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

2/ LGBTQ+ necropolitics

ABSTRACT: This is part 2 of 6 of the dossier *What do we talk about when we talk about queer death?*, edited by M. Petricola. The contributions collected in this article sit at the crossroads between thanatology, gender studies, and LGBT+ studies and tackle questions such as: how can queer death studies problematise heteronormative/cisnormative constructions of dying, death, and mourning? How can queer death studies approach the post-mortem manipulation of transgender identities? How can this discipline change the current cultural perception of the link between queerness and suicide?

The present article includes the following contributions: – Alasuutari, V., *Queering the heteronormative and cisnormative lifeworld of death*; – Whitestone S., *Queering as identity preservation: transgender identity after death*; – Goret Hansen L., *When I talk about queer death, I talk about trans-necropolitics and suicide prevention*; – Jaworski K., *Notes towards rethinking the agency of queer youth suicide*; – Doletskaya O., *Queer death and victimhood in Russia: 'westernised queer activism'*; – Zubillaga-Pow J., *Lesbian Liebestod: sapphic suicide in a Chinese society*.

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QUEERING THE HETERONORMATIVE AND CISNORMATIVE LIFEWORLD OF DEATH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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QUEERING AS IDENTITY PRESERVATION: TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AFTER DEATH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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WHEN I TALK ABOUT QUEER DEATH, I TALK ABOUT TRANS- NECROPOLITICS AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

1. INTRODUCTION

These days, when I talk about queer death I talk about my master's thesis on suicide prevention for trans children and young people¹ in Denmark. I usually talk about the findings of my thesis; how my interviews and literature reviews support findings on i.a. 1) the importance of parental support in early life, 2) how access to trans-specific healthcare, including gender-affirming treatments, serves as suicide prevention, and 3) that people who did not have access and support early in life, are more likely to attempt or complete suicide later in life (TURBAN *et al.* 2020). However, I often end up finding myself presenting the theories that serve to explain, or outline, a 'politics of suicide' at length. I.e. the context in which I talk about my current association with queer death. This side-track usually starts off with the mentioning of a common point of reference; biopolitics, allowing me to talk about necropolitics, which then leads me to trans necropolitics. This, in turn, leads to critical suicidology and finally the relationality of misery. By that time, if my audience is still with me, I'll finally make a connection to trans liveability and some more tangible ideas of what can be done in practice, to make lives liveable rather than non-liveable. By having such conversations I hope to provide some understanding as to why access to gender-affirming care is essential in effective suicide prevention for trans CYP, not only in the contexts in which it has been researched, but in a Danish setting too. In this essay I would like to focus, deliberately, on some of the key theories I applied in my thesis concerning: a) trans necropolitics, b) the relationality of misery, and c) the risk which a perceived lack of futurity presents to a liveable life. Finally, I aim to direct some attention to the issue of deficient coronial data-collection, in cases of trans suicidality.

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

2. QUEERING SUICIDOLOGY

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

¹ "children and young people" referred to as 'CYP' from this point onwards.

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

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

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

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

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

3. TRANS NECROPOLITICS AND THE RELATIONALITY OF MISERY²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. TRANS SUICIDALITY AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

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

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

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

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NOTES TOWARDS RETHINKING THE AGENCY OF QUEER YOUTH SUICIDE

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

In the context of queer youth suicide, the problematic framing of the queer subject is difficult to challenge and critique. Existing research continually reports that LGBTQ young people are three to four times likely to experience suicide in comparison with their heterosexual counterpart (BRYAN & MAYOCK 2017; CISZEK 2014; COVER 2012a, 2012b; McDERMOTT & ROEN 2016; REAM 2019; SKERRETT, KÖLVES & DE LEO 2015). This alarming

reality happens because of homophobic bullying, lack of support, relationship breakdowns, loneliness, alcohol and drug abuse, and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (ARANMOLATE, BOGAN, HOARD & MAWSON 2017; BERONA, HORWITZ, CZYZ & KING 2020; GREYDANUS 2017; McDERMOTT & ROEN 2016; McDERMOTT, ROEN & SCOURFIELD 2008; NICOLLAS & HOWARD 1998; PULLEN 2004).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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QUEER DEATH AND VICTIMHOOD IN RUSSIA: ‘WESTERNISED QUEER ACTIVISM’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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LESBIAN *LIEBESTOD*: SAPPHIC SUICIDE IN A CHINESE SOCIETY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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