WHAT
A Transdisciplinary
Journal of Queer
Theories and Studies
EVER
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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

[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 (Haggerty 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:

[2] This research is supported by the Comisión Nacional de Investigación Científica y Tecnológica, grant numbers FONDECYT 11800700, PIA 160007, SOC 180023 and CONICYT-PCHA/Doctorado Nacional/ 2016-21160817.

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.

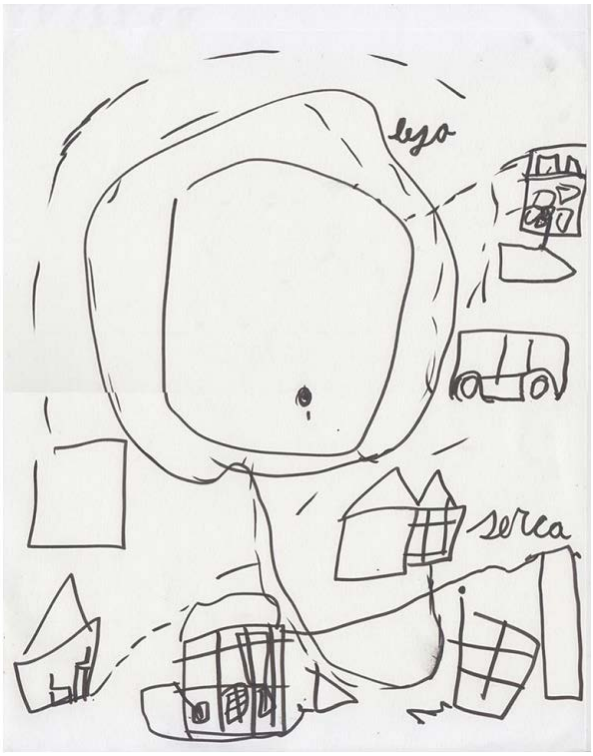

Fig. 2 – Drawing of the interviewed girl, P.D.

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.

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.

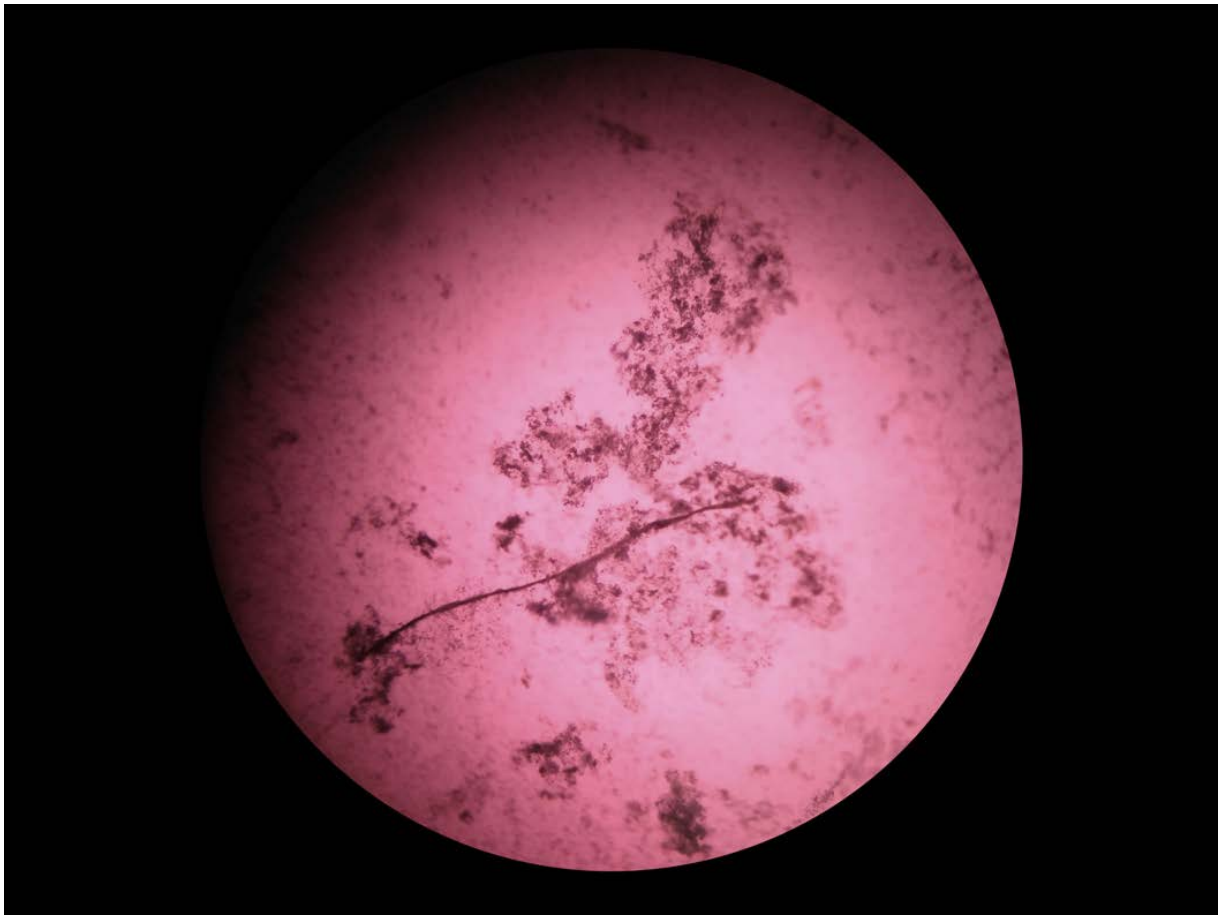

Fig. 1 – From the series "Wombs". Epithelial cell forming tissue under microscope. Picture credit by Margherita Pevere 2019.

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 interweaving of ecological, sanitary, political, and jurisdictional realities. This impossibility reveals and amplifies the specific imbrications expressed in biological arts.

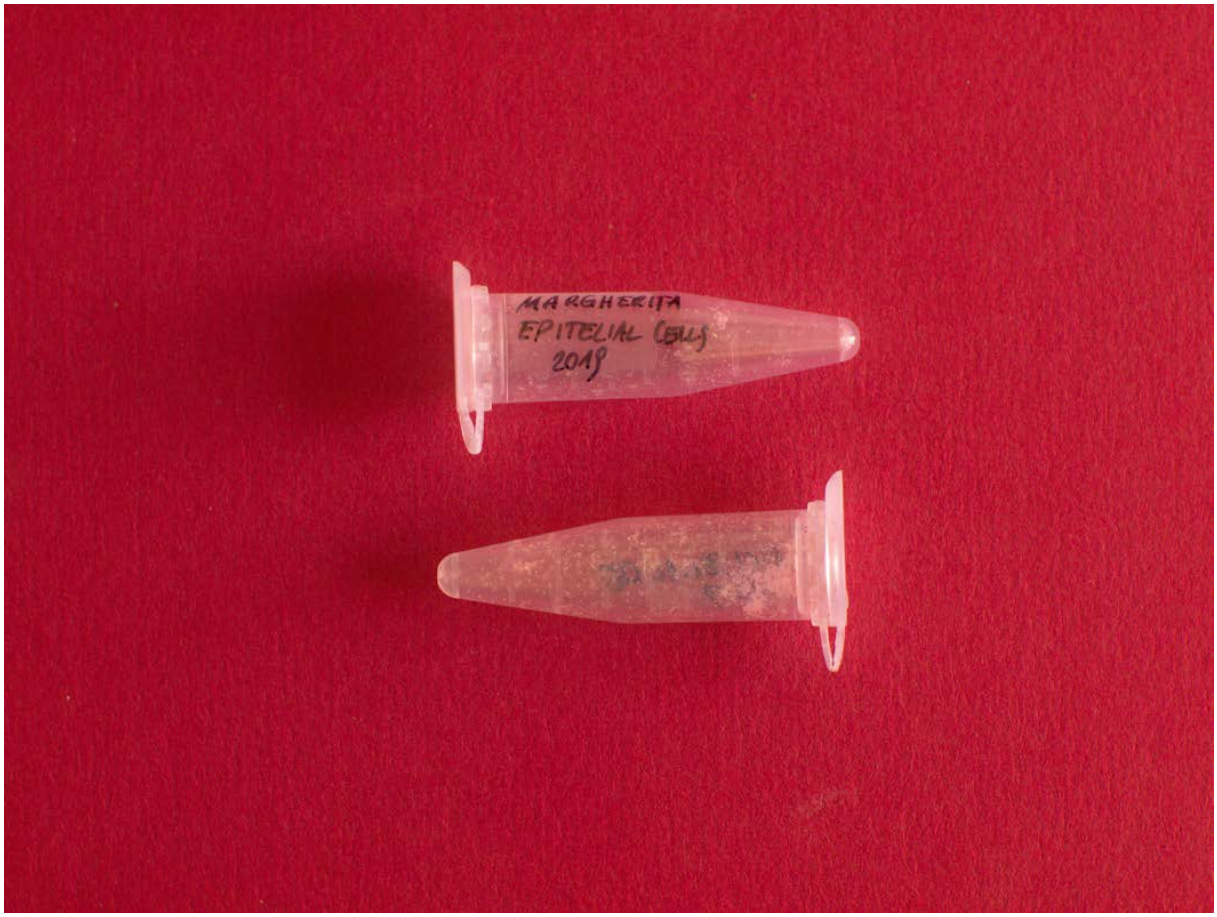

Fig. 2 – From the series "Wombs". Details of vials with dried cells. Picture credit by Margherita Pevere 2021.

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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