

# The Third International Queer Death Studies Workshop

## *Death Matters: Death and Dying in a Queer Context*

30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> May 2018

Tema Genus

Linköping University

Sweden

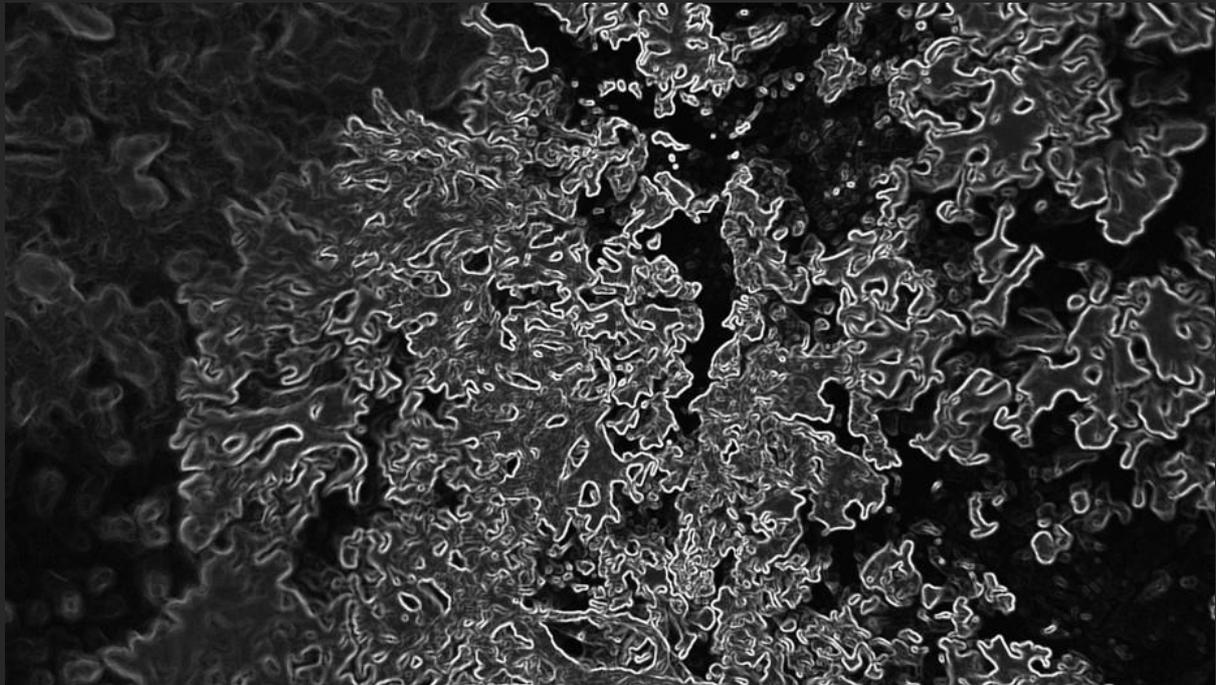


Photo: Marietta Radomska



## Programme:

30<sup>th</sup> May (Wednesday)

Room: KY31, Key house.

10:15 – 11:00 Introduction

11:00 – 12:30 Session I:

Margrit Shildrick, *Temporalities and Onto-epistemologies of Death and Dying*

Natashe Lemos Dekker, *Valuing Life: Normative and Moral Frames at the End of Life with Dementia*

12:30 – 13:45 Lunch (on a self-paid basis)

13:45 – 15:55 Session II

Andria Nyberg Forshage & Eliot Eklöw, *Lilies of Sterile Pleasure. On Indolence, Deathliness, Deproduction, and Double Affirmation*

ida Hillerup Hansen, *'Falling Apart': Prisms of Living with Loss*

Magdalena Górská, *Suffocations*

15:55 – 16:10 Break (fika)

16:10 – 17:40 Session III

Órla O'Donovan, *Death, Dying and the 'Commons'*

Anne Bettina Pedersen, *(Un)Making Sylvia Likens: Towards a Theory of Femicide Narratives*

17:40 – 18:30 Discussion

19:30 – ... Dinner downtown (on a self-paid basis)

31<sup>st</sup> May (Thursday)

Room: KY21, Key house.

10:15 – 11:45 Session IV

Agnieszka Kotwasińska, *Self/Haunted: Death and Mourning in Recent Horror Cinema*

Line Henriksen & Tara Mehrabi, *Hosts, Ghosts and Flies: Thinking Life, Death and Ethics through HBO's West World*

11:45 – 13:15 Lunch (on a self-paid basis)

**Room: KY41, Key house.**

13:15 – 14:45 Session V

Alexandra Løvås Kristinnsdottir, *Death Positivity and Its Potentials*

Kristin Gupta, *Death (Feminist) Futures*

14:45 – 15:00 Break (fika)

15:00 – 16:00 Final discussion

## Abstracts and bios:

### Temporality and the Onto-epistemologies of Death and Dying

By Margrit Shildrick

#### **Abstract:**

In conventional biomedicine, the definition and therefore the moment of death is a matter of ongoing and disturbing dispute between 2 major channels of thought. Should we understand life to end at the point of cessation of cardiac function, or alternatively that of the brain stem? The distinction is no trivial matter but is strongly tied to which utilitarian consequences are in play, and how interventions like the removal of organs for transplant should be operationalised. The whole issue is predicated, however, on the familiar binary of life/death that fails to address urgent concerns in 3 arenas: social-cultural imaginaries, postmodernist philosophy, and increasingly clinical bioscience. If there is always something about death that is uncanny, that exceeds rationalist thought, then we need to queer the concept and ask whether there are more sensitive ways of thinking the process of dying. It is not simply that the dead have haunted the imaginaries of every age and culture, or that sustainability is a keystone of postmodernist reflection, but that the biology of bodies, through epigenetics and microchimerism, defies a simple temporal cut. My presentation asks: how can we live well with the disturbed dead and the disturbance of death?

#### **Bio:**

**Margrit Shildrick** has a background in feminist poststructuralism and postmodernist bioethics. She is a body theorist with major research into the philosophy of organ transplantation and the nature of visceral prostheses, and most recently the significance of cellular microchimerism. Past

books include *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries; Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Sexuality and Subjectivity*; and *Embodying the Monster*, as well as many other edited collections and numerous journal articles. She is now Guest Professor at Dept of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies at Stockholm University, and Visiting Professor of Critical Disability Studies at York University, Toronto.

## **Valuing Life: Normative and Moral Frames at the End of Life with Dementia**

By Natashe Lemos Dekker

### **Abstract:**

The question which lives are ‘worth living’ is a moral and political one that points at how lives and deaths are normatively framed. The value placed on a life, as well as moral considerations of which lives and deaths can be considered ‘good’, is inherently political.

These dynamics become most visible in instances where life and death fail to conform to normative expectations or are relegated towards the margins of society. In this paper, I discuss how the end of life with dementia is managed through such moral and political frames, by paying attention to the voices of people with dementia and their family members who consider the end of life with dementia as undignified. As cognitive decline is apprehended through a stark mind-body dualism, dementia is often considered to blur the boundaries between life and death. Not fitting these normative categories, people with dementia can become associated with a social death, a grey zone between life and death wherein one is seen as neither fully alive nor fully human. This has far-reaching ethical implications as it pertains to value judgements about living and dying with dementia, and, in a broader sense, about which lives matter. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork in nursing homes for people with dementia in the Netherlands, I explore how these dynamics emerged in the welcoming of death over a life with dementia and in seeking forms of assisted dying within legal and institutional frameworks.

### **Bio:**

**Natashe Lemos Dekker** is a PhD candidate in medical anthropology at the University of Amsterdam and a postdoc researcher at the Leiden University Medical Centre. Through ethnographic fieldwork in nursing homes in the Netherlands, her PhD research addresses the social processes and the management of death and dying with dementia. She scrutinizes the notion of social death and assesses the politics of death and dying by questioning normative conditions for the production of lives worth living. Her postdoc revolves around the implementation of palliative care in nursing homes through a critical evaluation of palliative care

tools for observing and marking the end of life. She obtained her Master in Gender and Ethnicity and her Master in Cultural Anthropology, both from Utrecht University.

## **Lilies of Sterile Pleasure. On Indolence, Deathliness, Deproduction, and Double Affirmation**

By Andria Nyberg Forshage & Eliot Eklöw

### **Abstract:**

In critically discussing the works *Deproduction. Admit It's Killing You (And Leave)*. *Sound/Reading for Gay Porn* (2017) by multimedia artist Terre Thaemlitz and the bioart/poetry project *Pregnancy. Reproductive Futures in Trans of Color Feminism* (2016) by micha càrdenas, this paper aims to develop other trans lesbian positionalities by re-emphasising queer negativity, deathliness, desire and unproductivity through the figure of the lily, its indolence and its "sterile pleasure" (Baudelaire, 1954). These strange flowers bloom among the transversal, vegetal and "transexual" dimensions of molecular sex which Gilles Deleuze first located in reading *In Search of Lost Time* (1922-1931) (Deleuze, 2000).

In the interstices of reproductive futurism (Edelman, 2004) and queer necropolitics (Haritaworn, Kunstman and Posocco, eds., 2014), this paper explores a praxis of double affirmation or active nihilism (Deleuze, 1983) in the face of multiple erasures and appropriations as a means "to destroy sexuality" (Hocquenhem, 1995). Walter Benjamin writes: "lesbian love [...] raises its lily-banner of 'pure love,' which knows no pregnancy and no family" (Benjamin, 1999), instigating an anti(re)productive, somnambulistic, deathly desire which suspends homogenous time and the capitalist heteropatriarchal order in which "the body [has] to die for labor-power to live" (Federici, 2004; Benjamin 2005, baedan 2012).

### **Bios:**

**Andria Nyberg Forshage**, M. A. in Aesthetics and Gender Studies at Södertörn University and Stockholm University, has presented papers on trans women's writing and contemporary philosophy at the *Trans\*Studies International Transdisciplinary Conference on Gender, Embodiment and Sexuality* at the University of Arizona and the *Queer Death Studies Workshop* at Linköping University.

**Eliot Eklöw**, B. A. in Aesthetics and Fashion Studies at Södertörn University and Stockholm University, has presented papers on fashion, death and aesthetics at the *Zone Moda Conference* at the University of Bologna, Rimini, and the *Global Fashion Studies Conference* at Stockholm.

## **'Falling Apart': Prisms of Living *with Loss***

By ida Hillerup Hansen

### **Abstract:**

Expressions like 'falling apart' (Didion), 'being broken' (Aidt, Mallarmé) and of 'not wanting to be fixed' (Sedgwick) are widely evident across autobiographical accounts of loss. Within the biomedical discourse that is currently informing what diagnostic parameters of grief are incorporated into international registers of psychiatric pathology (the DSM-5 and WHO's International Classification of Diseases), expressions like these are likely to be assumed openings for the encouraged reparative interventions on the subject in grief like those behaviours their [registers] supporting scientific literature marks as 'retardations', 'functional impairments' and 'hallucinatory experiences' (Zisook et al., 426). This paper approaches these expressions as ontological in quality meaning, I assume they reflect how loss may entail confrontations with the inevitable and irreparable vulnerability and precarity of existence. As such, they neither can nor need they be repaired. Mindful that vulnerabilities are as differently distributed across socio-political and economic strata as they are specifically embodied and experienced, I move to utilise the sensory, cognitive and affective textures of these expressions as prisms through which to scrutinise and challenge the ideological and normative assumptions the biomedical discourse on grief generates and imposes on the subject.

### **Bio:**

**ida Hillerup Hansen** is a PhD student at Central European University, Budapest, Hungary. Their work, embedded in biopolitical theories and queer, feminist critique of representation, focuses on affective and sensory experiences of loss as sites offering alternative narratives to the contemporary pathological discourse on bereavement.

## **Suffocations**

By Magdalena Górska

### **Abstract:**

Why is living breathable for some and suffocating for others? How do everyday practices of living(on) enact points, moments, short-term or long-term durations of unbreathability? This presentation will engage with those questions through discussing suicide as a socio-cultural and political phenomenon rather than a socially and scientifically stigmatized and individualized problem.

**Bio:**

**Magdalena Górska** is Assistant Professor at the Graduate Gender Program at Utrecht University. Her research focuses on feminist politics of vulnerability and on developing a non-universalizing and politicized understanding of embodiment where human bodies are conceptualized as agential actors of intersectional politics. Her work offers anthropo-situated while posthumanist discussions of human embodiment and agency and focuses on the quotidian bodily and affective practices of living as political matters. She is an author of a dissertation book [\*Breathing Matters: Feminist Intersectional Politics of Vulnerability\*](#) and a founder of the [\*Breathing Matters Network\*](#).

**Death, Dying and the ‘Commons’**

By Órla O’Donovan

**Abstract:**

This paper will explore how conventional regimes of truth about death and dying can be queered through the metaphor, imaginary and practice of “the commons.” The growing ubiquity and celebration of “the commons” by those on the left and right, by champions and critics of “development”, by indigenous communities, by conservative nationalists and socialist anarchists alike alerts us to its status as a “chaotic concept” (Swyngedouw, 2012) and the importance of critical thinking about its potentials and its pitfalls. I will explore the possibilities of “commoning” death and dying as a pathway towards what we might call (borrowing from Ivan Illich) posthumous conviviality. I will explore it as a pathway towards non-competitive and collectively self-determined ways of being with and for each other during and after death, and away from the “dis-membering” (Daly, 1992) tendencies in prevailing imaginaries of death, dying and the dead body.

**Bio:**

**Órla O’Donovan** is based in the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Ireland. For the past number of years, she has been working on the idea of “the commons”, which has included co-editing “Commons Sense – New Thinking about an Old Idea”, a special supplement to the Community Development Journal published in 2014, and the organisation of three Thinkeries on the Commons. As part of a University College Cork-based transdisciplinary research collective, she recently began work on a research project called “Living well with the dead in contemporary Ireland”.

## **(Un)Making Sylvia Likens: Towards a Theory of Femicide Narratives**

By Anne Bettina Pedersen

### **Abstract:**

By combining academic modes of research with various forms of creative writing (short stories, slam poems, embroidery) and linking the aestheticization of victims of femicide to current concerns such as rape culture, this project merges the realms of academia, art, and activism. Building on existing theories on the paradox inherent in “death narratives,” the study examines visual and textual artifacts (which together form a Sylvia Likens archive (Halberstam)) inspired by the 1965 femicide of Sylvia Likens in Indianapolis, Indiana, and develops a theory of the problematics of narrating stories from the viewpoint of a dead narrator. Since the felt experience involved in the death process remains inaccessible to the living, artists use different strategies to avoid narrating the experience of dying. The project explores the possibility of a “structure of unmaking” (Scarry 20) embedded in these texts and links it to the denigration of the female body in (Western) popular culture. The existing Likens texts subject her to various forms of physical torture, from which the narrators often distance themselves, and explore or reinforce concepts such as slut-shaming and victim-blaming. Likens’s identity is often masked by artists who appropriate her story for their own purposes, and she is often queered (portrayed as somehow gender non-conforming) for the purpose of explaining the motive behind her murder. The study examines multiple ways in which Likens has been silenced, both by her real-life tormentors and by various artists and accounts for the difficulties encountered when writing femicide narratives as well as the ethical considerations inherent to the act of writing stories on behalf of a dead person. The study engages in interdisciplinary collaboration between fields such as literary studies, cultural studies, death studies, and gender studies.

### **Bio:**

**Anne Bettina Pedersen** is a PhD student at Aalborg University. After getting her MA in American Studies at University of Southern Denmark, she worked as an assistant lecturer at SDU from 2013 to 2017, teaching courses on American Horror, American Literature before 1922, Written Communication, American Cultural Studies, and more. Her main areas of interest/research are: dead women in popular culture, (toxic) motherhood, trauma, horror, feminism, and creative writing. She has published papers on the cult TV-series *Twin Peaks* and trauma narratives of victims of femicide.

## Self/Haunted: Death and Mourning in Recent Horror Cinema

By Agnieszka Kotwasińska

### Abstract:

I would like to take a closer look at how death and reactions to it are tackled in two recent horror movies – *A Dark Song* (2016) and *We Are Still Here* (2015). Rather than simply re-presenting bereavement as an ultimately finite process these movies incorporate mourning into their cinematic language and use it to comment on the limits of Western understanding of death and life after death. Interestingly, generic cues associated with horror (the supernatural, a deep epistemological crisis, a Gothic temporality) allow these two productions to investigate death not as a singular and unified event, but as an unpredictable process, a wondrous mutagenesis, a becoming-death of sorts, in which the bereaved are always already implicated. Drawing on Ewa Domańska's study of the ontology of the dead body, *Nekros* (2017), new materialist works that engage with life/death "dichotomy" (Rosi Braidotti, Stacy Alaimo), and affective theories of cinema, I hope to show how such movies may broaden the existing cultural frames in which death and mourning are predominantly discussed.

### Bio:

**Agnieszka Kotwasińska**, PhD in literary studies, is a cultural studies and American Studies scholar. She graduated from the Institute of English Studies and American Studies Center, University of Warsaw. Her doctoral dissertation concerned the transformations of American families and kinship structures in contemporary horror fiction by women. In 2017 she started working as an assistant professor at American Studies Center, where she offers courses in American literature, genre literature, horror cinema, and new media. Her research interests center on literary and film canon formation processes, embodiment in the so-called low genres, and reproduction of death in horror. In the last couple of years she has been moving away from psychoanalytic film theories and towards feminist new materialism(s) and schizoanalysis.

## Hosts, Ghosts and Flies: Thinking Life, Death and Ethics through HBO's *West World*

By Line Henriksen & Tara Mehrabi

### Abstract:

The HBO tv-series *West World* tells the story of a theme park inhabited by AIs called 'hosts'. The hosts are designed to be almost indestructible: the visitors of the theme park can repeatedly torture and murder them, and the theme park staff will simply bring any given host back to 'life',

wiping its memory of the traumatic event. The series begins as some of the hosts start to remember their former lives and deaths, which prompts them to rebel against the theme park 'gods'. In this paper, we investigate the entanglements of biotechnology and the Gothic that make up the West World hosts, and which seem to present them as cyborg ghosts - creatures who, in the words of Judith Butler in her work *Frames of War* (2009), are marked as 'dead' before their death, meaning that they can neither be properly killed nor mourned. We wish to explore what ethical challenges the hosts, haunted by trauma and technology, raise, and what it might mean to do them justice.

### **Bios:**

**Line Henriksen** is a lecturer in Gender Studies at the University of Copenhagen and holds a PhD in Gender Studies from the Unit of Gender Studies at Linköping University, Sweden. She has published on the subjects of monster theory, hauntology and digital media in journals such as *Women & Performance* and *Somatechnics*, and her fiction has appeared in *Andromeda Spaceways* and *Tales to Terrify*, among others. She is a founding member of the Monster Network.

**Tara Mehrabi** is a Postdoc in Gender Studies at the University of Turku, Finland. She holds a PhD in Gender studies from the Unit of Gender Studies at Linköping University, Sweden. Her work explores ethics and politics of knowledge production in science and medicine, human and nonhuman (animal, technology, environment) entanglements, as well as living and dying well in the Anthropocene. She has published in several anthologies, such as *Animal Places*, (eds.) by J. Bull, T. Holmberg and C. Åsberg.

## **Death Positivity and Its Potentials**

By Alexandra Løvås Kristinnisdottir

### **Abstract:**

How do we deal with death, and what does that say about how we *deal* with death? Particularly, how do we conceptualize death in different gendered ways?

In my presentation, I will try to sketch an image of the Death Positive movement – a loose group of activists whose goal is to change the way death is thought and done in the Western context –, and how they engage with death practices, beliefs and modern cultural notions of death. What are they advocating for? What are they resisting?

The material for the basis of my thesis comes from mortician Caitlin Doughty. She has written two books on cultural notions of death, one semi-autobiographical based in the US, and one that takes

her throughout different death practices around the world. Doughty is also progenitor of *The Order of the Good Death*, an activist network for death professionals and laypeople alike whose goals align with death positive ideals. Along with Doughty, I will try to utilize concepts like Haraway's *com-post-humanist* and *humusities* and Val Plumwood's ecophilosophy to imagine a fertile future for death thought.

**Bio:**

**Alexandra Løvås Kristinnsdottir** is a Master student in Gender Studies at the University of Oslo, Norway. She has a background in American Studies and English Literature, but has always gravitated towards the queer and monstrous. She is now working on her Master's thesis about the Death Positive movement, and what death activism can teach us about gendered subjectivities in meeting with death.

## **Death (Feminist) Futures**

By Kristin Gupta

**Abstract:**

Still in its early formative stages, this project aims to sketch queer temporalities oriented towards futurity and utopia in the death positivity movement. Coined by Caitlin Doughty in 2011, death positivity refers to an intervention that aims to break cultures of silence around death in American society and empower those outside of the funeral industry to plan for and be involved in caring for their own dead. This critical reimagining of both the professionalization of death and critique of death avoidance as an unnatural phenomenon has occurred alongside significant growth in feminist alternative deathcare, which places emphasis on “bad deaths” or how women, people of color, and non-binary individuals are often forced to confront death in ways others are not. In their work on issues such as green burial and the legal rights of trans people to have their identities recognized after they die, feminist advocates frame certain dead bodies as policed sites of patriarchy and imagine futures where death is a site of reclamation rather than an expensive, marginalizing process. (As one speaker noted at an annual death conference: “It is a feminist act to have the final say over what happens to your corpse when you die. There are so many things you can do... don't let someone else decide what your final act on this earth will be.”) With particular attention paid towards these narratives and notions of death utopias” that promise demystification, transparency, and equity, I ask how death positive activists reconfigure lived time and space and explore the implications of non-normative views on the relationship between life and death from a queer feminist perspective.

**Bio:**

**Kristin Gupta** is a first-year Ph.D. student in the Anthropology department at Rice University, where she works on species necropolitics, intimacy, and queer belonging in the International Gay Rodeo Association.

**The Third International Queer Death Studies Workshop *Death Matters: Death and Dying in a Queer Context*: Introduction to the workshop**

By Nina Lykke, Marietta Radomska and Tara Mehrabi

**Bios:**

**Nina Lykke**, PhD, Professor Emerita, Gender Studies, Linköping University, Sweden. Co-founder of Network for Queer Death Studies, and Network for Ecocritical and Decolonial Research. Her current research focuses on queering of cancer, death, and mourning in queerfeminist materialist, decolonial and eco-critical perspectives, and on autophenomenographic and poetic writing. Recent publications: Queer Widowhood. *Lambda Nordica*. 2015:4; Academic Feminisms: Between Disidentification, Messy Everyday Utopianism, and Cruel Optimism. *Feminist Encounters*. 2017:1(1); When death cuts apart: On affective difference, compassionate companionship and lesbian widowhood. T.Juvonen and M.Kohlemainen (eds): *Affective Inequalities in Intimate Relationships*. Routledge, New York, London (2018).

**Marietta Radomska**, PhD, is a Postdoc at Linköping University, SE; co-director of the Posthumanities Hub; founder of The Eco- and Bioart Research Network, co-founder of International Network for ECOCritical and DECOLonial Studies and a founding member of Queer Death Studies Network. Her current research project focuses on ecologies of death in the context of contemporary art. She is the author of the monograph *Uncontainable Life: A Biophilosophy of Bioart* (2016), and has published her texts in *Australian Feminist Studies*, *Somatechnics* and *Angelaki*, among others. For more info see: <https://mariettaradomska.com/>

**Tara Mehrabi** is a Postdoc in Gender Studies at the University of Turku, Finland. She holds a PhD in Gender studies from the Unit of Gender Studies at Linköping University, Sweden. Her work explores ethics and politics of knowledge production in science and medicine, human and nonhuman (animal, technology, environment) entanglements, as well as living and dying well in the Anthropocene. She has published in several anthologies, such as *Animal Places*, (eds.) by J. Bull, T. Holmberg and C. Åsberg. For more see: <https://taramehrabi.wordpress.com/>

The workshop is organised by Queer Death Studies Network (QDSN) with a generous support from the Department of Thematic Studies – unit Gender Studies at Linköping University, Sweden.

For more information about QDSN, see: <https://queerdeathstudies.wordpress.com/>





