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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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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 direction, 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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