ABSTRACT
This introduction to the Queer Death Studies special issue explores an emerging transdisciplinary field of research. This field critically, (self-)reflexively and affirmatively investigates and challenges conventional normativities, assumptions, expectations, and regimes of truths that are brought to life and made evident by current planetary scale necropolitics and its framing of death, dying and mourning in the contemporary world. It is set against the background of traditional engagements with the question of death, often grounded in Western hegemonic and normative ideas of dying, dead and mourning subjects and bodies, on the one hand; and on the other contemporary discourses on human and nonhuman death and extinction, directly linked to the environmental crisis, capitalist and post/colonial extractivist necropolitics, material and symbolic violence, oppression and inequalities, and socio-economic, political and ecological unsustainabilities. By bringing together conceptual and analytical tools grounded in feminist materialisms and feminist theorising broadly speaking, queer theory and decolonial critique, the contributions in this special issue strive to advance queerfeminist methodologies and ontological, ethical and political understandings that critically and creatively attend to the problem of death, dying and mourning in the current environmental, cultural, and socio-political contexts.

The twentieth century – marked by two world wars, the Holocaust, the Gulag, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, numerous regional wars and massacres all around the world – has often been referred to as a ‘century of death’ (e.g. Ericksen 2012). In her contribution to this special issue, Patricia MacCormack discusses Scottish writer Gil Elliot’s work Twentieth Century Book of the Dead (1973), in which Elliot describes ‘the twentieth century as unique because humans were manufacturing death machines for themselves, no longer in need or fear of “nature”’. As MacCormack argues, while Elliot emphasises ‘all human complicity in anthropocentric violence and a call to action for all’, his account of the technologies and environments of the dead that were
manufactured throughout the twentieth century is grounded in human exceptionalism; it is exclusively a story about the human dead. But, if we are to take the question of death and the related notion of ethics seriously, if we are to account for the violence of the here and now and, perhaps, rethink it in terms of the Anthropocene book of the dead, which MacCormack offers in her article, we should look at:

an industrialisation of life made for death, where ‘senseless’ death has become ‘useful’ death and capitalism has replaced national aggression as the primary vindication of death; Where even statistics only occur on abolitionist pages because most humans do not see death of the nonhuman as death; Where female death, racially motivated death, disabled death, LGBTQ death still do not seem to register as their own nations; Where the anthropocentric ego is a single point of perception of the world for an individual to get through and thrive and the Earth as a series of relations will always come second to individual survival, be it as excessive or as daily struggle.

In other words, in order to (re)think death and do it justice in its ontological, ethical and political terms, attuned to the present, we must refuse to perpetuate the epistemological and symbolic violence (with their practical, real-life consequences) of dismissing some deaths as not ‘worth enough’, not grievable enough, not even seen as ‘deaths’ in the full sense of the word.

Grounded in queerfeminist theorising and committed to the emerging field of Queer Death Studies (QDS), this special issue responds to the task of reconceptualising death, dying and mourning in relentlessly norm-critical ways. The aim is thus to challenge the straitjacket of normativities and hierarchies that are so prevalent in conventional Western theory and cultural imaginaries, and to do so in a manner that attends to more-than-human vulnerabilities and precarities in the complexity of the here and now. In the six contributions, which are diverse, yet immersed in a ‘transversal’ (Yuval-Davis 1997; Guattari 2008) dialogue, death, dying and mourning are approached in critical, creative and ecosophical ways by ‘going beyond the separate boxes of disciplines (…) and remaining attentive to the ever-changing geo-political, social, cultural and environmental conditions’ (Radomska 2017, 379). Yet, before we explore in detail what such a queering and norm-critical rethinking of death entails ontologically, ethically, politically and even methodologically, let us first take a look at the place that death has occupied historically, conceptually and theoretically during the last and the present century. This will provide a contextualisation and a grounding of the queerfeminist perspectives on death, dying and mourning offered in this special issue.

**Contextualising Death, Diagnosing the Present**

As the Frankfurt School, postmodernism and poststructuralism make clear, the Enlightenment project, with its institutions of reason and its focus on the rational autonomous human subject, failed in the face of the twentieth-century horrors and genocides (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002; Lyotard 1988). While these perspectives recognise both the failure and inadequacy of the Enlightenment humanist ideas of rationality, autonomy and subjectivity in light of the mass murders of the twentieth century all around the world, they seem to leave out the fact that, as Tasmanian scholar Greg Lehman (1997) notes, for indigenous peoples death has remained ‘life’s quiet companion’ since the very beginning of colonialism. The onto-epistemologically institutionalised divide
between *Humanitas* and *Anthropos* (Osamu 2006) was used to create a racist separation between ‘civilized (white) humanity’, and racialised others who were to be considered as not fully human ‘savages’, and to legitimate colonial violence, dispossession, genocide and enslavement, based on definitions of non-white bodies as disposable. The sheer number of victims of modern European colonialism, recognised only relatively recently, puts the deadly toll of the two world wars into a sobering perspective. Simultaneously, it highlights the fact that Western exceptionalism renders some deaths more acknowledged and grievable than others. The atrocities that took place in the Congo Free State between 1885 and 1908 under the rule of Belgian King Leopold II are but one example.

The second half of the twentieth century was the period of the Cold War with its accompanying arms race, combined with the spectre of threats from nuclear winter and radioactive waste. Through their anticipated impact on present and future generations, and their continued (post-)colonial violence, extractivism and extermination, these threats exposed the questions of death and genocide as matters of planetary scale and relevance. The widespread recognition that deadly events had to be taken into account from a global, planetary-scale perspective was further enabled by the rapidly developing worldwide media networks, which contributed to the ways in which, with an accelerating speed during the post WWII period, these matters started to form part of the public discourse, cultural and social imaginaries, and collective memory.

Over the past several decades, another important set of changes, bringing planetary-scale death and destruction even more firmly onto the agenda, should also be noted. Since the 1970s, anthropogenic environmental disruption has become increasingly visible and is being experienced on a planetary scale. Entire ecosystems and landscapes are being lost; certain habitats are being turned into unliveable spaces through logging, environmental destruction and the extraction of resources, affecting local human and non-human communities alike. All this is occurring in tandem with the global reproduction of deep-seated economic and social inequalities, as well as geopolitical, social, symbolic and environmental violence that expose and amplify the differential vulnerabilities of groups and individuals. In some cases, this happens in a spectacular manner; in others, ‘slow’ violence unfolds over time (Nixon 2011; Åsberg and Radomska forthcoming 2021). Both global and local mechanisms of necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) exert their power over the lives and deaths of populations, making some deaths more grievable than others (Butler 2004). A vivid example of this is the currently unfolding COVID-19 pandemic. While itself both an amplifier and a symptom of the destruction and exploitation of ecosystems and nonhuman creatures on the one hand, and inequalities, vulnerabilities and precarious conditions of human communities on the other, the pandemic is exposing the global-scale mechanisms which manufacture certain bodies, groups, populations and habitats as ‘disposable’ or ‘sacrifice’ in the face of capitalist, post/colonial extractivism and exploitation, financial profit and already existing discrimination.

Simultaneously, in the Global North, during the ‘end-of-history’ and ‘end-of-nuclear-war-threat’ era after 1991, death has sometimes been discursively constructed by the white middle and upper classes as something ‘remote’ or ‘distanced’ in temporal, social and geographical terms. This is despite the fact that life-threatening diseases such as cancer have been rapidly increasing globally, also hitting western middle and upper classes hard, as an effect of growing environmental pollution in the wake of ‘chemical modernity’ (Karakasidou 2015; Lykke 2019a). Modern biopolitical agendas, with ‘cruel
optimism’ (Berlant 2011), keep promising the eventual abolition of death through technoscientific advances. The current circumstances of COVID-19 have somewhat shaken that expectation: photographs from Bergamo or New York, showing huge numbers of caskets of those who have died as a result of falling ill with the novel disease, spread like wildfire through global media and perhaps made the idea of death a little less remote. Still, with the accelerating impacts of environmental disruption, toxicity and climate change broadly defined, alongside the renewed influence of far-right political movements in Europe, the USA and beyond, death is becoming a constituent of reality in different ways. It is intimately woven into the fabric of everyday life, even for those white upper and middle classes who are most prone to becoming immersed in the post-end-of-history climate’s seductions into neoliberal, consumerist cruel optimism.

The above-mentioned matters open up the question of what it means to live in ecological and social proximity to death; and yet, they also suggest that the available concepts, articulations and narratives/stories are insufficient or inadequate to account for the complex problematics of death, dying and mourning in the here and now, where some communities, groups or individuals are deemed to be ‘worth less’ (Braidotti 1994) than others.

From a natural scientific point of view, all elements of the environment (including humans) are interdependent; and one of the key common characteristics of all forms of life is that they die. Yet, Western cultural imaginaries, narratives and philosophies tend to draw a firm distinction between humans and other creatures linked to the very event of death (e.g. Schopenhauer [1844] 2010; Heidegger [1953] 2010). In these imaginaries, the human subject is supposed to be privileged by having an afterlife. This consists either, in the religious tradition, of an immortal soul, or, in the secular and humanist sense, of a posthumously memorialised (and thus, immortalised) subject. A precondition for this scenario of a privileged afterlife is that the deceased subject is not located beyond the contours of what is considered grievable in terms of citizenship, migrant status, geopolitical positioning, racialisation, class, gender, sexuality, ability and other markers of hierarchical difference. Furthermore, in addition to these clusters of hierarchical divisions between humans and nonhumans, as well as between grievable and non-grievable lives, it is worth noting that the biopolitical agendas of Western modernity tend to present the death (of privileged citizens) as something which, in due time, can be technologically and biomedically eliminated altogether in favour of survival from a secular perspective. A significant example of this kind of thinking can be found in the transhumanist movement (e.g. Boström 2005).

**Researching Death: Death Studies and Its Discontents**

As a consequence of the above, the questions of death and dying have occupied an important place in Western philosophy and cultural narratives since antiquity. It suffices to mention such classical works as Plato’s *Apology*, Aristotle’s *The Nicomachean Ethics* or Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoeceus*. While these perspectives explore both ontological and axiological aspects of death and dying, they are primarily focused on the death of human individuals, seen from the point of view of the normative sovereign subject (e.g. Bradley, Feldman, and Johansson 2013). Another line of Western research on death, dying and mourning is related to literary, visual and musical studies, exploring articulations...
of affective landscapes of death. These are, yet again, primarily concerned with human death understood as exceptional (e.g. Guthke 1999; Townsend 2008). Moreover, alongside biomedical issues, questions around death, human remains and the cultural and medical aspects of dying have been researched from anthropological, sociological, historical and psychological perspectives. These kinds of Death Studies focus on a multiplicity of different matters, from caring practices in end-of-life-care, assisted dying and the role of professional caregivers such as nurses, care-home attendants and hospice workers, to moral and ethical dilemmas and legislation. In the 1970s, Death Studies was established as a research field, and since then it has drawn attention to the issues of death, dying and mourning as complex and multifaceted phenomena that require interdisciplinary approaches (e.g. Fahlander and Oestigaard 2008; Åhrén 2009; Earle, Komaromy, and Bartholomew 2009; Gunnarson and Svenaeus 2012). Three academic journals: Death Studies, Omega and Mortality serve the field.

However, the engagements with death, dying and mourning that are constitutive of conventional Death Studies’ research (e.g. Kearl 1989; Kasher 2007) need to be taken further in a critical sense. Queer Death Studies, as we conceive it in this special issue, and in our broader network of activities within the area, builds upon different kinds of reframings, mainly characterised by the linking of death to: (1) overall societal necropolitics, structural mechanisms that systematically allow certain bodies to die; and (2) queering, a critical consideration of and resistance to the normativities constraining death, dying and mourning in modern society. Let us briefly summarise a couple of significant features of these reframings and their genealogies.

Firstly, Queer Death Studies distinguishes itself from more conventional Death Studies through its overall attention to necropolitics and necropowers. These two concepts were coined by postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe (2003) and are widely used today with reference to overall global structures, related to capitalist extractivism and the continued post/colonialist production of multiple inequalities. Mbembe (2003) proposed these concepts in a critical dialogue with Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower and biopolitics, and Foucault’s analysis of mechanisms to optimise the conditions for making citizens live productively (Foucault 1978, 2003). Mbembe, however, emphasises that modernity is not only characterised by a politics of the optimisation of life, a biopolitical effort to make citizens live, but just as much by generalised political mechanisms of letting certain populations die through the instrumentalisation of ‘human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations’ (Mbembe 2003, 14). Queer Death Studies pays attention to these necropolitics, and to their effects in terms of systematically and structurally positioning certain bodies as left to die (in the sense of social death as well as physical, material death). Queer Death Studies critically examines post/colonial necropolitics and draws upon the vast field of postcolonial and decolonial critique and theory (e.g. Fanon 1965; Minh-ha 1986/87; Osamu 2006; Mignolo 2011; Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012; Anzaldúa 2015; Gómez-Barris 2017) in order to make visible their deadly global effects.

Secondly, delinking from conventional Death Studies, Queer Death Studies also pays close attention to the systematic, necropolitical production of death in interaction with the currently robustly developing fields of Posthumanities and Environmental Humanities (EH), including Extinction Studies. These studies take seriously the planetary-scale mechanics of annihilation in a more-than-human sense in their ontological, epistemological and, most importantly, ethico-political dimensions. In the context of the sixth great
extinction event that we are not only witnessing, but are also complicit in, researchers working within those fields explore the philosophical and cultural meanings of extinction and the ways in which it disrupts the life processes of time, death and generations (e.g. Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew 2017; Grusin 2018; Heise 2016). They also engage with questions of responsibility, accountability and care for/in the (dying) more-than-human world. Another dimension of the problematic of death explored by EH scholars consists of the questions of environmental violence (e.g. Nixon 2011) and environmental grief (e.g. Cunsolo and Landman 2017). Finally, the problematics of nonhuman animal death, manufactured *en masse* through our habits of ‘consuming the world’, come prominently to the fore – not only as philosophical, but crucially also as ethical and political enquiries – in the work of Critical Animal Studies researchers (e.g. Wadiwel 2015; Nocella, Salter, and Bentley 2013).

Thirdly, Queer Death Studies differs from conventional Death Studies, where the latter has been constrained by *normative* and *exclusionary* notions of the human subject, understood along the lines of a series of dichotomous divides characterising modernity: the human/nonhuman divide; the divides between civilised *Humanitas* and savage *Anthropos* (Osamu 2006); the divides between hetero- and cis-normatively defined individuals and queered others; or, in short, the multiplicity of divides between appropriate and in/appropriate/d others (Minh-ha 1986/87; Haraway 1992). Individuals who do not fulfil the conditions of the normative idea of the sovereign subject (usually imagined to be white, modern and civilised, upper or middle-class, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied, able-minded and human) tend to be ignored in dominant stories of death, loss, grief and mourning. Scientific publications that either deal with these questions in the context of non-normative/marginalised subjects and communities, or employ methodologies that challenge the conventional frameworks and methods prevalent in Death Studies research, are sparse and occupy the fringes of the field, or are to be found elsewhere altogether (for instance, in Queer Studies, Feminist Studies, Transgender Studies, Decolonial Studies, Environmental Humanities, Posthumanities or Critical Animal Studies). To give one tangible, yet very simplified, example, browsing the core journals of conventional Death Studies in search of such key terms as ‘queer’, ‘LGBT’/’LGBTQ’, ‘decolonial’, ‘postcolonial’, ‘indigenous’, ‘posthuman’ and ‘non-human’/’nonhuman’ gives few results (the term ‘indigenous’ being an exception, with 45–70 hits depending on the journal).

While queer issues thus do not figure prominently in conventional Death Studies, important genealogies for Queer Death Studies can be traced in Queer Theory. As queer and feminist theorist Mel Y. Chen reminds us, matters of life and death have always been at the core of Queer Studies, or, at least, from the moment when radical queer AIDS activism and ACT UP melded with queer theorising and gender and sexuality research in the late 1980s and early 1990s (2011, 278). The media representation of the AIDS crisis in the USA and the UK evoked forceful immediate responses (e.g. Watney 1987). The popular perception among the general public of homosexuality as a ‘dead end’ has been powerfully transvalued by queer scholars working within the tradition of so-called ‘antisocial thesis in queer theory’, such as Lee Edelman or Leo Bersani. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Edelman argues that our culture is dominated by ‘reproductive futurism’, where the figure of the Child stands for the ‘perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics’ (2004, 3). In such a context, the *sinthomosexual*
manifests as someone who refuses the appeal of the Child/reproductive futurity. In consequence, *No Future* opens up questions about the possibility of a politics of death drive, and of a theory that would not be oriented towards the (re)production of a better future. In a similar vein, drawing on Simon Watney’s (1987) work on the representation of AIDS in the media, Bersani in his famous essay ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ suggests that perhaps ‘if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared-differently-by men and women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death’ (1987, 222). For Bersani, then, the rectum thus figured becomes a way of challenging/symbolically annihilating the normative subjecthood associated with ‘a sanction for violence’ (222).

The issue of death and the life/death boundaries have also informed key discussions within different kinds of feminist struggles against normativities and structural oppression, and within different branches of Feminist Studies, which in this sense make up another key genealogy for Queer Death Studies. Several themes stand out. Firstly, reflections on life/death questions have been central in feminist struggles for reproductive freedom and free abortion, insofar as feminist demands for abortion rights, globally, have given rise to fierce political and theoretical encounters with the misogynistic ‘pro-life’ norms and arguments of the conservative right wing, and religious fundamentalists. Along somewhat parallel lines, the rich branch of Feminist Studies that applies feminist perspectives to assisted reproduction and biotechnologies has come to strongly intersect with these discussions of the life/death threshold. In debates on assisted reproduction, fundamentalist right-wingers have often reiterated the normative ‘pro-life’ stance taken in abortion debates, i.e. that life begins at conception (e.g. Franklin 1997, 86–87; Lie and Lykke 2016). Alongside abortion and feminist discussions on assisted reproduction, another feminist issue that focuses on questions of death is gender-based violence and femicide (e.g. Radford and Russell 1992; Taylor and Jasinski 2011). Femicide refers to misogynistic hate crimes committed against womxn. Finally, in terms of important feminist genealogies for Queer Death Studies, we will foreground ecofeminist discussions of the ‘death of nature’ initiated by early second-wave feminism, such as ecofeminist philosopher Carolyn Merchant’s key work under this title (1980). These early ecofeminist theorisings and analyses anticipated current posthuman feminist philosophy and debates on extinction through their studies of the ways in which Western modernity, Cartesian and Baconian science, in conjunction with extractive capitalism, reconfigured the cultural imaginaries of the natural world, recasting what had previously been perceived as a cosmic organism into the image of a dead machine.

Finally, considering the genealogies of Queer Death Studies as we conceive of this emerging area here, it is also notable that, during the past decade, numerous queer and trans scholars have also offered a philosophically ground-breaking and politically crucial body of work that deals with the intersecting questions of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and necropolitics, that is, mechanisms of power that force certain bodies into ‘death worlds’: liminal spaces between life and death (e.g. Snorton and Haritaworn 2013; Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014; Puar 2007; Shakhsari 2020; Lunau 2019; Camminga 2019). For instance, Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco’s edited volume *Queer Necropolitics* challenges:
dominant understandings of the political by interrogating the ways in which sexual difference is increasingly absorbed into hegemonic apparatuses, in a way that accelerates premature death (Gilmore 2007) for those who are unassimilable in liberal regimes of rights and representation and thus become disposable. (Haritaworn, Kuntsman and Posocco 2014, 1)

In this way, the collection forms one of the key interventions dealing with the ways in which queer and trans politics are reshaped in the context of contemporary regimes of racism, (neo)colonialism, the discourse of the ‘war on terror’, imprisonment, border enforcement, capitalism and neoliberalism.

Towards Queer Death Studies

These queer, feminist, postcolonial and decolonial, and posthumanities/environmental humanities interventions are crucial for the emerging research field of Queer Death Studies (QDS), to which the present special issue contributes. By addressing matters of death, dying and mourning in relentlessly norm-critical ways and problematising ontologies, epistemologies and ethics as well as biopolitics and necropolitics, while searching for new frameworks, methods and scenarios, QDS seeks to overcome the difficulties of conventional Death Studies. In other words, QDS attends, among other things, to issues of diverse historical, cultural, social, political and economic conditions; to the entangled relations between human and nonhuman others in the current context of planetary environmental disruption; and to the differential experiences of marginalised communities, groups and individuals who are excluded from hegemonic stories and discourses on death, dying, grief and mourning. Furthermore, this means that QDS draws critical attention to discourses on death, dying and mourning that are linked not only to heteronormative and chrononormative models of family bonds, but also to the multiplicities of non-normative modes of life and companionship; norms for intergenerational and interspecies relations; ‘proper’ responses to biopolitical regimes of health- and life-normativity; and normative demands to consider life-threatening diseases from the perspective of a heroic battle against an ‘enemy’ rather than trying to engage with the life/death thresholds in less rigid and more (self-)caring and (self-)loving ways, taking into account the vitality of cosmic human/nonhuman co-constitutive agencies. In other words, QDS constitutes a transdisciplinary field of research that critically, (self-)reflexively and affirmatively investigates and challenges the conventional normativities, assumptions, expectations and regimes of truths that are brought to life and made evident by death, dying and mourning.

QDS has been consolidated through the workings of the Queer Death Studies Network (QDSN) which was officially launched at the G16: Swedish National Gender Research Conference in Linköping in 2016. To date, the network has hosted three international workshops and The First International Queer Death Studies Conference ‘Death Matters, Queer(ing) Mourning, Attuning to Transitionings’ that took place on 4–5 November 2019 in Karlstad. The QDSN has also worked on a series of joint publications (the special issue of the journal Women, Gender & Research 3–4/2019 and the present special issue, among others), which have all contributed to the further development of transversal dialogues among academics, activists, artists and other practitioners interested and invested in the field.
By bringing together conceptual and methodological tools grounded in feminist post-humanities, new materialisms and feminist theorising broadly conceived (e.g. MacCormack 2012, 2020; Franklin and Lock 2003; Braidotti 2006; Colebrook 2014a, 2014b), queer and trans studies (e.g. Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013; Ensr 2016) and postcolonial and decolonial critiques (e.g. Fanon 1965; Minh-ha 1986/87; Osamu 2006; Mignolo 2011; Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012; Anzaldua 2015; Gómez-Barris 2017), Queer Death Studies seeks to develop methodologies, theorising and understandings that critically and creatively explore the problem of death, dying and mourning within current environmental, cultural, social, biopolitical and necropolitical contexts.

In its endeavours to search for different articulations, silenced narratives and marginalised/alternative stories, QDS questions and deconstructs the normativities (Chen 2012; Sandilands and Erickson 2010) that often frame contemporary discourses on death, dying and mourning. In the context of QDS, to queer issues of death, dying and mourning means to unhinge certainties, to ‘undo normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries’ beyond the exclusive concern with gender and sexuality that is often associated with the term ‘queer’ (Giffney and Hird 2008, 6). In other words, ‘queer’ in QDS operates in a dual way; it refers to both: (1) a noun/adjective employed when researching and narrating death, dying and mourning in the context of queer bonds and communities where the subjects involved, studied or interviewed and the relations they are involved in are recognised as ‘queer’; and (2) a verb/adverb that describes the processes of going beyond and unsettling (subverting, exceeding) the existing binaries and given norms and normativities. In consequence, ‘queer’ becomes both a process and a methodology that is applicable to and exceeds the focus on gender and sexuality as its exclusive concerns. As queerfeminist theorists Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird emphasise, queer theorising is characterised by ‘a spirit of critique … a respect for difference, dedication of self-reflexivity, and drive towards revision’, combined with ‘openness’ to different frameworks and analytical tools as well as ‘a commitment to foregoing ownership of the word “queer”’ (2008, 4). In its critical, creative and transdisciplinary efforts, QDS seeks to challenge understandings of death, dying and mourning that are anchored in and structured by the hegemonic frameworks of heteronormative narratives (e.g. Lykke 2015, 2018; Alasuutari 2018, 2020); of the white Western subject and its relations (e.g. Snorton and Haritaworn 2013; Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014; Lykke 2019a); human exceptionalism (MacCormack 2020; Mehrabi 2016; Radomska 2018, forthcoming 2020; Lykke 2019b, forthcoming; Radomska and Åsberg 2020); and the technologisation/medicalisation of death (e.g. Adrian in this special issue), among others. Such efforts also require and involve a radical reworking of the ontologies, ethics, methodologies and politics of (researching and thinking with/through) death, dying and mourning. In the following sections, we discuss in detail how these four reworking moves are operationalised through the contributions in this special issue.

Queering Ontologies of Death

Taking a material-discursive relational approach to death, this special issue does not discuss ontologies of death as a fixed moment that marks the end of life, bounded to a human subject (a white, able-bodied, heterosexual man) whose life is imagined within a
linear temporality marked and defined by birth, reproduction and death. Rather, death becomes meaningful in terms of assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 2004) and interactions (Barad 2007). Death is materialised and becomes meaningful at a particular time, in a particular place and in relation to other processes. Thinking about death in terms of relations then leads to questions not only about the ontology of death and the binary of life and death, but also about human exceptionalism, in which human death is approached as unique. It questions Western linear temporality, in which birth and death are defined as the two opposites marking the beginning and end of the subject. Lastly, it renegotiates the moral economy in which matters of life and death are often discussed in relation to fixed ideas, such as that of responsibility.

As the contributions to this special issue show, the human and nonhuman become bound together in the processes of living, dying and decomposing in both material and discursive ways. For example, undoing the binary of life and death in terms of interaction and questioning the human exceptionalism of death, both Tara Mehrabi and Marietta Radomska discuss ‘ecologies of death’ from a vitalist and new-materialist perspective. This understands death, not as an exceptional moment in human life, but as processes of transformation that form part of life itself. Similarly, in her contribution and activist plea, Patricia MacCormack calls for a fundamental revision of both the ontology and ethics of death by recognising the violently erased nonhuman (and marginalised human) deaths that have occurred en masse, while simultaneously rethinking hegemonic human death/extinction as an abolitionist practice of radical compassion and ‘care for the world as other, [and] as open’.

Stine Adrian shows that death is something that is always already situated and mediated beyond human agency. Thinking with technologies of death at the beginning of life, she discusses the way in which not only is death itself remade in a hospital setting, but prescribed notions of moral obligations and responsibilities around death are also renegotiated. Mehrabi explores how meaning-making about dead matter as waste in the science lab bears the ‘legacies’ of colonialism, as well as patriarchal and heterosexist understandings of intimacy, purity and danger that were historically – and even are still today – used to dehumanise ‘unwanted others’, reducing them (human and nonhuman) to the status of pests, which allows for the exploitation of their bodies and bodily matter. In order to challenge the normativity and human exceptionalism of the understanding of death in Western philosophy, in her analysis of Svenja Kratz’s bioartworks, Radomska employs a queerfeminist biophilosophy as an analytical lens that enables her to rethink death in terms of processes rather than essence. Using the concepts of the non/living (Radomska 2016) and passive vitalism (Colebrook 2014b), Radomska argues that ‘intimacies between materialities of a human and a nonhuman kind that form part of the processes of death and dying [...] consequently, reframe the ethico-ontology of death as material and processual ecologies of the non/living’.

Thinking about death as always already a process that is materialised through relations also queers the temporality of death beyond life/death, absence/presence and linear time. For example, Margrit Shildrick, using both a Derridean and a Deleuzian approach to discuss recent public disclosures about deaths in Ireland’s Mother and Baby Homes, which were run by the Catholic Church, shows how the binary of living and non-living is not a state of ‘inertness or of the inorganic but of, at [the] very least, spectral presence’. As the unjust deaths of the past, those deemed ungrievable by the social order of the time,
come to haunt us in our present time, Shildrick asks: how can we learn to live well with the dead and respond appropriately when ‘the dead refuse to stay silent’?

Thinking with the Selk’nam of Karokynka/Tierra del Fuego, Chile, Hema’ny Molina Vargas, Camila Marambio and Nina Lykke not only mourn, but also summon the dead, the living and the land to political action in the present, as they reflect upon and call into question the consequences of the violent necropolitics that were imposed on the Selk’nam people by white colonialism. The co-authors refuse to acknowledge a historical ontology, reconfirmed in scholarly works by white twentieth-century anthropologists, which defines the past as irreversibly ‘left behind’ and implies that the dead are unable to enact change in the present. Their situated letters, written to, among others, dead Selk’nam ancestors, ancestral Selk’nam land and dead white anthropologists, establish a performative act of reontologising the linear temporality of modern Western conceptions of history. Reclaiming instead an indigenous cosmology and philosophy, in which the dead are not left behind in a temporally inaccessible and forever congealed past, but are present and potentially active in the here and now, the co-authors performatively disrupt the ontology of Western historical thought that builds on ideas of linear temporal progression, making death irreversible. Thus, from very different philosophical perspectives, Shildrick, on the one hand, and Vargas, Marambio and Lykke, on the other, rethink the binary of life and death, the living and the dead, in terms of spectral and spiritual-material copresence in the here and now.

**Queering Ethics of Death**

Revisions to the ontology of death and dying, which are called for by each of the contributions in this special issue, cannot be thought or materialised without a thorough rethinking of ethics. Indeed, as feminist materialisms indicate, ethics – that is, the questions of relations between bodies, entities, processes, subjects and objects, as well as of accountability and responsibility for/towards other bodies – are always already intimately entangled with ontology. They are always situated, and need to be considered on a case-by-case basis rather than understood as a given, fixed, universal or even transcendental, principle. Queering the ethics of death thus becomes constitutive of queering Death Studies as such.

De-exceptionalising human death – understood as doing away with its discursive construction as uniquely valuable, superior and cast against the ‘backdrop’ of undifferentiated earthly and dehumanised others – involves a truly care-full crafting of responsibility, accountability and care for/towards the more-than-human world. In her article, MacCormack reframes death as a gift, seen through the lens of (1) abolitionist practices: an ethical approach that refuses the use or consumption of animals for any reason; and (2) antinatalism: ‘the cessation of reproduction [that] involves an end to the hyperhumanist dance of birth-marriage-breed-die [… and] configures an Earth devoid of humans, while attending to all lives here, human and nonhuman, as they diminish’. Giving up human privilege and supremacy enables an ethics of ‘radical compassion’, understood as a call ‘for action here and now, adapting to local and larger environments based on need but underpinned by one key force, that of dismantling human exceptionalism in order to open the world to the other, nonhuman, environmental and yes, even still the human’.
The idea of doing away with anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism – so prominent in cultural perceptions of death – also comes to the fore in Radomska’s queer-biophilosophical analysis of Svenja Kratz’s art project *The Absence of Alice*. There, relations between living and non-living, and life and death, are being reconfigured through the conceptual framework of the non-living. Simultaneously, as Radomska points out, the nonhuman deaths that are erased in the daily anthropocentric practices of consumption take centre stage in Kratz’s works. They are a crucial reminder of our complicity in the violence against and slaughter of the marginalised/excluded other, that happens every day ‘out of sight’. Material ‘disruptions’ in the ways in which humans and nonhumans are memorialised in Kratz’s art projects, Radomska argues, open up a space for the less anthropocentric and less oppressive ethics of death that is desperately needed in the here and now.

More-than-human reconfigurations of ethics concerned with thresholds of death/life are also enacted through technoscientific practices and procedures. In her contribution, which focuses on the ways in which the dead bodies of transgenic fruit flies are handled in an Alzheimer’s disease laboratory, Mehrabi looks at how the living, dying and dead bodies of *Drosophila melanogaster*, materially and discursively constructed as biowaste – which itself is grounded in a normative understanding of nature while yet defying it – mobilise a rethinking of the relations of becoming, care and responsibility/response-ability in the laboratory. The questions of responsibility and ethics reconfigured through science and technology are also at the centre of Adrian’s article. Drawing upon her own autoethnographic material and memories of her three-week-old firstborn child’s death due to a rare congenital heart disease, Adrian shows how prescribed ideas about a good death, and responsibilities about life-and-death decision-making are affected by and mediated through available technologies. Tracing the technologies of death at the beginning of life, she argues that response-ability (rather than responsibility) emerges from the use of such technologies during moments in which death is remade.

Yet another element that is woven into the studies of the death, dying and mourning of inappropriate/d others offered in this special issue is a complex critical undoing of chrononormativity. This is not limited to the critique of reproductive futurism only. Each of the articles engages, to different degrees, with the non-linear and/or modulated temporalities that are woven into the entangled tissues of response-ability and the relations between human and more-than-human actants and agencies. For instance, queered, non-linear and spectral temporalities of mourning emerge most prominently in Shildrick’s discussion of the deaths in Ireland’s Mother and Baby Homes, and her proposal for a situated non-formalised hauntological ethics grounded in a thoroughly reconceptualised notion of death. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s ethics of hospitality, Shildrick emphasises the importance of ‘welcom[ing] the other without preconditions or expectations. And it is precisely because the spectral other is a figure of ambiguity and difference that the welcome speaks to an ethical response.’

Spectral presences and present absences also dwell in the space of the poetic, philosophical, political and activist intervention by Vargas, Marambio and Lykke. While disrupting the linear progression of Western history and its ontology, these three co-authors call for an engagement in ‘mourning practices that transgress the effects of white humanist melancholia and establish a relational ethics apt for unlocking congealed power matrices, and opening towards alternative futurities’. In their formulation of a relational, decolonising ethics, they ‘shift the perspective to an epistemology inspired by Selk’nam and other
indigenous philosophies, based on the assumption that land and dead ancestors have the power to affect, re/empower and speak to the living’.

Queering Methodologies: Writing Differently about Death

Queering studies of death, dying and mourning is not only a question of rethinking ontologies and revising ethics, but is also a call for alternative methodologies and research writing practices, unfolding in tandem with shifting political agendas. From a QDS perspective, death, dying and mourning are not events or processes to be considered as mere objects to be studied from detached, neutral vantage points. QDS is aligned with feminist onto-epistemologies of situated knowledges, and this point of departure calls for always emergent, and never fixed methodologies and research writing practices. These make visible the personal accountabilities, political passions and entangled engagements in those humans and nonhumans whom Trinh Minh-ha (1986/87), and later Donna Haraway (1992), pinpointed as ‘inappropriate/d others’. Against the background of this kind of situated openness to emergent methodologies and writing strategies, the approaches of the contributors to this special issue are diverse. Nevertheless, the commitment to studying death, dying and mourning from the perspectives of queer and inappropriate/d figures, spaces and times also implies a lot of shared ground. First and foremost, we find shared ground in the meticulous attention that all the contributors pay to political questions of who? how? why? for whom? and cui bono? Along these lines, the contributors share a political commitment to writing from the perspectives of those whom the intersecting necropowers of technocapitalism, colonialism, Anthropocene extractivism and exceptionnalising humanism render inappropriate/d. These inappropriate/d others are those humans and nonhumans whose deaths often go unnoticed, those who are de-individualised as a mass death which is understood as collateral damage in the service of ‘higher’ purposes such as profit, progress, colonisation, civilisation, scientific breakthrough, ideological purity, neoliberal mass consumption etc.

In terms of methodologies and writing strategies, what does it mean to commit to the perspectives of those who are necropolitically inappropriate/d? In response to this question, we will focus on another set of shared methodological features characterising the articles. On the one hand, they are embedded in a critical mode; an urge to critique different kinds of necropowers which make certain humans and nonhumans into killable and disposable bodies runs through the articles, interpellating certain choices of perspective and writing strategy. However, intertwined with the critical mode, an affirmative search for alternatives also guides the contributors’ writing strategies. Such a search can be traced in the articles, set in motion through attention to resistance, resilience, an unexpected and unruly liveliness arising from queer and inappropriate/d figures, places and times, as well as through accountability to efforts to reconfigure cultural imaginaries of death, dying and mourning.

Radomska poses searching questions of critical affirmation and the production of unruly liveliness when she focuses on Svenja Kratz’s figuring and honouring of invisibilised nonhuman deaths. For example, Radomska discusses Kratz’s artistic strategy of revitalising and amplifying through storytelling. These stories memorialise the dead calf foetuses used to produce foetal bovine serum that is applied by the biotechnology industry and research labs to facilitate the in vitro growth of cell cultures. Shildrick’s discussion of the
necropolitical violence and neglect inflicted throughout the twentieth century by nuns in the Irish Mother and Baby Homes figures as another key example of unruly and unexpected liveliness. Shildrick’s interpellation of the spectral is cast as a critical-affirmative alternative – an intervention into the current public discussions of the scandal in Ireland, which primarily seem to strive simplistically for closure.

In some of the articles, the search for affirmative alternatives, and queer and in/appropriate/d liveliness in unexpected figures, spaces and times, is also translated into the exploration of academically non-conventional formats. MacCormack defines her article as a mixture of an academic text, a requiem and an activist plea. She argues that this mixed format is needed insofar as her passionate embracing of human extinction and vitalist commitments to radical compassion and caring for nonhuman life do not resonate with the emotionally restrained format of conventional academic texts. The commitment to humans giving up their claim to supremacy over the nonhuman, radically envisioned by MacCormack, calls for a style that ‘collapses flesh and text’ and in this way resonates with the need to combine passionate mourning with an imperative call for radical, self-committing change.

Adrian’s article, too, disrupts conventional formats in order to reflect on the question of response-ability (Haraway 2016). Adrian draws on auto-ethnography, but in a radically unconventional sense, whereby the autobiographical storytelling is reconfigured within an agential realist framework (along the lines of Barad 2007), focusing on material-discursive phenomena in intra-action. This means that the mourning narrator’s ‘I’ is not envisioned as an autonomous subject in charge of a storyline, but rather as part of an assemblage of human and nonhuman agencies, while Adrian’s story of her child’s death is also told as one story among others, i.e. as part of a carefully chosen collection of stories of other grieving parents.

The article co-authored by Vargas, Marambio and Lykke provides yet another example of a radical break with conventional academic formats. While voicing positions as indigenous scholar, activist and poet (Vargas), mestiza feminist curator (Marambio), and white feminist professor (Lykke), the co-authors interpellate the performative powers of the intimate and personal ‘you’ form of address that characterises the epistolary genre. Their call for the decolonisation of mourning is articulated through a radical exploration of the genre’s potential to establish ethico-political encounters between embodied and situated human and nonhuman, alive and dead, subjects, mutually touching and affecting each other. This epistolary address resonates with their political purpose: to contribute to a performative undoing of white twentieth-century anthropology’s colonising accounts of the Selk’nam people as extinct; to support the Selk’nam community’s current efforts to claim indigenous rights from the Chilean state; and to revitalise the ancient Selk’nam culture, language and cosmology.

**Politics of Mourning**

The issue of mourning cannot be separated from Queer Death Studies. Giving up the position of the neutral knower and committing to passion and compassion mean that practices of mourning and reflections upon them become an inevitable part of the picture. This is amply demonstrated in this issue’s articles which, in different ways, deal with loss, death and extinction, and call for passionate mourning. In so doing, they pose the
radical question: what is a feminist, queer, posthuman, decolonial response-able politics of mourning? While reflecting affirmatively on this question, the articles also critically discuss how mourning can be reduced to a mere nostalgic, sentimental or utilitarian process – a process that does not challenge or change the intersecting necropowers that cause planetary-scale death and destruction. The fact that nostalgic mourning can even reiterate the oppressive violence that caused the deaths to be posthumously mourned in the first place is forcefully highlighted in Vargas, Marambio and Lykke’s critical dismantling of the humanist mourning articulated in the scholarly work of white twentieth-century anthropologists. The anthropologists’ gestures of mourning the ‘extinction’ of the Selk’nam actually reproduced colonial violence, locking the Selk’nam into a static past and implying that their demise can be conveniently mourned without disturbing the present-day postcolonial continuation of colonial oppression. The political problems adhering to nostalgic and sentimental mourning are also made clear in Shildrick’s rejection of the mainstream Irish suggestions that the national trauma concerning the infants who suffered mass death in the Catholic Mother and Baby Homes, due to severe neglect, can be ‘solved’ and a state of public closure (and forgetting) achieved, simply by naming the dead, and giving them a ‘proper’ funeral ceremony. When MacCormack commits herself to radical ahuman compassion, this implies a ‘mourning of the Earth’, but through active commitment; according to MacCormack, the mere nostalgic mourning of the planetary-scale Anthropocene extinction would be a far too easy – and utterly escapist – response to the current environmental crisis. The contributors to this special issue all point towards politics of mourning which, in accountable and carefully situated and reflected ways, imply response-ability, and commitment to taking responsibility for the worlding processes in which the mourning practices are embedded.

The importance of attending to the relationality of mourning practices, and their wider links to overall processes of world-making, also comes to the fore in Radomska’s discussion of Svenja Kratz’s setting up of a shrine for the calf foetus, and giving him a name, Algernon. This enshrining and naming make Algernon’s death visible and grievable in a spiritual-material sense. But, as isolated acts, enshrining and naming would not be enough. As Radomska points out, it is important in Kratz’s artwork that the posthumous honouring of Algernon is creatively linked to rhizomatic nets of further stories, evoking lines of flight towards new queer and non/living livelinesses, and political as well as conceptual moves to deterritorialise death in the exceptionalising human sense. The politics of mourning, implicitly suggested here, also resonates with Mehrabi’s discussion of the transgenic fruit flies. Through scientific lab practices, the flies are made to oscillate between the categories of abject hazardous lab waste, and a highly prestigious species, characterised by its utilitarian ability to perform as a model for the development of Alzheimer’s disease in humans. But, through the establishing of an intimate relation to the flies through her fieldwork, Mehrabi comes to reconfigure the flies and their remains as something other than these pre-formed categories. The flies transform into liminal, ambiguous critters, who, as such, are perhaps also made to perform as grievable at an individual level, a level which, for Mehrabi, leads not to mourning, but to reclaiming agency for the flies as part of a queer ecology of resistance.

Alongside a passive nostalgia, yet another important pitfall when it comes to the politics of mourning, discussed by Adrian in particular, relates to the question of the sovereignty (or lack thereof) of the mourning ‘I’. Adrian demonstrates how a modern,
Cartesian-framed belief in autonomous, sovereign subjectivities, in total control of their worlds, can lead to a mourning mother of a dead baby ending up in a self-blaming game. Adrian’s materialist-discursive reconfiguring of the painful ‘what if’ question (‘what if I had done this and that, would my child be alive today?’), reminds us that it is also crucial for a feminist politics of mourning to think through the complex problems of response-ability in relation to the many uncontrollable and unpredictable dimensions of death and dying.

The bottom line, in all of the approaches to the politics of mourning articulated in this special issue, is to emphasise the necessity of a careful and critical thinking through of the many pitfalls and to establish affirmative approaches. Across their many differences, all the contributions share the desire to joyfully embrace the rhizomatic emergence of new stories beyond the life/death threshold. It is crucial to radically queer that threshold, which Western philosophy and theory, so influenced by Christian and Cartesian dualisms and hierarchical, dichotomous thought, have rendered decisive. As the Selk’nam and other indigenous people all over the world have known for thousands of years, life and death, human and nonhuman, nature and culture are not radically dichotomised, but totally continuous.

Notes
1. See, for example, Vidal 2020; Warden 2020; Jabr 2020.
2. See, for example, Campbell and Saddique 2020; APM Research Lab Staff 2020; John, et al. 2020; Lindberg et al. 2020.
3. See, for example, Radomska Forthcoming 2020; Armiero 2020.
4. Edelman’s neologism draws on Jacques Lacan’s concept of the sinthome, which combines three ideas: the symptom, the synthetic man and the saint.
5. In line with branches of intersectional feminist theory, taking into account trans- and non-binary gender, we use the term ‘womxn’ to underline that both cis-women and differently embodied queer femme persons should be included when the issue of femicide is being debated and theorised.
6. See: https://queerdeathstudies.net/ (accessed 31 May 2020).
7. See: https://www.kau.se/en/centre-gender-studies/date/first-international-queer-death-studies-conference-death-matters (accessed 19 July 2020).
8. See: https://tidsskrift.dk/KKF/issue/view/8122 (accessed 19 July 2020).

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank Liz Sourbut for the language editing of the final manuscript of the article.

Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding
This work was supported by The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) International Postdoc grant number 2017–0067
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