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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*

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

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

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& Öhman 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 & Öhman 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.

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,

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).

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

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

[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.

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 *T*s 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.

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

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

Postscript: how and with whom do we talk about queer death?

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.

[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).

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

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

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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