsullied as her sheets; not so much someone as some *thing*.

She objectified others by insisting they stay forever static, as biographers often do. In her mind, he was still the child who had appreciated his *Transformers* toys enough to know they were best left preserved in their packages. To take them out – let alone transform them – ran the risk of danger, damage, even destruction. Anyway, she didn't care for those toys' innate ability to become totally unrecognizable; she couldn't find comfort in a world where tape cassettes transmogrified into troopers without warning.

She never felt closer to him than five years after that gunshot when she collected nearly $10k in a single day from all those perfectly preserved *Transformers* toys in pristine original packaging selling on eBay. Her perfectly predictable son did her proud that payday by demonstrating his grasp of her zeal for life survived under hermetic seal. Of course the price for him had been a debilitating case of OCD that culminated in self-murder, but at least she profited from her original investment.

When we talk about queer death we frequently omit cause – it discomforts. That which refuses to make so-called sense doesn't usually survive the story others construct about us. Memoir and its brother biography, in their current configuration, render othered existence orderly by way of exorcism and excision.

She intuitively understood how to be one such surgeon; she'd operated by that instinct her whole life. By the time that cash came in, she had already cleaned up his causes – and his queerness. She had tried to inhabit his incomprehensibility from 2002-2004, but it proved a sheet too wrinkled to iron out.

He hadn't been feminine. He wasn't even that fancy. In fact, he had even once had a female fiancé, however briefly, and that fact felt more fixed. She felt fixed – and she imagined he did too – by that f(act).

Though this ventriloquism might not have been vindictive, it certainly left only her feeling vindicated.

She didn't know what to do with his ominously "doubled life" so she refused to leave him divided, divisive in death – people and/as possessions ought to be absolutely predictable, their states of being not necessarily separable. In that way, the casket becomes a closet in which the coherency and razor-straight linearity idealized and loved by so many of the living may be imposed upon our unruly queer dead.

Biography, in its traditional form, un-queers us by quieting our contradictions and complexities; in death we need much more than a linear narrative. In its place, we must propagate possibilities, pluralities, and problems. Queerness and death necessitate narration in the interrogative – even the subjunctive – mood. Our deaths, despite current commemorative paradigms, cannot become declarative or definitive.

Why can't the story of his lives span hundreds of years like Woolf's *Orlando*? Shouldn't we all be read through the lens of the life to come, as Neil Bartlett read Wilde in the context of the AIDS crisis? I, for one, hope someone has the sense to ask my possessions – both literal and figurative – what they have to say about me, as Richard Klein does in his anti-memoir, *Jewelry Talks*. And, of course, Wayne Koestenbaum could surely teach a master class in how to capture – and then release – queer subjectivity in life and death.

When we talk about queer death, we must talk about who *and what* died – and all those remains. He died by self-inflicted gunshot sometime after midnight and before dawn on August the thirteenth. He left behind a slew of honest, authentic contradictions that two decades have not reconciled. I hope they never do; life is no balance sheet.

He failed to make sense; he assaulted my senses. He served as a constant reminder of the rich, generative possibilities inherent in incomprehensibility, the rewarding realization that linear narratives of life and lives lived are always lies. Congruity does not *become* queer, even in death.

What we lose in queer death, and that I am attempting to regain in some small part here, is senselessness. In death, by default, we cede our ability

to interrupt the ways we are narrated by the people who surround us. We forfeit all that is silly, incomprehensible, unpredictable, incongruous and defiant to become a straightforward story someone else tells. The part of his story in which he acted – because of course it continues now with a few other narrators – ended in suicide. To me, that particular mode of queer death seals his refusal to assimilate into his story because no matter how seamlessly she recounts it, she can't avoid that conclusion without delivering an outright lie.

What we talk about when we talk about queer death is always, in part, our own demise(s). I first died along with him; I spent two years as a specter that had to learn about the life of a widow before we had any rights. I could not inherit because he killed himself a week in advance of his will-writing appointment; I could not lay claim because marriage then (as now) was still totally straight. His long-estranged father claimed half his estate thanks to the indifference of the law, his mother took the rest. She disposed of the artifacts that came across as queer and took what fit the narrative she intended to tell. She Ziploc-ed and Post-It-noted them with her version of his events; then she Rubbermaid-toted those satisfying remains into the crawlspace under her split-level staircase where they are sealed to this day.

I walked away with a few relics and a strong sense of disillusionment. I discovered death isn't that deadly; queer re-creation comes in time as do other deaths, small and large. I resurrect him in my writing and with my words; we others construct him just as we continually (re)construct ourselves. What we talk about when we talk about queer death is the way that control of our construction belongs as much to those observing the performance as those doing the dance. We're all left to wonder how we will be talked about in our own queer death, just as we recognize the relative worthlessness of words to capture, even adequately (if feebly) something with an absolute absence of stability.

When we talk about queer death, we talk to make illusory sense of something utterly insensible. It's all a question of perspectives – probabilities and possibilities – wherein no positionality or potentiality necessarily receives primacy over another. I have written his death – biographed him – many times in the last nineteen years. Each time I revisit and write anew, I find different subjectivity and objectification.

I write today from the perspective of a narrator who now knows, for example, how his grandmother died. His life puts forward new lessons

– unknown even to him – when we consider that the great Covid-19 pandemic would kill her nearly two decades after his death. She had said there was no point in persevering after his exit; some will say she found new purpose postmortem. Others, of course, might just quip about the sincerity of her desire to quit this life over love.

Queer corpses may be buried, but that fact does not stop them from continuing to come out. They continue to become even as we work to foreclose their futures in favor of fixity. They are specters that haunt; subjectivities more suited to Choose Your Own Adventure-style studies than anything so stolid as biography. Perhaps Carla Freccero (2013) asks it best when she ponders, "[What would we] see and hear were we to resist identitarian foreclosures and remain open to ghostly returns[?]" (339).

Each time he – reappears – at every conjuring – I find him reinvented and reinvigorated. In turn, I see the specters of myself from ten, twenty, thirty years ago and find myself unable to make much sense of some of those stages, prismatic in their possibilities. In that way, queer death proves little more than a hypothesis, a problem in need of new representation rather than its all-too-pervasive appropriation.

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The queer death binary of *Giovanni's Room* remodeled as space for navigating oppression

> I never had a childhood. [. . .] I was born dead
>
> James Baldwin[1]

Queer death in literature and film, since the end of the 19th century with the *Picture of Dorian Gray*, has been characterized by the Bury Your Gays trope, which then permeated popular culture through 1950s and 60s lesbian pulp novels. The predictable routine includes some of the following: a same-gender romantic couple falls in love; they have sex; and, shortly after, one of

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[1]   From the unpublished 1974 interview *Je n'ai eu jamais d'enfance James Baldwin: Entretiens* by Christian de Bartillat as quoted in James Campbell's *Talking at the Gates*.

them dies, often leaving the living partner contemplating their temporary lapse of judgment in attraction (Hulan 17). These narratives are hardly a reflection of real life, where research suggests that "mortality risks among sexual minorities and heterosexual individuals may be highly similar, contrary to beliefs that minority sexual orientation shortens lives" (Cochran). While more authentic representations of queer life in literature and popular media are on the rise, this queer death stereotype persists within heteronormative systems -- real-world systemic oppression that contributes to higher mortality rates for minority groups (see, for example, BRIDGES 2020).

Yet, staying alive is as essential as death to the queer narrative. James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is an example of queer literature because it tells a story about homosexual and bisexual characters, including the complexities of their relationships and the spaces in which they work and live. It is also a story told by a renowned queer author, which could promote a sense of irony as the protagonist David rolls through the expected steps of the Bury Your Gays trope. While in Paris as an American ex-pat, David questions his heterosexual relationship. He meets and falls in love with a man, Giovanni. Shortly after sleeping together, David flees, questioning his motives and future, and attempts to patch things up with his fiance, Hella. She is finished with him and returns to America. David then rejects Giovanni, who enters a relationship with his former boss and the owner of a gay bar. Later, Giovanni is accused of killing this man and is then sentenced to death by guillotine. David suffers a similar queer death fate -- left alone, he is adrift without a country to belong to, and he feels responsible for the death of his lover and the loss of his fiance.

As much as the narrative provides an opportunity to examine queer death, it is also about the search for places and spaces to belong and with which to identify. David initially leaves America for Paris to run from the family and cultural rejections of his queer identity. He finds a place to belong in Paris in the gay bars, gay friends, and Giovanni's room, the titular space-as-metaphor of both queer love and queer death. But, whether in America or Paris, he can never fully embrace himself as a bisexual or homosexual person. He cannot participate in anything other than the cycle of rejection he has learned from home. He knows no other narrative to enter into, which is made evident by his disgust and mocking of Giovanni after their break-up as having "fairy's mannerisms" and behaving "giddy, and girlish" (147). Earlier in the novel, David describes the feminized behavior

of the les folles that Giovanni has joined:

> I confess that [their] utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs. They might not mind so much if the monkeys did not – so grotesquely – resemble human beings. (27)

The binary of being either masculine or feminine--good or bad--leaves David searching for someplace to belong. He cannot find this place in Giovanni, or his room, because he sees that space as grotesque. He cannot be satisfied with his relationship with Hella, whose body he also describes as "grotesque" (158). Within the binary, David does not belong in either space, because he "decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened" him (20). His disgust and mocking come from the shame and fear he experienced growing up as a queer boy in America. Baldwin described this aspect by saying rather than being about homosexuality, the novel is about "what happens if you are so afraid that you finally cannot love anybody" (Baldwin 205).

The fear and inability to love oneself and others that Baldwin's novel presents is key to unpacking what we *actually* talk about when we talk about queer death. Rather than participating in a stereotype or a trope, Baldwin's novel provides evidence of what happens when people are systematically marginalized. As their relationship dissolves before him, Giovanni says to David, "If you cannot love me, I will die" (137). Oppression works by pushing the inhabitants of a system to the edges and extremes. In David's case, he leaves his country for Paris, where he also finds himself living on the edges of the heteronormative society. Giovanni similarly flees his country of Italy, after his child is delivered stillborn. Being pushed as far to the edge as possible by their families and cultures, Giovanni and David end up pushing each other away. Trapped within supramaximal systems of oppression and without a way to change themselves or the systems, they cannot imagine a way to love one another or themselves. They simply cannot stay alive. Giovanni and David both experience a queer death, one physical and one metaphorical, which is the only escape that their systems allow. As readers, their deaths provide us with a warning. To stay alive, the oppressed individual must figure out how to navigate the systems in order to change them or to create new ones.

Queer death in *Giovanni's Room* and in the Bury Your Gays trope is ultimately a paradox, an unavoidable pattern from which characters never stop running. Queer death is both a result of and a way out of oppressive systems, which is one of its long-term appeals to the dominant culture. As a source of analysis, queer death stands as an antidote to systematical change, drawing on what Baldwin called the "wet eyes of the sentimentalist" to incite feelings of pity rather than motivation to action (14). The trap of the either/or perspective has caused criticism of the novel, placing its failures on the character of David as a "negative, confusing, embodiment of the homosexual experience" (Sylvander 85). Applying a postcolonial feminist/poststructuralist lens to this queer death narrative reveals that David's binary perspective leads to an incomplete reading of the novel. For example, Chela Sandoval theorizes in *Methodology of the Oppressed* that to achieve wholeness and survival one must experience the "fragmentation" caused by the oppressive system from a "critical distance" (32.3). To achieve critical distance, Sandoval describes five oppositional stances that have distinct ideologies and goals: equal rights, revolutionary, supremacist, separatist, and differential. She argues that the most effective way to create change in oppressive systems is by adopting differential consciousness or the ability to move through any and all of the other four while using and adapting them as necessary. Sandoval argues that this state of oppositional consciousness is vital to survival. In the light of this theory, David is not the embodiment of a negative and confusing queer experience. He is an example of someone who has not mastered the differential and therefore cannot navigate all of the contexts that push him to the margins.

David and Giovanni cannot transcend the binaries of their worlds. They are trapped by their systems of oppression and limited by their binary ultimatums. As readers, we enter a relationship with Baldwin's narrative, with the characters, the places, and with queer death itself. Baldwin's novel breaks down the first four states of oppositional consciousness. David flees America for Paris seeking equality. Instead, he finds that his shame at being in love with a boy is part of the "dreadful human tangle occurring everywhere, without end, forever" (62). Publication of a novel with homosexual content in 1956, 13 years before the Stonewall riot, was revolutionary, and Baldwin was advised to burn the manuscript (Weatherby 119). David's character exudes white American masculine supremacy, which we experience through his constant judgment of others, especially regarding their

behaviors and appearances. Giovanni points out this quality of supremacy when he says that if David had encountered him in Italy, he would have passed on by "shitting on us with those empty smiles Americans wear everywhere" (144). In Giovanni's room, David attempts to separate himself from the forces of the outside world. At first, the separation works, and he describes the space as being on a different plane of existence filled with joy, but "beneath the joy, of course, was anguish, and beneath the amazement was fear" (81). The narrative illustrates how each of these oppositions work to create oppression, fear, and shame. On their own, these oppositional forces lead the characters to destruction rather than to power. As readers, we maintain the critical distance necessary to see these systems at work throughout the novel and to enter the differential consciousness that is unattainable to our fictional characters.

The critical distance also allows us to theorize a third meaning for queer death that extends its purpose outside of the stereotype or the sentimental. The queer death narrative acts as a potential catalyst propelling the reader into oppositional thought and activism where the possibility exists to reclaim, reform, and rename queer death in our real-world systems. This lens needs to be applied in queer death studies to break the pattern of the Bury Your Gays trope and to make possible new interpretations of queer texts that appeal to contemporary audiences.

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Queering the life/death dualism through barely alive fictional characters[2]

> So then, he wants to die, so that's what he wants. I wouldn't wonder much about that, if only he were alive. Look, such an emaciated body and such powerless limbs and such dull eyes, and he thinks he has something left to kill. Do you think you have to be lying stiff and cold, nailed under a coffin lid, to be dead? Don't

[2]   I thank Davide Burgio and Maria De Capua for reading a first draft of this piece.

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> you think I can see how dead you are, Gösta Berling?
>
> Selma Lagerlöf, *The Saga of Gösta Berling*

Talking about death through a queer lens leads to questioning the existence of a rigid categorical divide between the living and the dead. In fiction we sometimes find this divide challenged by the existence of 'undead' characters. But there is another sort of characters, which I will call the 'barely alive' ones, who are not dead nor alive. They find themselves halfway between death and life, thus queering the dualism: but they are also 'queer', socially marginal characters whose death might take up a scapegoating, sacrificial function.

In *The Simpsons*' episode "A Star is Burns" Barney Gumble, who is usually the butt of the joke, films a movie about his tragic experience of alcoholism. At the end of the film, he addresses the audience with the line: "Don't cry for me, I'm already dead". The protagonist of Quentin Dupieux's film *Le Daim* is so alone that he can dump his phone into a trash bin, perhaps one of the ultimate signs of social death. The last person he calls is his ex-wife: "you don't exist anymore", she tells him. He will go on an absurd murdering spree shortly after, thus blurring the boundary between social and physical death. In Fennell's *Promising Young Woman*, the protagonist Cassie apparently commits 'social suicide', dropping out of medical school and going back to live with her parents after her friend Nina commits suicide in the aftermath of rape. Both characters have in truth been murdered, socially and/or otherwise, but they will haunt the murdering living until they get justice.

Though the examples above can be described as 'social deaths', on a general level I employ the expression 'barely alive' to maintain a distance with the concept of social death as it has been developed in social sciences (see Králová 2015 for an overview of the field). The categories isolated in this field – Králová describes instances of "loss of social identity", "loss of social connectedness", and "loss associated with the body's disintegration" – are a very useful theoretical toolbox for mapping these characters, but fiction, and especially speculative fiction, can explore kinds of death and of subversion of social categories in ways that feel fantastic, not strictly realistic. While I am not saying that this cannot happen in reality, fiction can explore possibilities that are usually outside the 'realistically' thinkable

and, by doing so, bring them into the area of the thinkable.[3] Moreover, through the study of the reactions assigned to the implied reader (Iser 1978) we can try to trace what reaction barely alive characters are supposed to elicit – sympathetic or otherwise, for example –, and ask ourselves why this happens. For these reasons, I think that it is best to employ another term to refer to the study of fictional characters, while keeping in mind that research in social sciences is extremely helpful for the study of fictional characters.

In a lecture in which he examines telephone calls made by suicidal people, sociologist Harvey Sacks argues that "I am nothing" is what people say when they lack the things that members of the social categories they belong to are supposed to have at a certain stage in life: "So there's a notion of a stage in life in which you're entitled to say whether or not you have nothing on this or that value. When persons 25 years old say in assessing themselves that they're unmarried, they're told, "No, you can't say that yet." That's not anything that counts as ' nothing' at this point. These things are standardized; it's a matter of certain formal properties, that your age has to be X before Y counts as ' nothing. '(68). If the conviction of "being nothing" can lead to suicide, it is possible to imagine that it implies a feeling of being 'already dead'.

In some pieces of fiction, the character tempted by death, not at ease in the community of the living, can take up a role that resembles that of the scapegoat, in the terms in which it was defined by Girard. According to Girard, society relies for its correct functioning upon the existence of differences in degree amongst its members. A society in which this system of differences is put into question will precipitate in a condition of crisis. Since all members feel equal, and therefore entitled to have the same things, each of them starts desiring the same objects: but these are not available to all, and violence becomes pervasive and reciprocal. The crisis is solved, at least temporarily, by the choice of a scapegoat that catalyzes universal violence upon itself alone. Girard talks about the return of the dead amongst the living as one of the possible configurations of a differential crisis. Normally, the dead and the living belong to separate realms. In times of crisis, the two realms blur:

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[3]   This way of thinking about the fantastic is inspired by a forthcoming work by Carmen Dell'Aversano.

> In certain cultures the gods are either absent or insignificant. In such cases mythic ancestors, or the dead, take the place of the missing divinities and are seen as the founders, guardians and, if need be, disrupters of the cultural order. When incest, adultery, and other social ills begin to proliferate, when family relationships begin to crumble, the dead are displeased and visit their displeasure on the living. They bring nightmares, madness, contagious diseases; they provoke discord among relatives and neighbors and instigate all sorts of perversions. The crisis assumes the form of a loss of difference between the living and the dead, a casting down of all barriers between two normally separate realms. We have here the proof that the dead incarnate violence; exterior and transcendent violence when order reigns, immanent violence when things turn bad and maleficent reciprocity walks abroad. The dead do not want the total destruction of an order that is after all basically their own. After they have brought about a paroxysm of sorts in the community they are willing once more to accept the homage of their descendants; they cease to haunt the living and withdraw to their usual retreats. If they do not go into exile of their own accord, they allow themselves to be led into exile by the community's ritual observances. The difference between the living and the dead is thereby restored. (254)

Girard regards the dead as ambiguous, both benevolent and malignant, when the society of the living is working properly, and malignant in time of crisis – to become again benevolent when their expulsion reinstates pre-crisis social order. This ambivalence is typical of the scapegoat according to Girard.

Literature offers many examples of outcasts that long to be absorbed by the community of the dead, or that see such absorption as a liberation from the society of the living, or that, perhaps involuntarily, feel drawn towards it. These characters cannot be said to belong to the dead entirely; they are not dead at the beginning of the action, nor undead. By dying, these liminal figures might be performing an important role in the sacrificial event that eventually reinstates the difference between the living and the dead. The thought that they might always have been unsuited for life might be reassuring to 'us', the murdering living. My hypothesis is that the judgment of being 'socially' dead, whether uttered by an external authority or internalized and self-assessed, might not be just chronologically preliminary to actual death, but can perform the task of preparing the scapegoat for the sacrifice. This is in line with the findings of research undertaken in the social sciences which maintain that ostracism can increase thoughts of death (Steele, Kidd & Castano 2015). This might be the case of characters

who are openly instigated to suicide, but as a mechanism it might also be working in subtler ways – maybe nobody tells these characters to kill themselves, but we might have the sense that they are universally antagonized or considered worthless. Girard states: "Whatever the cause and circumstances of his death, the dying man finds himself in a situation similar to that of the surrogate victim vis-à-vis the community" (255). It is possible that 'socially' dying people can be pushed to act like, and therefore to become, biologically dying people. 'Barely alive' members of the society of the living might be a casualty to the reinstating of a rigid difference between the dead and the living. If, on the other hand, the barely alive characters continue acting upon the community of the living, they can perhaps be considered as subversive of the social pressure that would like to posit them amongst the dead: scapegoats who strike back. The importance that the idea of the contagiousness of violence in times of crisis has in Girard's theory can also help us make sense of 'socially' dead people who become killers, as happens in the abovementioned film *Le Daim*.

Another example of this kind of character that comes to mind is Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. Himself sharing in many of the characteristics of the scapegoat, he inhabits a society which presents not few of the traits that Girard sees as typical of crisis, above all generalized reciprocal violence. Eventually, he will die, leaving the heirs to the Heights the possibility of breaking the circle of violence in which they are caught. But this expulsion has some peculiar elements. Nobody kills Heathcliff. he dies affected by a mysterious illness, unable or unwilling to eat, and having lost interest in torturing his relatives. He says of himself:

> With my hard constitution, and temperate mode of living, and unperilous occupations, I ought to, and probably *shall* remain above ground, till there is scarcely a black hair on my head – And yet I cannot continue in this condition! – I have to remind myself to breathe – almost to remind my heart to beat! And it is like bending back a stiff spring … it is by compulsion, that I do the slightest act, not prompted by one thought, and by compulsion, that I notice anything alive, or dead, which is not associated with one universal idea… (269)

Heathcliff is 'above ground', not living. From a Girardian point of view, it is interesting to notice that Heathcliff dies after two of his victims, Catherine Linton and Hareton Earnshaw, form a bond which excludes him, and

which might lead to the instauration of a new society at the Heights, in which Heathcliff will no longer have absolute power. He dies so quietly that my reading is that he just chooses the company of the dead Cathy, who haunted him – whom he had exhorted to haunt him – over that of the living. Furthermore, one might ask, if Cathy "is" Heathcliff, as she so famously states in a pivotal moment in the novel, was not Heathcliff himself 'already dead' all along, after her death? The pattern of hauntings in *Wuthering Heights* is too ample to be discussed here, but to my aims it is relevant to point out that, on the one hand, Heathcliff seems to choose the company of the dead; on the other, he and Cathy were so deeply entwined that perhaps after her death Heathcliff was already dead all along.

Another example of a character who feels drawn from 'our' world to another is Eleanor Vance in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, with her decision never to leave the titular haunted, and haunting, house. Eleanor has nowhere else to go, she has no home, no friends, no job, and only relatives she despises. She will eventually die by voluntarily crashing her car. Another example of a haunting house, inhabited by socially isolated characters doomed to death, is to be found in Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher.*[4]

Examples proposed above do not claim to be analyses, as many other factors that should cooperate in determining the function absolved by the 'barely alive' characters, nor we should assume all these characters to be scapegoats. The sketching of a taxonomy of barely alive characters, and the functions they absolve, might be an interesting project to pursue. Relevant questions which come to mind are: who passes the judgment on characters' being 'already dead'? Why? Are there recurrent features, and are they depicted as social, or natural, or supernatural? Do we side with or against the barely alive character, and why?

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[4]   I thank Mattia Petricola for this suggestion.

THE PROMISE OF A QUEER AFTERLIFE: A COUNTER-PROPOSAL TO PRESERVING NORMATIVE SINGULARITIES IN THE CLOUD[5]

There are many men motivated by their own fear of aging and dying who dedicate much of their late professional years to countering the inevitable. Most often this is done as Science – within media and technology industries, or academic disciplines – and most often under the guise of advancing healthcare, optimizing wellness, or precision medicine. As a kid, I distinctly remember hearing a rumour that when Walt Disney had died, he had been frozen. Being cryogenically preserved, I now understand, is hoping to be revived in the future, based on the theory that the brain can hold memory and personality intact until defrosted. Men like Disney, do not want to die forever; rather they wait in death for technology to catch up and to redefine the living.

Cryopreservation still exists, and feeds off of and into a very specific understanding about the embodiment of human life. Decades later, there are experiments harnessing brain waves, uploading them to inter-communicating computers. This is done by scanning, mapping, and digitally reconstructing the trillions of synaptic connections of the embodied brain. But, as Jeffrey Sconce observes: "this quest to evacuate the meat puppetry of the pre-anthropocene may have a few detours in store for us" (2015: 3). Specifically, Sconce (2015) outlines the few imagined options for digital avatars: there is the repurposed 'brain-in-a-vat' model (at the bottom of the hierarchy), and there's the 'hologram-like avatar' (at the top), with the 'artificial brain' being somewhere in the middle. All models, however, demonstrate the centrality of the individual's brain in the creation of digital avatars. The western-settler (or, allopathic) scientific understanding of the body – i.e that the mind and body are separate, and that the brain largely constitutes the individual's individuality – means that the body is an appendage to the mind (which lives exclusively in the brain) rather than constitutive of the body (and vice versa). Since the late 90s, only the dogma of the gene competes with (or completes) this vision; our genomes become a deterministic blueprint, software for the body. Brought together – the magnetic signals of the brain, and the easily sequenced human genome – make for the perfectly re-encoded human model. All attention

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is placed on the faithful reproduction of the individual. This reproduction of the individual is key, and it forms the basis for a counter-proposal, against storing normative singularities, in favour of centering a complex network of and for queer intimacies.

While critical scholarship of Science (such as Stengers 2000; Latour 2004; Hayles 2008) has demonstrated that the brain and the rest of the body are better thought of as environmentally co-produced, symbiotic, dynamic, ever-changing, etc., dominant views of science and technology persist, rooted in settler-western dualities, and continue to push forward the fantasy that life is best extended, or slowed down, and controlled by big data. Examples of this abound: Dr. Aubrey de Grey, co-founder of AgeX Therapeutics aims to "completely eliminate aging" (The Quantified Body Podcast 2015). Similarly, co-founder of PayPal and Facebook investor Peter Thiel set out to find "the key to eternal life" (Cha 2015). Amazon's Jeff Bezos is backing Silicon Valley scientists working on "a cure for aging" (Zaleski 2018). Google is spending billions on projects "solving death" (TOTT News 2019). And, Microsoft recently announced that it would "resurrect the dead" into chatbots (Kneese 2019; Linder 2021). There are many more manifestations of these anxieties in Big Tech, and on various cusps of scientific exploration (Hayworth 2012). However, "[m]any digital immortality startups are in fact vaporware, or novelties that are more theoretical than utilitarian", as digital death scholar Kneese (2019) reminds us.

Vaporous or not, one of the most persistent industry voices on this topic of digital immortality has been Ray Kurzweil, author of several books on transcendence into machines, and Director of Engineering at Google (Kurzweil 2000; 2005; 2012). According to Kurzweil, the singularity is:

> […] a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed. Although neither utopian or dystopian, this epoch will transform the concepts that we rely on to give meaning to our lives, from our business models to the cycle of human life, including death itself. (Kurzweil 2016 in Wolny *et al.* 2018)

He imagines this time of 'singularitarian transcendence' to be 2045… 24 years from now. This is also why there is a foundation called "Global Future 2045" (2045 Initiative).

While anxieties about aging and dying have motivated scientists and CEOs alike, science has in turn given fodder for popular cultural representations of this 'singularitarian transcendence'– the idea that people can be at once human and wholly duplicated and uploaded to a machine in order to either straddle the two worlds, or live seamlessly in and out of a virtual rendition. We might think of this as a 'digital afterlife'. This model, however, focuses so much on the individual avatar being faithfully replicated, that it deeply complicates 'the social' by not factoring complex relations into the design. Sociotechnical imaginaries of the digital afterlife are literally self-centered. How might a queer reading redress this normative anxiety-driven future? (Edelman 2004) What do relations, connections, and love mean in the afterlife? How are these to be archived in all their complexities? (TallBear 2020) How might our connections to others – human and non-human – thwart the hype of the singular? And why is this kind of derailment important?

There are a few key insights from popular culture that might help us think beyond the digital afterlife as it's currently being presented to us; be it through *Upload*'s (2020) Lakeview, or *Forever*'s (2018) Riverside, or *Black Mirror*'s (2016) San Junipero. All three television series are about 'passing over' to a boutique – and seemingly eternal – virtual afterparty (though *Forever* functions slightly differently). The worlds of Lakeview and San Junipero are always tethered to a reality (i.e. what we think we are living in now, but in 20+ years) by data centers. In *Upload*, the entirety of the digital afterlife is maintained in the server room of an old-timey industrial building, one that is (remarkably) smaller than what currently serves Facebook (for example). In contrast, San Junipero is generated in a vast data center; location-less, automated, and sleek. In *Riverside*, we're not told exactly what the afterlife is, or how its magic is maintained, and this serves a necessary reminder that seamlessness is also an ideal outcome of the afterlife experiment.

Beyond questions of technology and infrastructure, the 'living dead' in each of these digital afterlives are also tethered to normative notions of what a post-living life retreat might include, usually as imagined for upper/middle class white folks: a small, quiet community, beaches, hotel service, access to nature, convertible cars, nightclubs, good weather, endless buffets, and so on. These are markers of physical and material comforts, but – intentionally or not – they invoke little more than enduring boredom.

Fig 1 – Screen grabs of Lakeview Data Centre and server room (*Upload*, 2020).
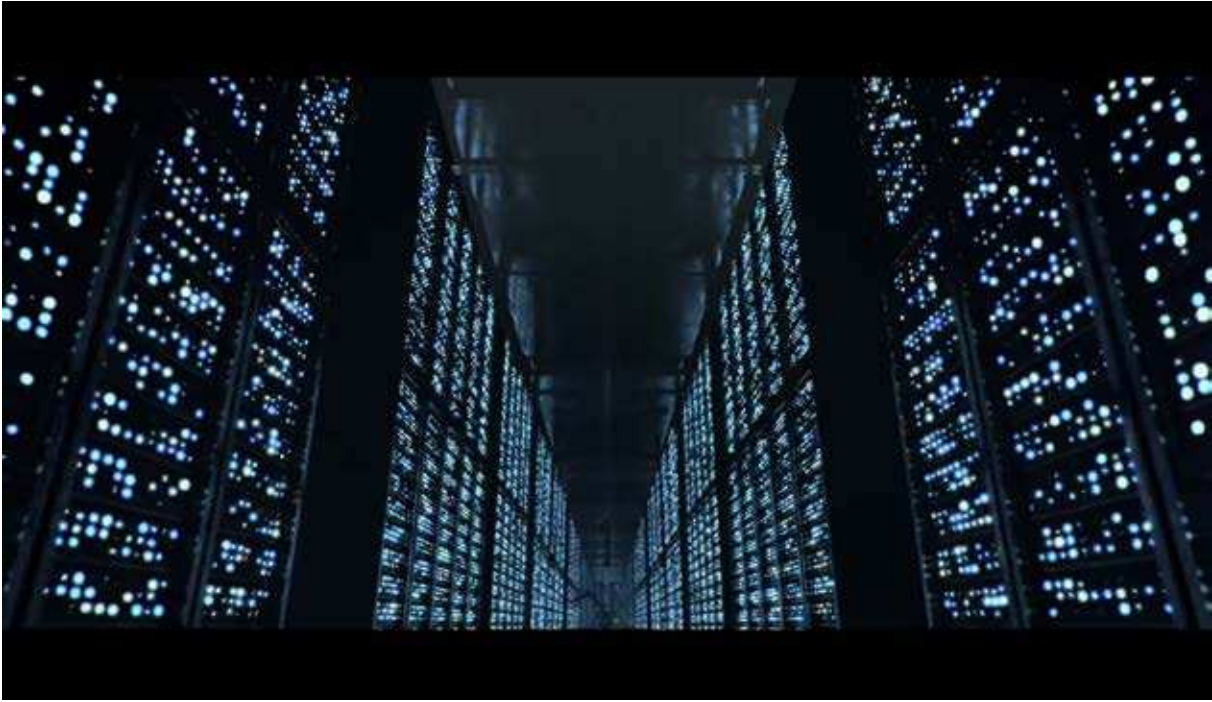
Fig. 2 – Screen grab of San Junipero Data Centre and Tucker Systems servers (*Black Mirror*, 2018).

The characters seem eternally lonely, though less as a plot point and more as a byproduct of the paucity of imagination that constitutes those worlds – to have created an afterlife with neoliberal capitalist ideals, only to realise that (we) the living are never fulfilled by these either. Eternal boredom plays an important role in the affective registers of the afterlife.

This affective register – which could be likened to a "projection space for nostalgia" (Niemeyer 2014: 19) – instantiates and mobilizes psychic relationships to 'the past' for a wide range of ends. This is perhaps most obvious in Upload and Forever, but it is through San Junipero that the importance of this point is made about the eternity of that boredom, nested in nostalgia. We learn that San Junipero is a computer simulation functioning as 'immersive nostalgic therapy' for old, dying people. One (Yorkie) of the two main ciswomen characters (the other being Kelly) ends up in a simulation because she died in a car crash at the age of 21, right after coming out to religious, abusive parents. She didn't live to enjoy being a lesbian in the 'real world', so the simulation is all she has to render this future for all times. She falls for Kelly, a woman who has lost her husband and daughter, and is therefore ready to explore her attraction to Yorkie in this simulated world. The boredom, in that case, is in part about being trapped in this kind of interpersonal dynamic – a suffocation of lesbian desire, to the cuttings room floor – but also about nostalgia itself, said to

be the emotional engine of the simulation, a consequence of and a defense against time itself (Tanner 2021).

In the digital afterlife, the living dead are designed to be perfect replicas of their living selves, but usually, or ideally, arrested at their 'prime.' Disabilities are 'corrected' either by erasure or recoding. Youth is assumed to embody the perfect forever body. Queerness, especially, is indulged on the other (dead) side, but in real (living) life – as we're reminded with laboured dialogue – supports the real labour of heterosexual marriage. The lesbian romances in San Junipero and in Forever are possible only by living out a fantasy in death. Gender and race are also flattened because these worlds were not created with collectivities or relations in mind. Bodies, avatars, and 'uploads' belong to the companies that sequence, host, and archive their data, and ownership falls into regular patterns of earthly inheritance, only gently subverted for our entertainment. Basically: if you have money in real life, and you own your self, you can pass over. You don't have to die forever. The technofix has you covered.

The central battle at the heart of each character's death, however, isn't grieving or dealing with death itself. It's love: their ability to love and be loved. And the litmus test for love, it seems, is the ability to grapple with and tame the promised foreverness of the afterlife in the digital realm. Each show ends with a sense of that impossibility, the failed programming that imprisons them into a world where they cannot afford love; where love simply cannot be in a world created for perfect individual replication and nothing else. In each case, desire and temptation belong in a different place from love – away from it, a seedy underbelly (the Quagmire of San Junipero/the Grey Market of Upload) or luxurious debauchery (Oceanside of Forever) – a place to travel to and away from. Boredom is a feature, not a bug, in a program that focuses solely on replicating the self rather than on extending the deep bonds and complicated intimacies that we form and contend with, if we are to be in relation with others.

One of the (many) problems with singularitarian transcendence is that it's motivated by heteronormative patriarchal anxieties. As Sarah Sharma writes: "The white patriarchal penchant for exit rears its ugly head at any hint of having to live with one's supremacy in question. For most populations on Earth, you might say that living in a world of human constraint and limited conditions is just part and parcel of living" (2017: np). In other words, those who stand at the margins are better able to imagine the

limitations of our current (social, political, technological) imaginary from which they are either excluded or exploited, while those around which the imaginary has been centered and constructed are unable to face the slightest discomfort or inconvenience; the apparatus was conceived to persistently avoid this very thing.

On the other hand, as a counter-proposal, radical queer reimaginings put into question such a focus on the future, at least in so far as this future aims to contain and reproduce sameness for its own sake, and that sameness is equated with being worth preserving, and reproducing again and again (Lewis 2019; Hobart & Kneese 2020). Rather than violent future visions that perpetuate heteronormative patriarchal anxieties in this way, radical 'archival' approaches can offer alternatives to the rigid infrastructures of data centers that host these fantasies. The radical gesture, then, is not to debate the timing or potentialities of digitally replication, nor to opt out in hopes of an analogue 'heaven', but to recentre connections to the myriad contexts – elemental, energetic, animal, political, environmental, spatial, spiritual, etc. – that constitute our interselves, and keep our deaths away from all heteronormative capitalist quests that determine future imaginaries just as poorly as they do the present.

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Notes on female necrophilia

This brief contribution aims at introducing some contemporary critical perspectives on female necrophilia and, at the same time, suggesting possible future developments in this field of enquiry. Far from claiming any unquestionable truth, the present paper should be read as a starting point for deepening further investigations on the subject, by unveiling some of the main still open questions related to necrophilia in general, and to female necrophilia, specifically.

One of the issues related to the representations of female necrophilia is their potential to undermine many of the cultural assumptions which construe normative horizons of meaning in nowadays societies. For instance, the active and desirous instance of female subjectivity (which is central in

female necrophilia) is seen as deviant within a normative, still widespread, cultural paradigm that assigns to women the role of objects of desire in sexual relationships. Also, there is an overall misrecognition of other practices aside penetrative sex, that are often considered 'non-sexual'. According to this last claim, sexual intercourse with a dead man without a penile erection is not accepted as such. This is also due to a broader assumption regarding the ways in which female desire and sexuality are represented as relegated to perpetual absence. Overall, it seems that female necrophilia has the potential to disturb and disrupt such claims, and can therefore be used as a hermeneutically valid tool for the analysis of the ways in which female desire is both positively and negatively represented.

It is widely known that necrophilia, as other so-called 'perversions', has been systematically condemned and stigmatised as deviance in order to downplay its subversive potential since the very beginning of its occurrence. The term 'necrophilia' was first used by the Belgian physician Joseph Guislain in a lecture presented in 1850 and published two years later (cited in Downing 2011: 210). However, it was only in 1901 that the first extensive medical treatment of necrophilia as a disease was elaborated in a treatise by Alexis Épaulard, a former student of the French criminologist Alexandre Lacassagne. His thesis was a medical report inspecting several cases of interaction with the dead: *Vampirisme*, *Nécrophilie*, *Nécrosadisme*, *Nécrophagie*. The text is a nosography that catalogues and classifies the case studies based on the different interactions with the victim: cases of non-violent sexual activity with corpses (necrophilia/la nécrophilie); cases in which the victim is killed in order to be turned into a corpse and therefore mutilated (necrosadism/la nécrosadisme); and lastly, cases in which mutilated body parts are ingested (necrophagia/la nécrophagie) (*Ibid.*). Épaluard reports eight cases of necrophilia, all of which are cases of male necrophilia. As this study confirms, unfortunately, female necrophilia does not seem to feature in psychiatry and has overall been absent from the cultural horizon of understanding, until recently. This is also due to the fact that as other perversions, female necrophilia has always been seen as exclusively and strictly a male phenomenon.

Underlying this observation, there are many other considerations that can be added. First of all, necrophilia *tout court*, seen as any kind of erotic and/or sexual relationship with a corpse, intersects with and at the same time exemplifies many of the most deeply rooted cultural taboos

in Western cultures. One taboo is that of the dead body perceived as an untouchable object. Such a taboo is also validated by religious beliefs surrounding life after death and the handling of corpses. A common sexual taboo prescribes that valid relationships occur only between living beings, although, in the prospect of male dominance, no reference is ever made to mutual consent. One last taboo relates to gender roles: as Lena Wånggren (2012) highlights, "[f]emale necrophilia then might be seen as not only transgressing boundaries of life and death [...] but also as transgressing prescribed gender roles" (71).

Therefore, it can be stated that not only necrophilia is considered the most monstrous of perversions, as Krafft-Ebing (18894: 223 - 4) pointed out, but that it is also strongly marked at the level of gender performance. Numerous are the studies on male necrophilia that often confuse necrophilia and necrosadism and analyse the most violent aspects of sex-death connections as part of a broader discourse on the violence inherent in the representation of male sexual relations. Similarly, much space has been occupied by male necrophilia in horror, snuff and gore films, as well as in horror literature, starting from Poe's famous quote "[t]he death [...] of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world". Here, the representation of necrophilia revolves around the "perverse mesmeriser" who places his reifying gaze on "controlled" and "obedient" female bodies. Consequently, necrophilia is not framed merely as a sexual practice but also as a practice involving the gaze in the first place. In fact, much feminist research has connected male necrophilia to the objectifying male gaze on the female body. It is worth mentioning, in this sense, Elisabeth Bronfen's book (1992*), Over her dead body*, that has greatly contributed to the studies on male necrophilia, alongside Lisa Downing's research, an essential starting point for investigating necrophilia in the context of French *fin-de-siècle* literature (2003).

Although female necrophilia is yet to be fully addressed in critical studies due to the above-mentioned taboos still affecting research in this field, however, some references should be made. Among these, in film criticism, the study by Patricia MacCormack, *Necrosexuality* (2011), and the isolated records of soft-core necrophilia in contributions by Downing on women's writing (2003b) and on some explicitly necrophilic films (2002). None of the above, though, attempts to explore systematically all the representations of female necrophilia in its various manifestations, broadening the

spectrum from visual practices, such as figurative representations of dead male bodies eroticized by a female spectator, to forms of necrophilia as possession and domination over a totally passive or passivised body. Curti and Laselva (2015 3ed.) pointed out that a localised and rapid appearance of necrophilia in horror film productions is that provided by Jörg Buttgereit in Nekromantik (1987) and *Nekromantik 2* (1991) for female necrophilia especially, although necrophilia soon became a side element in horror film plots. This is the case, for example, of Nicolas Winding Refn's *The Neon Demon* (2016) where female and lesbian necrophilia intertwine with forms of necrosadism and cannibalism.

Because of its interstitial nature, necrophilia is a very complex practice involving a series of connected sub-practices, all of which rely on the body-death-eros connection. Such a '*ménage à trois*' can be fully grasped by means of a thorough analysis of the concept of necrophilia itself and its multilayered forms. For instance, necrophilia could be ascribed to the sphere of pornography. In this regard, performances of bodily obscenity and the so-called "body genres" in films, as Carol J. Clover (1987) and Linda Williams (1991) first theorised, come to mind. Such performances have also narrowed a *summa divisio* between the modes of male porn and the modes of female porn, creating a constant tension between visual necrosadism along with genital and bodily dissection, on the one hand, and the maintenance of bodily integrity in its sacredness, on the other. In the latter case, the necrophilic act occurs with no explicit violence. Lynne Stopkewich's *Kissed* (2006) provides an example of a nonviolent, highly erotic, though not explicitly pornographic form of female necrophilia, lacking necrosadic connotations.

The issues raised by research on female necrophilia are varied and lead to some interesting questions that can be profitably addressed through a queer perspective for several reasons: on the one hand, female necrophilia overturns some very specific polarities in gender performances and subverts the normative erotic desire; on the other, it questions the boundaries between body and desire, and their correlated meanings, since the dead body becomes the product of secularised and depathologised subject dissolution.

A number of questions also arise in order to effectively analyse female necrophilia today. What firstly needs to be addressed is a still debated question regarding the very concept of necrophilia and female necrophilia

and what these phenomena mean nowadays, at a time when the clear-cut pathologisations provided by Épaluard or von Krafft-Ebing no longer seem to offer valid taxonomies. Necrophilia is often associated with other 'pathological' perversions, resulting in new forms of eroticism that involve bodies and dead bodies, along with their changing definitions and understandings. We might, therefore, wonder to what extent forms of interaction with bodies that we consider dead can be labeled as necrophilic practices. At the same time, we might question the pathological limits of necrophilic desires.

Another urgent question concerns how necrophilic desires intersect with the construction of gender identities and how these identities are interrogated by erotic perversions. Such issues require further assessment and delineation of the connections linking desire, identity, gender, and sexuality, along with their boundaries.

Lastly, the study of female necrophilia can be a useful tool for understanding certain representations of masculinity, especially when it comes to heterosexual female necrophilia, and the connected instances of power that underlie it. For instance, a sexual intercourse between a woman and a dead man body overturns the normative representation of masculinity that therefore shifts from an active into a passive role, thus deviating from the commonsensical reality that associates femininity with passivity and masculinity with activity. These passive masculinities partly overlap with what Kaja Silverman (1992) classified as "male subjectivity at the margins". Such subjectivities recognize castration, otherness and specularity as constitutive elements of their own identity, and, moving beyond these categorisations, are necessarily passive and totally objectified.

To conclude, female necrophilia is a hybrid space that ends up questioning its own nature. As a matter of fact, we may wonder whether the adjective "female" still makes sense, and if necrophilia can be separated from its pathologisation so as to be used as a hermeneutic tool in the broader analysis of subject-object, active-passive relations, as well as of living-dead body relations. In so doing, it might become a useful rhetorical device also to analyse these radical changes, act as a spectrum of anti-normative erotic relations in the history of culture, and ask new questions about very sensitive issues, in ways that are also controversial. Necrophilia symbolises the reshuffling of gender polarities that have assigned to men the role of sole active agents of erotic desire. Our hope is that this brief contribution

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may broaden the ongoing critical debate on necrophilia and encourage the inclusion of the above issues.

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

6/ New perspectives in queer death studies

Abstract: This is part 6 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 seek to open new frontiers in queer death studies from the most diverse perspectives, from death positivity to psychedelics, from digital death to extreme embalming, from ethnography to philosophy.

The present article includes the following contributions: – Kristinnsdottir A.L., Death positivity: a practice of queer death; – Haber B. and Sander D.J., Death is a trip; – Nowaczyk-Basińska K., Queer (digital) death?; – Ramírez Rodríguez S.M., colony and the "velorio insólito:" contesting conventional death practices in puerto rico through extreme embalming; – Brainer A., Caring for queer bodies and spirits in and after death: research notes from Taiwan; – Newman H., Notes on living after death: a queer pitch for philosophy.

Keywords: Death Studies, Queer Studies, Ethnography, Hallucinogens, Death Positive Movement.

Death positivity: a practice of queer death

The human lot is to be mortal. Like all things, we are stamped with expiry, motivating us to seek ways in which to put it off. Creams, surgeries, diets: all are measures taken to defer the inevitable, the impossible–the end of the self. So concerned are humans with our need to remain conscious and *doing* that we seek to colonize other planets, upload our consciousness, freeze our bodies in the faint hope that *someday, someone* might revive us (More 2013; O'Connell 2017). So, in many ways, even talking about death is queer. Not as in an individual marker of identity, but as in engaging in "unsettling (subverting, exceeding) binaries and given norms and normativities" (Radomska, Mehrabi & Lykke 2019: 6). Death is a truly unsettling phenomenon in the modern Western imagination–as explored for example by Philippe Ariès' *The Hour of Our Death* (1991), Thomas Laqueur's *The*

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Work of the Dead (2015), or Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject (1982)–and to embrace its evils, its violence, its ruthless presence, is unimaginable and, to some, immoral (de Grey 2013).

And yet. The death positive movement, a primarily Anglophone-world movement of protest against modern "death phobia" (Order of the Good Death 2021), challenges the way we think about this life/death binary. Most noticeable is the naming of the movement itself, juxtaposing words that are so oppositional as to not even be comprehensible together at first sight. How can one be positive–that is, happy, contented, inspired–about death, a phenomenon of loss? The movement draws inspiration from other positivity movements, such as sex and body positivity (Doughty 2018) which seek to break down normative boundaries that entangle embodiment and morality. Death positivity does the same, with the expressed mission to dismantle the idea of the dead body as an inherently sullied object, the abject reminder of the borders that are drawn between the human as subject and object (Kristeva 1982).

In her 2016 book of the same name, Donna Haraway calls for practices of "staying with the trouble" (10) to dismantle borders drawn up between the Anthropocene human self–usually a cisheternormative, noncolonial subject–and its others. Death positivity takes up the mantle to champion this cause and emerges as a practice of what Haraway imagines as "partial recuperation and getting on together" (2016: 10). The movement shies away from utopian goals of Frankensteinian resurrection or digital immortality, and instead proposes that we simply embrace the fact that we are mortal and act accordingly. This means that we should consider the impact our post-death rites may have on the environment, understanding our material reality as inherently linked to the larger world around us beyond the cultures of the human.

Prominent death positive activist Caitlin Doughty writes about how ownership of the body can be expressed through allowing bodily decomposition, stating that as a woman "[t]here is a freedom found in decomposition, a body rendered messy, chaotic and wild. I relish this image when visualizing what will become of my future corpse" (2017: 136). Doughty appeals to a mode of post-mortem being here that exerts power and subverts the idea that power necessarily comes with consciousness and conquest, in stark opposition to any popular futurisms of the human. She also subverts Kristeva's concept of the abject body by enjoying rather than

being horrified by the challenge the decomposing body poses to the delineation of subjectivity/object in the human self.

To embrace death in the death positive way is to accept what Haraway calls "not "posthuman" but "com-post"" (2016: 11) being, to materially and figuratively realize the interconnectedness the carbon-based life-form "human" has with its surroundings, despite its placement above and beyond such categories as nature. Death positivity emerges as a normatively disruptive practice *of* death, for the ways it enables us to reimagine, to *queer*, our relationship *to* death.

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Death is a trip

In 1975, Michel Foucault dropped acid for the first and last time in Death Valley, California. Simeon Wade (2019), who was there and whose account of the trip was published posthumously, attributes the significance of this psychedelic experience to a turn in Foucault's work from concerns around human finitude – portrayed famously at the end of *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* as man being erased "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (422) – to arguably more hopeful, ethical concerns around self-fashioning. This rupture in Foucault's thought between the institutional and the individual speaks to philosophical inquiry into the post-apocalyptic and the post-human – into what Eugene Thacker (2011) calls the "world-without-us" – and to the increasing medicalization of the psychedelic experience.

There are some obvious resonances between the phenomenology of psychedelics and queer thinking about the subject. Even before reaching anything like ego death, the boundaries of the everyday world quickly fall away during a trip – self/other, subject/object, life/death – the categorical cleaving of the world into difference suddenly doesn't seem so obvious. Tripping blurs, trips up our sense of the world and the self – of the worldly self – so clarity, if and when it comes, can feel all the more shocking.

The YouTube classic "1950s Housewife on LSD" (RaleighArtist 2012), documents a time when psychedelics were regularly administered to

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human subjects and other animals as part of research experiments. Discovered by a reporter and uploaded to YouTube, the video went viral after it appeared in a CNN segment. In it, the aforementioned housewife – whose "husband is an employee here at the VA" and was suggested because the study was "looking for normal people" – suddenly waxes poetic about the interconnected nature of everything and the overabundance of potential that overwhelms the routinized limits of the subject.

"Can't you see it… everything is so beautiful and lovely and… alive… *you shouldn't say anything about anything not being…* this is reality"

And later… "I wish I could talk in technicolor".
If this 1950s housewife stands as an avatar for the lead-up to 1960s and '70s psychedelia, the *aliveness* that opens up to being *anything*, contemporary drug culture might be suggesting a newly potent encounter with death and nothingness. The pleasure and liberatory potential in that synesthetic moment of technicolor speech is now the default condition of contemporary life, senses bleeding hopelessly as we talk over/through/around each other online; our voice in oversaturated technicolor is now the mandatory labor of the gif economy. Can we dissociate from a hallucinogenic capitalism invested in boundary upheaval as big data market making? We can try, but as Melinda Cooper has said, "[t]here is no form of social liberation, it would seem, that the neo-liberal economist cannot incorporate within a new market for contractual services or high-risk credit (2017: 8)."

Nowadays, rather than entailing the philosopher's pilgrimage to an extreme and sacred locale or a housewife's awakening in a lab, one is likely to casually and banally ingest a microdose of psilocybin or ketamine en route to their open office. Kyle Chayka (2021) describes this latter experience in his description of HBO's *Industry*: "The show zooms in on the faces of these aspiring members of the economic elite, but their expressions are usually frozen into affectless flatness, eyes wide, staring at nothing, glamorously disconnected. I couldn't tell whether it was a side effect of the drugs or just the characters' slow realization that their individuality and sensual lives would be ground down until they, too, become cogs in the machine of global capital." The point being, perhaps, that the Goop-ification of turning on, tuning in, and dropping out is but another instance of accelerationism. Grinding down individuality does not necessarily have to come at the expense of sensuality, though, and could lead toward a reinvigorated queer vitalism rather than the dovetailing of the death drive and capitalist expansion.

Queerness and psychedelics share an interest in instability and process, a resistance to easy instrumentalism, and a foundational relationship to death. Queer theory and its orientation towards self-shattering – the deconstruction of easy boundaries between body/world/self/other – resonates with the transcendent, death-adjacent experiences of hallucinogens. While queer theory was born in and through a mass queer epidemic, its purview has expanded rapidly, and death is no longer so central, or at least, the queer gaze has been refracted towards a kaleidoscopic range of norms and practices related to relationality, identity, and embodiment. The slow mainstreaming of psychedelics from countercultural to clinical significance, in contrast, has been squarely focused on death, anxiety, and subject-threatening trauma: treatment resistant depression, PTSD, and especially end of life therapy have been notable clinical success stories (Slater 2012).

This success in easing fear of death and helping to reintegrate dissociation from life has come despite the mechanism of action being indeterminate, context sensitive, intention based, and fundamentally opaque; in other words, we don't know exactly how psychedelics work. Perhaps, though, we might understand it as a queer encounter with corporeality that resists categorization. Psychedelics reveal the fundamental strangeness of embodiment and can denaturalize, deconstruct, and distance us from the fixed boundaries that tether us to the traumas of environmental/historical circumstance. While the clinical work on psychedelics will importantly expand access and attention, we propose that the time is right for a different kind of inquiry to run alongside, underneath, and above: a promiscuous encounter between psychedelic and queer studies on the topic of death.

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Queer (digital) death?[1]

The concept of queer death usually leads us to think about a vast space of open-ended anti-normative and anti-conventional concepts related to death and a dead body. Queer death mostly refers to organic human and non-human bodies as well as different forms of dying and mourning. Despite a growing body of academic literature on the phenomenon of queer death, its relation to digital technologies has hitherto drawn little attention. In particular, there is a lack of nuanced discussion that go beyond a radical critique, or even rejection, of death-related digital technologies in the twenty-first century. An increasing number of researchers have spotted that digital culture is gradually changing the parameters of death, dying, and mourning over the last two decades, mainly due to the emergence of the internet and the accelerated use of social media platforms (Kasket 2020; Sisto 2020; Graham *et al.* 2013; Moreman *et al.* 2014; O'Neill 2016). Consequently, this essay will arque in suport of the inclusion of 'digital death' (Sisto 2018) in the framework of queer death as a significant component of the contemporary process of dying and mourning, especially in technologically determined western cultures.

There is much to be said about the role of technology in changing the cultural performances related to death, much more than I would fit in this short contribution. Thus, I will focus on two problems that I termed 'the right to be forgotten' and 'the right to remembered'. These two contradictory perspectives sketch the bigger horizon of queer actions one may take in terms of digital death.

Many of us, over the course of our lives, build up intentionally or accidentally a substantial amount of data that stick around after our death. Some researchers call it 'digital flesh' (Gibson & Carden 2018; Yoon 2019). Digital flesh is not merely a container of information; it is not given or transcendent, but materializes itself in reality through our performative actions (Yoon 2019). Digital flesh should not be perceived as an external sphere, separate from our organic bodies, but rather in dynamic relation to it. As Luciano Floridi and Carl Öhman argue: "we should relate to private data as being ours in the sense of 'our body' rather than 'our car'. We are our own information and our personal data are our informational bodies"(Floridi

& ŌHMAN 2017). Therefore, if digital flesh is 'our own body', it is reasonable to ascribe to it the same level of importance and care we give to dead bodies; or at the very least we should make conscious and responsible decisions regarding it.

We are living in a culture that values the idea of legacy preservation, looking for its noble legitimacy in the antiquity tradition of *non omnis moriar*. However, preservation may not be the only option. An interesting perspective has been provided by Ewa Domańska in her latest book *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała [Necros. Introduction to death body's ontology]*. „The idea of keeping forever [like immortality] seems to be thoughtlessly regarded as a positive value, as if [all] people have a desire to endure forever. Such an assumption is as rhetorically attractive as it is difficult to accept in its universality, and even dangerous" (DOMAŃSKA 2017: 285, Pl. tr.). This idea creates space for a new way of thinking about 'digital flesh'. A way that allows for its liberation from the dominant model of sustenance and preservation for the future generation. The subversive practice might be to think in a category of anonymity and annihilation, with a sense of individual living and the desire for total decomposition without leaving footprints (DOMAŃSKA 2017) in both the digital and non-digital sphere. Subversive queer practices might help to carefully plan and prepare a performance of postmortem disappearance.

The right to be forgotten can be understood as a form of resistance to the regime of remembering as the dominant, straight cultural production. Particularly important in the context of the right to be removed from internet searches is the fact that online afterdeath presence is mostly mediated by commercial platforms (FLORIDI & ŌHMAN 2017). This raises a practical but also ethical question: who has the right to own, control, and manage these data? According to a prediction of Carl Öhman from Oxford University, if the use of technologies continue to grow, there will be 5 billion deceased persons' profiles on Facebook by the end of the century. This prediction leads one to imagine what would happen if postmortem disappearance is taken on a mass scale as a subversive queer action.

On the other end of the digital death spectrum is the right to be remembered. I believe that the right to be remembered would still be valued positively if it was given as a choice rather than a forced upon people by political or commercial forces. In this case, queer perspective may help to reconceptualize death, dying, and mourning in a technologically mediated environment.

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In digital culture, the border between life and death has been blurred and might be seen more as a process of transformation or entering another phase, than a fixed moment. Death seems not to be perceived as the end of relations, but rather as a change in its modality. As Jennifer Huberman noticed, what we are witnessing now is a shift from 'the remembering paradigm' to 'the communication paradigm' (Huberman 2017). In other words, we stop talking *about* the dead and start talking *to* the technologically mediated dead (Kasket 2020; Sisto 2020; Stokes 2021). There is an ongoing discussion about how to design technologies that would, on the one hand, effectively acknowledge the death of the user, but also open up a space for new forms of existing. "Technology has the capability to ease suffering or to disturb sensitivities through its strangeness and irreverence", claims HCI researcher Michael Massimi (Massimi 2020; Massimi & Charise 2009). Inventors and researchers, as Massimi further points out, should engage in the process of creating a tech-environment that would support users who are coping with loss and not cause additional pain and hardships. However, this radical cultural, social and psychological change provokes numerous questions including: what is the status of posthumous technologies, from memorialized Facebook account to personalized avatar? will it be just an interactive archive, or possibly a technologically mediated doppelgänger? are ghosts remaining in technology are human elements that embody everything machines?

Also worth raising is a question about grief in the context of emerging technologies. New technologies challenge Sigmund Freud's classical distinction between mourning and melancholia. Healthy mourning, in his rationalistic and normative approach, means a gradual, linear process of accepting the loss of a beloved. The latest studies show that there is no single right way to deal with grief, and some kind of final closure in relation with the dead is not always needed (Kakset 2020; Doka 2017; Klass *et al.* 1996). This makes room for the creation of an entirely new culture of grief that is not constrained by the normative notion of 'proper' mourning. Digital-death-related technologies challenge also the western model of grieving that is dominated by hyper-individualism and self-sufficiency, enabling the creation of new collective practices. Are we entering a new phase of a technologically mediated version of companionship? Could we consider such novel technologies as a tool for creating deeply affective relationships? Could using those technology, and resting in sadness

because of the loss might be understood as a resistance to health-normative discourses on happiness? (Lykke 2018). These are some urgent questions that must be considered from the queer death perspective.

It is clear that themes of identity, loss, mourning, connection, and memory as well as the idea of disappearing and anihilation are deeply affected by digital culture. I belive that queer death studies, as an emerging field of research that "overcome the difficulties of conventional death studies" (Radomska *et al.* 2020) has a potential to provide new theoretical and conceptual tools that will aid in our understanding of the shift in our attitude towards death, dying and mouring and the impact of digital technology on this shift. Queer death may also help to highlight crucial aspects of death, dying and mournig in the contemporary world and introduce the possibility (and right!) of making your own choice.

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Colony and the *Velorio Insólito*: Contesting conventional death practices in puerto rico through extreme embalming

> No quiero que nadie llore
> si yo me muero mañana
> ay que me lleven cantando salsa
> y que siembren flores, allá en mi final morada.
>
> Cheo Feliciano, "Sobre una tumba humilde"

A white plastic table with matching chairs, dominoes laid out. People take their turns and set up the pieces, all the while chatting with other players. This is a regular scene at many plazas and balconies in Puerto Rico. However, this particular domino session is an exception; there is one player that hasn't left the table for any of the rounds. These will be Carlos A. Méndez Irizarry's last games, and everyone wants to make sure they get to sit with him one more time. Once the last round is played, he will be cremated. After all, Méndez Irizarry is dead. Before passing away at age 79, he had told his family that he wanted his wake to be just like a domino game,

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and they obliged. That is how in December of 2019, the municipality of Isabela in Puerto Rico became the place where they had "*el muerto jugando dominó*," the dead man playing dominoes. However, Méndez Irizarry was not the first to have "one last game" before leaving. In October 2015, Jomar Aguayo Collazo was dressed in a royal blue Adidas tracksuit, accessorized with a pair of sunglasses and a gold chain, as well as a drink and a pack of cigarettes close by. He waited for his friends and family at the domino table by the jukebox at Bar Carmín in Río Piedras. Aguayo Collazo and several of his friends had been murdered shortly after his 23rd birthday. It is unknown if he had specifically requested this type of wake, but his mother reached out to Marín Funeral Home, a mortuary business in the San Juan area, who are known for their work in extreme embalming.

Méndez Irizarry's and Aguayo Collazo's wakes are not alone in their use of unique ways of remembering the deceased in Puerto Rico. In the past twenty years, Puerto Ricans have been involved in a number of "*velorios insólitos*" or "unusual wakes." The Orlando Sentinel lists sixteen funerals that presented the dead in "exotic" ways, but no one can be entirely sure that these are the only funerals that were "nontraditional." According to Cintrón Gutiérrez, stories of unusual wakes began in 2008 with Ángel "Pedrito" Pantoja Medina. Known as "*el muerto para'o*," or "dead man standing," Pantoja Medina was embalmed in an uprigth position and viewed in his own living room. Pantoja Medina's, Aguayo Collazo's and Méndez Irizarry's wakes inspired the Boricua community on the island and in the Diaspora. Various men and women requested unique viewing experiences or were prepared in such a way at the request of their families. Others chose to provide a final send-off to their pets in a similar fashion. These events became media fodder, with news coverage of these funerary practices extending to mainland United States, Europe, and Asia; a discussion began to develop regarding Puerto Rico and its dead. Media reports on these wakes range from factual to manifesting a degree of shock and horror. Others projected sensationalized disgust, such as the Daily Mail. Its headline stated "Dead gangster's body is propped up playing one last game of DOMINOES at the same bar where he was murdered days before," which is not only grotesque, but factually incorrect. Aguayo Collazo was murdered at El Regreso; his wake was at Bar Carmín, which belonged to his mother.

Having originally visited Puerto Rico to write about the *Día Nacional de la Zalsa*, Alfonso Buitrago Londoño ended up being fascinated by these

mortuary practices. Upon learning of these incidences of extreme embalming, Buitrago Londoño thought that they were more extravagant than curious, "as if those embalmed dead were the call of a people at the brink of a battle against death." He also wonders if it is a sign of Puerto Rico's colonial history. While embalming and burial have been the apparent norm for generations, Buitrago Londoño is not wrong when connecting these unique wakes to the island's colonized past and present. Having been under the rule of not one, but two foreign countries, Puerto Ricans have been forced to change their lives as well as their deaths. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish, indigenous Puerto Ricans known as the Taíno had a more accepting view of mortality. Instead of viewing death as abhorrent, the Taínos believed the dead never left; they simply became part of their community (López Rojas, 21). They may have feared it, but they saw it as a part of their life cycle. Death was "*el Gran Areyto*" or the great feast, and it was another form of life in which death was just a part of the process. Death was a form of cultural renewal in the community, as well as the reconciliation between its past and present (López Rojas, 20-21).

Since the Taíno believed that people and their dead could, and should, communicate, this led to a "culture of conservation" in regards to the deceased, both as a body and as an idol. Taínos did not believe that the dead left their bodies entirely, which led to whole or partial conservation of the body. López Rojas notes that chroniclers observed this funerary practice across the Antilles (22). The *cemí* also played a key role in Taíno culture. Rocks were used as vessels for ancestral spirits of Taínos past as well as deities; they were brought to life via carvings on these stones. *Cemís* were protected, as they were important symbols; Taínos would even fight over who had the right to keep them (López Rojas, 21). All of this came to an abrupt halt with the arrival of the Spanish; López Rojas states, "Spain imposed its civilizing order and with it, the Spanish sensitivity to death was enthroned (24)." No longer would there be natural burials for bodies or any corporal conservation. The *cemí* did not escape scrutiny either; it was eliminated as it was considered to be part of pagan polytheistic practices. The ideological imposition on mortuary processes was official in 1513 via the *Ordenanzas para el tratamiento de los indios*, which stated that any sick Taínos must be assisted and brought to confession. If they were to die, they must be properly buried, with a cross on top of the grave. If any *encomendero* refused, they would be served a four dollar fine (25).

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The Spanish, hindered by the elements and by disease, were struggling to colonize the island. Even though the Taínos were spiritually destroyed and no longer allowed to commune with their dead as was tradition, they continued to fight against the colonizers. However, indigenous Puerto Ricans were decimated by illness and slavery; Taínos were soon replaced by enslaved Africans brought to Puerto Rico. In turn, the enslaved were also subjected to these colonized expectations of life and death. "The Burial Policies of 1539" further regulated death, stipulating that all bodies had to be buried within church or monastery grounds (López Rojas, 26). Not even in death could the force of the colonizer be avoided. Yet, as Puerto Rico's population grew, so did fringe movements contesting social norms and mores. This also applied to death practices. The enslaved, as well as the peasants, began to celebrate death. Unlike a conventional wake, this was an occasion for "song and dance." The utmost expression of this was the *baquiné*, or little angel's wake. In the 1700s, the death of a child was "a cause for celebration, the child's death was a symbol of collectivity (López Rojas, 33)." The *baquiné* was then a representation of the community's "pain, death, and rebirth in hope for a life beyond (33)." While some may see the *baquiné* as a form of denial in regarding a child's passing, López Rojas sees it as the formation of popular culture outside of established or official norms. Peasants and enslaved communities were facing death and responding to it, in contrast to the noble and law-abiding sectors of Puerto Rican society (35-36). The *criollos* practiced a different kind of good death; one that relied on prayer, repentance, and last rites, as well as a plot at a proper church or Catholic cemetery. Followers abided by Catholic practice, and so they held wakes at church, paid for *rosarios* and *novenas*, and left charitable donations to ensure their spots in heaven.

Cintrón Gutiérrez states that the body becomes a dominant ritual symbol during the wake, which draws social attention. At the same time, the cadaver also assumes a performance that forces death to commingle with life and family until the time has come to bury (or cremate) the deceased. Citing Laura Panizo's "Cuerpo, velatorio y performance", he adds that embalming and cosmetology practices go one step further in order to help the body present a "beautiful, healthy, and youthful" aesthetic (6). Extreme embalming takes this beyond, as traditional funerary practices have bodies as static entities lying in a coffin, as if asleep. Instead, these unique wakes present the body in imitation of dynamic everyday situations. In addition to wakes

in which the dead are ready to play domino, or are waiting for visitors in their own living room, there have been deceased that have been presented as driving ambulances or taxis, playing poker, or simply sitting in their rocking chairs at home, as they used to do. Puerto Ricans have also done this in the Diaspora: Julio López, deceased at age 39, was embalmed and presented "riding" his motorcycle at his wake in Philadelphia. Like the *baquiné*, the "*velorios insólitos*" break with tradition as they do not separate the dead nor do they spend their time in prayer for the deceased. They play and chat with the dead; they even take pictures so they have a physical or digital reminder of the moment. Extreme embalming allows these families to remember their dead, but also to celebrate them. This is a contestation of the colonized cultural norm that calls for a traditional wake, church service, and burial.

In a piece for *Cuadernos Inter.c.a.mbio sobre Centroamérica y el Caribe*, Cintrón Gutiérrez describes extreme embalming funerals as a type of wake that demonstrates how the deceased never surrender or give up. He also adds that it is a way of "making history." Within the context of marginalized spaces, making history is being able to transgress invisibility (17). These individuals were able to transcend accepted colonial norms and connect with past practices that made life and death inseparable. Perhaps the best example of this is not just how they are presented in dioramas that depict everyday situations, but how the community went about in normalizing these wakes. Méndez Irizarry's viewing took place at a funeral home, but people went up to him and sat down, talked, or played a game. Aguayo Collazo's wake took place in a bar, and whilst his friends and family went there to pay their respects, the bar was operational. People were playing pool and drinking close by. This is a new kind of *baquiné*, wherein people celebrate the deceased and erase the line between life and death, even if it is just for a little while.

These approaches gain visibility and urgency in the wake of tragedies such as Hurricane María, rising cases of femicide, and hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community. Post-hurricane, Puerto Ricans suffered and died in their homes due to inexistent government aid at local and national levels. Treated as second-class citizens, islanders were left without power for almost a year, amid resource scarcity and a leptospirosis outbreak. If the living had been ignored, the dead had been forgotten. Bodies piled up in malfunctioning storage as families struggled to reclaim their loved ones so they would give them proper burial. Since relatives had no bodies to mourn, memorial

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marches, murals, and vigils began to occur. Puerto Ricans were once again finding ways of facing death on their own terms. Likewise, memorialization of victims to hate crimes has become increasingly visible to national and international media. After the murder of Alexa, a young trans woman, art, protest, and music were crucial components of the people's mourning. Trap and rap artist Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, better known as Bad Bunny, involved himself in the protest toward official handling of the crime by donning a shirt that said: "They murdered Alexa, not a man in a skirt."

López Rojas stated that the corpse belongs to the political apparatus (43), but Puerto Ricans refuse to let this be so. Extreme embalming and radical memorialization have become a part of Puerto Rican culture on the island and in the Diaspora as a contestation of colonization and marginalization. Méndez Irizarry's, Aguayo Collazo's, and Pantoja Medina's wakes, along with artistic memorialization and protest, assert that conventional approaches to death and dying are an option, not the norm. They signal a refusal to conform to imposed processes implemented via colonization. When traditional funerary approaches such as embalming are used, they are pushed to the limit: the dead are forceful and involved. Furthermore, these contestatory acts are relatively accessible to the public. They are not reserved for the upper echelons of society; this group usually aligns with colonial funerary practices that entail religious rites. For those who engage in "extreme embalming," protest, and memorialization, death is another instance of protest. It is another way of asserting cultural and queer identity.

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Caring for queer bodies and spirits in and after death: research notes from Taiwan

Beginning my research career about one decade ago, I did not expect to talk about queer death. I had just begun my fieldwork with LGBTQ+ people and families in Taiwan, and death was far from my mind. But in tuning in to queer lives, I also learned about queer experiences of dying. I witnessed the end of life and afterlife care that people offered one another within systems that were not designed for them. I listened as people talked about death

candidly with their families. Parents, especially, referenced their own and their children's (future) deaths to frame their responses to queer issues.

In this note, I offer a small number of examples to start a conversation about queer death that is rooted in Taiwanese culture and society. I am eager to see work at the nexus of queer kinship, family, and death studies in a wider variety of cultural contexts. I also hope to see more talk about queer death that bridges academic, activist, and community spaces.

End of life and afterlife care

As with other forms of reproductive labor, who cares for spirits, and who *is cared for*, reflect and reproduce the gender norms and values of a society. This holds implications for queer and trans people that scholars have only begun to explore. It is important to recognize that ancestors and spirits are not a niche or disappearing part of our cultures. They continue to matter to many people in ways that cross class and generational lines, and intersect with the relations among living family members[2]. Queer thanatologies are uniquely suited to explore these relations and practices through the lenses of gender and power.

The following vignette is an example of how end of life and afterlife care can become intertwined with queer personhood as well as queer practices of friendship and solidarity. My interlocutor, An, recounted this story about her best friend, Lin, whom she lost to cancer when both were in their late teens. An and Lin shared in common a transmasculine or *T* identity, and issues of gender integrity arose in death just as they had in life. Lin had been training at the police academy and convinced her family to clothe her body in her police uniform, managing in this way to avoid the indignity of a dress. However, the family did lay her out in very feminine shoes.

At the funeral, An spoke aloud to her friend's spirit. "I'm sorry about the shoes, man," she said. "Don't worry. I have your favorite sneakers. I'm going to burn them, and you can put them on as soon as you get them."

As items burned for the dead are widely understood to reach them in the afterlife, An used this practice to intervene – a quiet rebellion against

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[2]   There is a large body of work showing the present day salience of ancestral spirits. See, for example, Buyandelger (2013), Fonneland (2017), Heng (2020), Kanai *et al.* (2019), Mackenzie *et al.* (2017), and Santo (2018) writing about contemporary Mongolia, Norway, Singapore, Japan, the African diaspora in Australia, and Cuba, respectively.

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the shoes, a final act of care[3]. Some grieving families do recognize the alternative genders and sexualities of their children. But in many cases, like this one, it is queer friends who step in to create a more gender-respectful memorial (for another example, see Ho 2005).

Gender concerns did not end with Lin's funeral. As an unmarried and childless daughter, Lin was not recognized as part of the family line nor as an ancestor. Ancestral status, ensuring social continuity and care after death, is conferred to men through their natal families and to women through their marital families (Shih 2010). For this reason, Lin's family did not bring her home, but instead placed her remains in a temple, where her spirit would be cared for by outsiders[4]. Describing this to me, An said, "I always thought this was so unfair." I felt her voice harden, like a thin sheet of ice across a lake. "I told my mom, if I die first, and you put me in a temple, my ghost will come back to haunt you." A haunting ghost is a spirit that is suffering, without the anchor of home or kin. Couched in these terms, An's message to her mother was crystal clear.

Gay and bisexual men also intervene in end of life and afterlife care in creative ways. An interviewee in his seventies had created a small altar to his boyfriend, similar to the family altars that populate most Taiwanese homes. There he burned incense and placed food for his boyfriend's spirit. Elsewhere, I write about Hong, a heterosexually married gay man who purchased columbarium niches for himself and his boyfriend of twenty years. They would be placed together with his mother, while his wife would be housed on a different floor of the same columbarium tower (Brainer 2019: 24-26). On one hand, this example shows queer agency. Hong arranged for his boyfriend to be with him in death in a way that had been unattainable in life. At the same time, it shows how easily women can be excised from the family. Gay men had, on average, more opportunities to create space for themselves within existing systems. Lesbians, and *Ts* in particular, faced some of the most severe obstacles at the end of their lives[5]. Their precarity as women living apart from men became all the more visible in death.

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3   For the meanings and reach of this practice, see Blake (2011).
4   For a description of such temples, see Shih (2007).
5   The LGBTI Elders Group is a subcommittee of the Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association (https://hotline.org.tw/, https://hotline.org.tw/english). The short film 其他人 (*Others*) is available on their YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/dG-rpIQDsUw, retrieved January 2021.

Death as a rhetorical tool within families

Death can also be a point of reference or rhetorical tool in family negotiations surrounding sexuality and gender. This came up rather often in my interviews and fieldwork. Some parents referenced their own deaths in an effort to compel children to become heterosexual or at least to subdue their queer identities for a period of time. This took two main forms: parents who said that having a queer child would hasten their death or make them want to die, and parents who told children to wait until elder family members or they themselves had died in order to come out or undergo gender transition. Both strategies carried weight. Some adult children did consider waiting, although this proved enormously difficult. In the final chapter of my book, I quote the elder sister of a gay brother as saying: "I think it's better if my brother can wait until after my parents have gone [passed away] to come out. But that is such a long time from now, with many difficulties in between" (Brainer 2019: 119).

I'll never forget the first time I presented this topic to a mostly heterosexual audience. One woman gasped, "These people want their parents to die!" I was stunned by her interpretation. Some people had waited years, a lifetime, at times in crushing loneliness, to protect their parents from knowledge that could hurt them. I realized then that the sacrifices queers were making were not visible to many heterosexuals. The perception of queerness as selfish and unfilial is one we must continue to work to dismantle. This work includes creating a social environment in which a parent's life does not (appear to) depend on their child having a heterosexual marriage and family.

Other parents feared that their children would die because they were queer. This notion was two-edged. Fear of HIV/AIDS and isolation or social death did propel some parents to try to change their children's sexualities in order to safeguard them. At the same time, in support group meetings and other gatherings for parents of LGBTQ+ children, I often heard moms say to other moms that death by suicide is a possibility if the children are not supported. Thus, suicide became a part of the narrative that parents used to explain why they supported Taiwan's LGBTQ+ movement and their own queer and trans children, and to urge others to do the same.

My research suggests that talking about queer death with parents and families is not something to be avoided or feared. Parents themselves are already thinking and talking about these things. Scholars working in queer

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death studies can contribute meaningfully to these conversations. This will require, however, that we make our work accessible, as I discuss last.

Pᴏsᴛsᴄʀɪᴘᴛ: ʜᴏᴡ ᴀɴᴅ ᴡɪᴛʜ ᴡʜᴏᴍ ᴅᴏ ᴡᴇ ᴛᴀʟᴋ ᴀʙᴏᴜᴛ ϙᴜᴇᴇʀ ᴅᴇᴀᴛʜ?
In 2013, the LGBTI Elders Group in Taipei self-produced a short film about a lesbian couple's struggle to stay together at the end of their lives. The film, based on real stories, culminates with the femme partner's death and her lover's isolation in grief. During the funeral, family members are called to pay their respects according to gender and kinship role. Gradually the funeral proceeds through other socially recognized relationships, such as neighbors and coworkers. The woman's lifelong partner stands alone in the final group, *qí tā rén* or "others." This word – others – became the title of the film and a touchstone for the alienation and precarity that queer people experience in and after death. Group members used the film to showcase issues that their years of organizing had shown to be important. The scripts for funerals, and what transpires after, are rooted in the same gendered kinship system that many queers struggle with throughout their lives.

I opened this note with my hope to see more talk about queer death that bridges academic, activist, and community spaces. The work by the LGBTI Elders Group is one place where such talk is happening. These activists have spent enormous amounts of time and energy on all of the issues I have raised here: gender disparities in funeral rites and rituals, gendering of bodies in and after death, concerns raised by parents and families, and more. One of the most important things Queer Death Studies can do is listen to and learn from this work. It is wonderful that this journal is open access. I urge us collectively to remove not only the financial barriers, but also the barriers of disciplinary jargon that keep our ideas siloed in the academy. In this way we can support efforts to improve the quality of queer lives, deaths, and afterlives, now unfolding around the globe.

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Notes on living after death: A queer pitch for philosophy

I.

> None knew so well as I:
> For he who lives more lives than one
> More deaths than one must die.
>
> Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, 1897: §III, l. 394-396.

What does Oscar Wilde talk about when he talks about queer death? When he was sentenced to hard labor in Reading Gaol – condemned not so much for having loved another man as for having dared to let it be known – Wilde returned his thoughts to a central theme of *Dorian Gray*. Queer life means living more lives than one, figured in the novel by the division between Dorian's body and portrait, which mirrors that between his daylight and nighttime lives. (Already: nightlife as the *real* life of queer people, standing to daytime as writing does to speech, writing as testament of death: each morning an occasion for mourning, departure from one life the (re)turn to another.)[6] Recall, as well, the moment just before Dorian's "mad prayer" is answered (1891: 174), when Lord Henry awakens him, for the very first time, to his own beauty – and with it, to a new world of possibilities, a new life. Yet with this life's dawning, the old life ends: "For he who lives more lives than one/More deaths than one must die".

Call this less a scene of coming out than of instruction. (Reading Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell calls philosophy "education for grownups" (1979: 125), answering to our found need for a new form of life. Call this a queer pitch for philosophy.) Nevertheless, it captures a truth of coming out. In coming into my queerness I leave my old future, my old life, for my new one. That this entanglement of life beginning and life ending entails I mourn myself, I am apt to learn only belatedly. But when and should I look, I will find that who I was I am no more. Carla Freccero writes of "queer spectrality" figuring the traumatic touch of our history "in the form of a haunting […] whose ethical insistence is to 'live to tell'" (2007: 195). Like Dorian I, too, am spectral. Like Wilde, living on death's other shore, I too am called to live on to tell.

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[6] These connections of "morning" to "mourning" and to "testament" as "writing in view of one's death" (1989: 106), I borrow from Stanley Cavell's writing on Emerson in *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, writing which I take to register Cavell's responsiveness to Derrida (Cavell 1988; 1994).

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II.

> Death, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein's ownmost possibility – non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped. Death is, as Dasein's end, in the Being of this entity towards its end.
>
> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1927: 258; Eng. tr. 1962: 303.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger pictures the human as *Dasein* and *Dasein* as being-towards-death. Before death and its untraversable singularity, we find our absolute limit, and so our ownmost end, and so our ownmost possibility. The task of life is one's call to stand before this singular possibility of *our own* impossibility – which we can never experience, only anticipate – *resolutely*. "Here I stand, I can do no other":[7] to say as much sounds rather like coming out. It bears, however, an opposite relation to death and so to life. Coming out, I acknowledge not that I *will* die, but that I *have already* died – and so now live differently, anew. My resolution in coming out is not before the death I anticipate, but the death I have traversed. And so before a death that is mine but also not mine; in no way my own*most* possibility. Death not as an end, but as a beginning – for joy as for mourning, for work as for love. I should say: One who dies more deaths than one more lives than one must live.

III.

> You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.
>
> Hélène Cixous, *The laugh of the Medusa*, 1975; Eng. tr. 1976: 885.

The history of queer death is of queer blame, of being blamed for our own deaths: for the pink triangle and for the AIDS crisis, as if genocide were our choice; for Matthew Shepard and the interminable murders of trans women, gay men, butch lesbians, and, in the end, whomsoever dares defy the tyranny of heteronormativity; for countless suicides, seen and unseen, known and resolutely unacknowledged. Blamed as if our choosing love were, in truth, choosing death.

When we come out, we are apt to be met by similar recriminations. What we may not be ready to hear in our words of coming out, those who

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[7]   Among others, John Van Buren has noted the importance of this (apocryphal) formulation of Martin Luther's to the development of Heidegger's early philosophy (1993: 133).

love us may well hear, that this new life I announce entails that the old one has ended. The morning of one life entails the mourning of another. What, hearing this, they may well accuse us of is less suicide than murder: I stand before you, having put an end to the life of the one you love. As if it were not me who died so, with you, to live. As if in choosing to love, and in so doing choosing life, I chose death.

But again: that life is over, and here, now, I am.

In *No Future,* Lee Edelman (2004) takes this accusation with utmost seriousness as just what homosexuality means in our heterosexual world. In refusing reproductive futurity, we are for society its death drive. We figure the foreclosure of expectations and disruption of life's given anticipations, opposed to the child who *is* the future. As if every moment of not being-towards-children were a being-towards-death.

This, Edelman claims, we ought to embrace: accepting the mantle of the death drive is our (ownmost) task. Queerness means: *Achieve the negative!* As if our call – the destiny and message of our original becoming what we are, inscribed transcendentally as death, the not-to-be-bypassed – is less to stand resolutely *be*fore death, than *for* death. As if born-becoming-Medusa, deadly in our laughing.

IV.

> The preconceived idea of crystalline purity can only be removed by turning our whole examination around. (One might say: the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need.)
>
> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953: §108a.

"Where do we find ourselves?" (1844: 266) – so asks Emerson in mourning his son, after (and so before) his death. Finding one's life thus disrupted, one's straight path lost, turned by another's death, or in traversing one's own – finding oneself lost as if awoken in sunless woods: On finding ourselves so disoriented, we are apt to pull out our maps, expecting there to find ourselves and so our paths. But just this is what must needs averring.

To go scrounging among the maps we carry in our books and in our heads, Eve Sedgwick describes as "paranoid reading" (2003). Beginning and ending beneath long shadows cast by AIDS, Sedgwick draws our attention to the pervasive conviction that there awaits a hidden, total map wherein

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all is found, a key by which all may be read, a transcendental and total system of significance. The hope which births belief: All things might be foreknown and so forestalled – foreseen because already drawn, foretold because already told. As if we might find already said all that's gone unsaid, might yet account all our deaths uncounted.

Suppose we found such a map and so the account we seek: "what would we know then that we don't already know?" (2003: 123). What would we know that we don't already know about our deaths and how to mourn them? About the work of dying and living after death? In this sunless, disoriented place, what could a rightly-oriented map say? How would a map from ten-thousand feet say where, now, to place our feet?

What we need is what Wittgenstein found when the silence following the *Tractatus* proved insufficient: "the axis of […] our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need." Not according to the orientation of a transcendental system of heteronormative preconception, as if *their* prejudice constituted crystalline clarity of just the way things are. You want to know what we mean when speak of "queer death"? No map already drawn will tell you. Rather, go, "*look and see*": "To repeat: don't think, but look!" (1953: §66).

V.

What do we talk about when we talk about queer blame, when it is said that for our deaths we are responsible? I spoke earlier of philosophy as education for adults, and of claiming this as a queer pitch for philosophy. What do such accusations teach us that we must unlearn so as to learn differently and anew? So as one another to teach?

To be blamed is to be called either to justice or to repentance, to suffer consequences – disdain, marginalization, violence, death – or to seek forgiveness. What we are taught when we are taught that for our deaths we are to blame is that we must either accept our abjection or seek forgiveness for the lives we chose; and that this forgiveness cannot be given, save we forgo our lives. The charge: for your one death another.

We are apt to respond with righteous indignation, to accuse our accuser and so to say it is *they* who need forgiveness. Or, recognizing that this will not be well-met, to respond by accepting the charge while yet refusing to pay: "For death I do stand; I will do no other." But what if, instead, we turn our words about the fixed point of our need?

Do I need to be forgiven? Edelman is right – this I do not need and for this I should not ask. Does the world need my forgiveness? It is immaterial, a question for *their* investigations. (Am I saying they and us are not a we? Only sometimes: to know when, we must look and see.) What *I* need is not to be forgiven but to forgive: to forgive *their* accusations and so forgive *myself* their charge. Call this resolution before injustice, not to be outstripped.

But why should I forgive absent repentance? Can there be forgiveness without reconciliation? So claims Derrida: "forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable" (1999: 11; Eng. tr. 2001: 32). We forgive when justice cannot be attained, when the reconciliation of accounts we must forgo. And so I hope to go on, living less and less a ghost.

When we speak of queer death we speak of the unforgivable and so of what must be forgiven and so of our need to forgive. To forgive whom? The world? Ourselves? I take this last as our ownmost task: the work of mourning, and so of morn-*ing*, of living after living death. Call this learning to forgive queer death an education for queer life. Call it dying to live on and live to tell.

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