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Non/Living Queerings, Undoing Certainties, and Braiding Vulnerabilities: A Collective Reflection

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Abstract

The ongoing global pandemic of Covid-19 has exposed SARS-CoV-2 as a potent nonhuman actant that resists the joint scientific, public health and socio-political efforts to contain and understand both the virus and the illness. Yet, such a narrative appears to conceal more than it reveals. The seeming agentiality of the novel coronavirus is itself but one manifestation of the continuous destruction of biodiversity, climate change, socio-economic inequalities, neocolonialism, overconsumption and the anthropogenic degradation of nature. Furthermore, focusing on the virus – an entity that holds an ambiguous status between the ‘living’ and ‘non-living’ – brings into question the issue of the agentiality of non/living matter. While the story of viral potency seems to get centre stage, overshadowing the complex and perverse

entanglement of processes and phenomena which activated these potentials in the first place, the Covid-19 pandemic also becomes a prism that sheds light on the issues of environmental violence; social and environmental injustices; more-than-human agency; and ethico-political responses that the present situation may mobilise.

This article serves as a written record of joint conversations between artists and researchers in the working group 'Non/Living Queerings' that formed part of the online series of events 'Braiding Friction' organised by the research project Biofriction. The article strives to capture the collective effort of braiding and weaving a variety of situated perspectives, theoretical toolboxes, knowledges and experiences against the background of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, the text focuses on the issues of crisis, 'amplification effect', viral agency and the changing notions of humanity.

Keywords

the non/living; queering; Covid-19 pandemic; art; vulnerability; amplification

Non/Living Queerings, deshaciendo certezas y trenzando vulnerabilidades: una reflexión colectiva

Resumen

La pandemia de la COVID-19 ha expuesto al SARS-CoV-2 como un actante no humano potente que resiste a los esfuerzos científicos, de la salud pública y sociopolíticos que se hacen conjuntamente para contener y entender tanto al virus como la enfermedad. Sin embargo, esta narrativa parece ocultar más de lo que revela. La aparente agencialidad del nuevo coronavirus no es más que una manifestación de la continua destrucción de la biodiversidad, el cambio climático, las desigualdades socioeconómicas, el neocolonialismo, el consumo excesivo y la degradación antropogénica de la naturaleza. Además, centrarse en el virus –una entidad que tiene un estado ambiguo entre lo «vivo» y lo «no vivo»– pone en cuestión la situación de la agencialidad de la materia no viva. Mientras que el relato de la potencia vírica parece que ocupa un lugar central, eclipsando el enredo complejo y caprichoso de procesos y fenómenos que activaron estas posibilidades desde el principio, la pandemia de la COVID-19 se convierte en un prisma que arroja luz sobre los problemas de violencia ambiental, injusticias sociales y ambientales, agencialidad sobrehumana y respuestas éticopolíticas que la situación actual pueda movilizar.

Este artículo sirve como un registro por escrito de las conversaciones entre artistas e investigadores del grupo de trabajo Non/Living Queerings, que ha formado parte de una serie de actividades en línea, Braiding Friction, que organizó el proyecto de investigación Biofriction. En el artículo se intenta plasmar el esfuerzo colectivo de trenzar y de entretrejer una variedad de perspectivas, cajas de herramientas teóricas, conocimientos y experiencias en el contexto de la pandemia actual de la COVID-19. En particular, el texto se centra en las cuestiones de la crisis, el «efecto de amplificación», la agencia vírica y las ideas cambiantes de la humanidad.

Palabras clave

non/living, queering, pandemia de la COVID-19, arte, vulnerabilidad, amplificación

Introduction

The ongoing global pandemic of Covid-19 has exposed SARS-CoV-2 as a potent nonhuman actant *resisting* the joint scientific, public health and socio-political efforts to contain *and* understand both the virus and the illness. Yet, such a narrative appears to conceal more than it reveals. The seeming agency of the novel coronavirus is itself

but one manifestation of the continuous destruction of biodiversity, climate change, socio-economic inequalities, neocolonialism, over-consumption and the anthropogenic degradation of nature, broadly speaking. Focusing on the virus – an entity that does not fulfil the basic biological criteria of what counts as 'life' and holds an ambiguous status between the 'living' and 'non-living' – brings into question the issue of the agency of *non/living matter*. While the story of viral

potency gets centre stage, overshadowing the complex and perverse entanglement of processes which activated these potentials in the first place, the Covid-19 pandemic also becomes a prism shedding light on the issues of environmental violence; social and environmental injustices; temporal, spatial and material scales at work in the Anthropocene; more-than-human and non/living agentiality; and ethico-political responses that the present situation may mobilise. Put differently, perhaps it can be read as a 'portal', as novelist Arundhati Roy (2020) put it.

In May 2020 five artists and researchers were invited by Bioart Society (BAS) to form a working group which would take part in the series of online events 'Braiding Friction' organised by the research project Biofriction¹. Braiding Friction was focused on the discussion of the current situation and possible scenarios in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The group assembled by BAS and named 'Non/Living Queerings' ('N/LQ') consisted of Marietta Radomska; Terike Haapoja; Margherita Pevere; Markus Schmidt; and Mayra Citlalli Rojo Gómez. N/LQ saw their name as a reference to: (1) the term 'non/living' (Radomska 2016), describing the enmeshment of the processes of living and dying, living and non-living; and spaces of ambiguity refusing to be easily classified as one or the other (examples: viruses; prions; inorganic protocells; technologically supported bioartworks); and (2) the term 'queer(ing)', taken as a verb/adverb referring to that which challenges normativities and fixed classifications, while not remaining limited to gender/sexuality exclusively (e.g. Giffney & Hird 2008; Radomska, Mehrabi & Lykke 2020). The starting point for the group was to bring together perspectives/toolboxes from across art, science and theory, as well as years of experience and history of working with *biomatter in art/science* laboratory contexts and *bodies in performance art*, in order to address the questions of crises, contingent notions of humanity and more-than-human agencies.

This essay serves as a *written record* striving to capture the collective effort of weaving a variety of situated (Haraway 1988) perspectives, theoretical toolboxes, knowledges and experiences.² In our explorations, we relied on the process-oriented, question-driven, imaginative and open-ended methodology. By weaving through the expertise, theories and methods from across philosophy, art and science, the work itself became transdisciplinary (blurring the boundaries of the disciplines involved; cf. Growth et al. 2019). Our work took the format of semi-structured conversations via Jitsi, integrating resources linked to our individual practices, scientific publications and diverse media outlets. The methodological element of 'braiding friction': a meticulous discussing and critical/creative reworking of disagreements, became one of the core elements of our collective approach. The 'grand finale' of the N/LQ's work took the form of

an online presentation/discussion livestreamed on 17th June 2020 on the Biofriction YouTube channel.³ Each member of N/LQ worked from their own theoretical/disciplinary/life 'location', namely, their specific individual situation. What we shared was the feeling of 'being suspended' in a way. To use a metaphor, we saw ourselves as 'antennas' in a 'transitioning world', curious, sensitive and open to signals, phenomena and processes around us; we were ready to critically and creatively work through those signals. The results of our explorations were divided into four thematic sections: the question of crisis; SARS-CoV-2 as an amplifier; the (changing) ideas of humanity in the present context; and the virus as a non/living agent.

In what follows, we offer four thematic vignettes that give an account of our conversations, frictions, and conclusions. Some of the vignettes are separated by interludes/interventions focused on the work of one of the group members, Mayra Citlalli Rojo Gómez. Mayra, currently based in Mexico, is one of the artists whose Biofriction art residency, planned for spring 2020 at BAS, could not take place due to the pandemic-related restrictions. Mayra's artistic research practice focuses on symbiosis, un/common synergies, entanglements, materialities and cultural imaginaries, their intra-actions (Barad 2007), poetics, and political space they may mobilise. Her work accompanied our collective processes of thinking *with* (Haraway 2008), bringing together various perspectives and creating uncanny resonances and alliances between knowledges, methodologies and praxis. In this essay, an uncanny assemblage comes to the fore: the semi-academic in their character vignettes (to be read in *no particular order*) are woven through the interludes – Mayra's poetic reflections. We employ here a critical-creative resonance and 'interference' between art/poetics, theory/philosophy and science (Deleuze & Guattari 1994) in the hope of creating approaches better fit for diagnosing and addressing the complexities of the *now*.

Vignette I: Crisis

From its outset, the ongoing pandemic has been framed as a global crisis in its multiple dimensions: public health and healthcare; economy; airline industry; tourism; arts and culture, among others. When we say 'crisis', what do we actually mean? The term itself stems from the Greek word *krisis*: 'judgment, result of a trial, selection', and *krinein*, 'to separate, decide, judge'. 'Crisis' does not have any universal criteria. It is always a context-specific situation in its historical, geopolitical, social, cultural, or economic terms; always loaded with particular stakes for different actors involved. Calling a given set of circumstances 'critical' involves power to decide,

1. See: <https://biofriction.org/news/announcement-e-working-groups/>. This and following links were last accessed on November 20, 2020.

2. See: <https://www.makery.info/en/2020/11/13/english-margherita-pevere-interconnectedness-is-the-substrate-of-my-work/>.

3. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ch2-1z6T9M&ab_channel=biofrictionorg.

which is a privilege not given to all by default. For disadvantaged communities 'critical' living conditions may actually be the essence of everyday reality, only intensified by the ongoing pandemic. The latter, as global statistics demonstrate, affects some more than others, amplifying already existing vulnerabilities: the proportion of positive cases and deaths among people of colour in the US and the UK (APM Research Lab Staff 2020; Campbell & Siddique 2020), and the globally rising domestic violence rates linked to lockdowns are some of the examples. Calling a situation critical requires posing the following question: Whose crisis is it? Many, especially in the West, tend to forget that historically speaking stability is an exception, not a rule; it becomes taken for granted. In the context of Western Europe, from which this essay is written, we have become so used to stability that the pandemic-related top-down lockdowns taking place throughout spring 2020 have been interpreted as a major crisis. There are very few people left who experienced and remember the great crises of the 20th century: WW1 and WW2 with their aftermaths. Certainly, for some the memories and fears related to the Cold War conflicts and the Yugoslav Wars from the 1990s are still relatively vivid.

In general terms the idea of uncontrollable danger or situation is often seen as something located 'elsewhere' in geographical, socio-cultural, political or temporal terms. Similarly, the majority of Western countries have held to an erroneous presumption that epidemics occur mostly 'far away'; 'mostly', meaning, with the exceptions of the H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic from 2009/10, and the HIV/AIDS global epidemic. This false belief has contributed to the ongoing neoliberal deconstruction of welfare structures, healthcare systems and other institutions. Furthermore, it is in itself problematic, proving yet again the prevailing, but not always openly admitted, idea of Western exceptionalism and 'superiority', in its 'mild' version perfectly exemplified by the resistance towards and subsequently slow adaptation of face masks in most Western countries in the context of Covid-19, even when the scientific evidence proving their effectiveness was there.⁴ As gender studies scholar Melissa Autumn White reminds us, the idea of a global pandemic as such has been discussed among epidemiologists and virologists since 1997 and the outbreak of avian influenza in Hong Kong at the time; in 2005 WHO issued a general pandemic alert after working with the development of early viral response capacities since 2002 and following the SARS epidemic in 2002-2004 (Stephenson & Jamieson 2005, cited in White 2010, 121)⁵. Simultaneously, White notes, 'bio- and necropolitics in shared nationalized spaces' merge and escalate, creating 'political

institutions and acts of governance that allow an effectively striated humanity (of citizen-subjects and noncitizen-others)' and manufacturing 'disposable populations' and lives (2010, 121). This point is perfectly illustrated by the earlier mentioned disproportionately high numbers of cases and deaths among deprived populations (e.g. ethnic minorities, asylum seekers, the elderly, etc.)⁶.

The question of crisis also opens a different avenue: if it is to be understood as a turning point, then there is also power in it. The 'normal' has been violent for many humans and nonhumans alike, but as long as they have not had the power to articulate it as crises, it has not resulted in any opening towards change. It is in that way that Roy called the current pandemic a portal: it is a possibility, a rupture, that perhaps does and should allow for things to become visible and changed. If the crisis is seen as a 'portal', perhaps it is also a process of adaptation, mobilising ethical, historical and biopolitical discussions and actions. There are questions that remain yet unanswered: How do we adapt? How does this gradient break affect each community?

Interlude I

What we do not see frightens us, but it is through the hegemony of the gaze of the amplifying technologies that we have been limited and, at the same time, instructed to build the world we know. Somehow, it disables us from proximity, connection and interference with other living entities. It disables us from mystery.

How do we rebuild our sight? I wondered when, after a couple of days of bubbles in the liquid, I saw with curiosity a thin layer of tissue growing. Fermentation. The days passed and it was a mass full of texture and smells like human flesh or pig skin.

That tiny world of bacteria and fungi; organic, viscous matter that grew disproportionately inside a container. The blob. The flesh. A community that communicates, that grows and maintains a cycle of transformation. The strain. How to connect that matter with my body? Does it die when it comes out of the water? Or is it an inert matter since the moment it emerges?

The intersection/symbiosis: The flora/microbiota. The relationships between populations of microbes extend to vegetation and humans with bacterial flora, a phylum and a symbolic bridge between humans and plants, between bacteria and humans. That mass that I saw growing inside the jar, that bacterial consortium, that flora that grows

4. In early spring 2020, mask wearers (especially of Asian origin) faced racist violence in many places in both Europe and the US. It had taken months for WHO to recommend the general public use of face masks (issued on 5th June 2020). The resistance towards the use of face masks in general society is motivated by the idea that 'a mask gives little protection to the wearer', which dismisses the key premise of the use of face masks in places where they have been used for years (not the least because of the experience of the SARS epidemic in 2003), i.e. protecting those around the mask wearer. Furthermore, approx. 40-45% of the infected never develop any symptoms (Oran et al. 2020). It is not clear how infectious they are.

5. See: <https://www.who.int/ith/diseases/sars/en/>.

6. E.g.: Vogel 2020; Lindberg et al. 2020.

outside, some of them live inside my body in my mouth, my guts, on my skin.

The human being is a recombination of bacteria.

*The arrangement: That mass in the hands of the scientist becomes useful and appropriate for the industry; bacterial cellulose is the biopolymer of the future, thought to replace the hydrocarbon industry. Yet, it is so unstable. Some studies suggest isolating the model organism the *Gluconacetobacter Xylinum* with greater cellulose production capacity; others show that the consortium of microorganisms should be maintained. So far, the research concludes that producing bacterial cellulose is difficult because of its vital(?) instability. There is no patent code that can appropriate the microorganism only for its growth process and the assigned 'use'. In other words, this organic matter is still placed out of the order of scientific industry: it remains inappropriate/d (Haraway 2003).*

Vignette II: Amplification

The question of crisis brings us to another enquiry unfolding since early 2020, namely, how the Covid-19 pandemic emerges as an amplifier of processes and conditions that had already been in place long before the pandemic started. The pandemic exposed the processes that had contributed to its emergence in the first place: the continuous destruction of biodiversity, climate change, socio-economic inequalities, neocolonialism, overconsumption and the anthropogenic degradation of nature are key factors here. SARS-CoV-2 became an amplifier of vulnerabilities.

In 2008 a research team led by British biodiversity scientist Kate Jones identified 335 appearances of new infectious diseases that occurred between 1940 and 2004 (Jones, et al. 2008). Over 60% of those are zoonoses (71.8% originate from wildlife). As Jones emphasises, zoonoses are 'a hidden cost of human economic development. There are just so many more of us, in every environment. We are going into largely undisturbed places and being exposed more and more. We are creating habitats where viruses are transmitted more easily, and then we are surprised that we have new ones.' (Vidal 2020). Currently, the same research team investigates how species in degraded habitats are likely to carry more viruses which can jump over to humans: 'Simpler systems get an amplification effect.' (Jones in Vidal 2020).

Environmental health experts agree that pathogens do not respect boundaries and the majority of them are still to be discovered (Vidal 2020). And yet, the 'business as usual' prevails: the slaughter of nonhuman animals, killing off entire species, destruction of biodi-

versity and natural habitats, and degradation of landscapes continue undisturbed. The extraction of resources, administered by the global north and most often performed in the global south, does not slow down. Looking at 'resources' one should not forget about wildlife: elephant ivory, rhino horn, sturgeon caviar, and so-called 'bushmeat' (the flesh of primates, antelopes, rodents, birds and reptiles) are smuggled to Europe and North America (Sun Wyler & Sheikh 2013; Jabr 2020). The combination of the exploitation of nature and intensification of socio-economic inequalities directly contributes to the emergence of zoonoses (Gosalvez 2020). As disease ecologist Thomas Gillespie emphasises, 'Whenever you have novel interactions with a range of species in one place, whether that is in a natural environment like a forest or a wet market, you can have a spillover event' (Vidal 2020). The more voracious we become in our patterns of consumption, exploitation and intentional creation of such spaces, the greater probability for spillover events we manufacture. Science writer Ferris Jabr puts it succinctly: 'Our ceaseless rearranging of ecosystems loops back to alter our health in even more circuitous ways — in ways many people would never consider... We cannot blame the bats, mosquitoes and viruses. We cannot expect them to go against their nature. The challenge before us is how best to govern ourselves and stymie the flood we unleashed' (2020).

Yet, it is not only wet markets – so central to the discussions on Covid-19 – that are identified as the source of a potential epidemic. Animal agriculture as such, with various structures enabling the exploitation of nonhuman animals broadly speaking, is to blame. Let us recall the outbreaks of BSE or swine flu – none of them involved wildlife. Both abattoirs and wet markets where living animals are kept, killed and sold are the spaces where these nonhuman bodies are turned into 'bare life' (Agamben 1998): exploited and slaughtered with impunity, because they are constructed as mere object to (ab)use. These are the places where excruciating pain, suffering and death are produced on a mass scale. Furthermore, outbreaks of infectious diseases among abattoir workers are not a rare occurrence. Bodily fluids, animal corpses, temperature, ventilation and proximity are all contributing factors. It happened during the avian flu and swine flu epidemics, and it has happened a number of times this year, under the Covid-19 pandemic.⁷ Here, the killing itself becomes 'the product'; the nonhuman animal bodies are considered as either 'excessive' or 'not suitable for consumption' and therefore 'destroyed'.⁸ In late spring 2020 the news reached us: the deficit of slaughterhouse workers who could 'process' the to-be-slaughtered animals created a 'backlog' of livestock. Political theorist Lisa Warden puts it firmly: 'industrial farms are culling millions of animals, now classified as waste, on site. The culling methods specified by the American Veterinary Medical

7. E.g.: <https://www.bbc.com/news/53137613>.

8. E.g.: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-livestock-insight/piglets-aborted-chickens-gassed-as-pandemic-slams-meat-sector-idUSKCN2292YS>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/14/business/coronavirus-farmers-killing-pigs.html>.

Association's guidelines for 'depopulation' include gassing, suffocation with foam, and induced hyperthermia achieved by turning up the heat and switching off ventilation systems' (Warden 2020). Furthermore, the cruelty of abattoir reality – in its regular conditions, let alone under the pandemic – is accompanied by the precarious situation of slaughterhouse employees. These are often temporary, foreign and undocumented workers. They do not always speak the language of the country they work in and are also afraid of losing their jobs. Workplace injuries are frequent and work conditions render the staff more prone to various diseases. The trauma linked to the character of the work has further consequences for their mental health and well-being, leading to desensitisation and increased cruelty both in and out of workplace. This generates an even more extensive spiral of violence (e.g. Warden 2020). None of the above is new; the ongoing pandemic amplifies and simultaneously highlights the continuous perverse logic behind these processes, which we have mostly chosen to ignore.⁹

There are also other aspects that become amplified through the unfolding of the pandemic. It is striking how different narratives activating 'humanity'/'non-humanity' or animality have become very visible. Early on, SARS-CoV-2 became 'associated with' the country of its 'origin' and only with time global critiques managed to nuance the 'origin story'. The language of Western science and medicine – as it has always been in the case of immunology – uses the metaphor of 'war' in order to talk about the body and its hybridity. As medical anthropologist A. David Napier argues, relations between immunology and culture unfold in two directions: general cultural attitudes towards difference and the other are frequently described in medical metaphors ('contagion', 'epidemic', and 'virus' have been used historically in much the same way as they are employed in the contemporary discussions on terrorism), while immunological processes are framed through military metaphors (usually as a 'battle' between self and not-self, 'invasion' and 'defence'). What he sees as particularly problematic about this use of military language is the (detrimental) cultural implications of the idea that there is a 'system to eliminate not-self' (2010, 42): the military-imbued notion of the immunological system has influenced cultural and political discourses on the *other* (in the broadest sense).

The SARS-CoV-2 amplification effect has many faces. The pandemic itself became an unfolding political event. The narrative on essential workers became a way to convince people to sacrifice their lives for the economy. Simultaneously, uncertainty linked to the emergence of the virus resulted in creative storytelling. In a

way, Covid-19 broke the impasse of habits and did what no social movement has ever managed to do: it stopped – even if only for a few 'moments' – the capitalist machine.

Vignette III: Humanity and the pandemic

The notion of humanity also changes under the ongoing pandemic. In *The Open: Man and Animal* (2002), philosopher Giorgio Agamben proposes the concept of the 'anthropological machine', a mechanism manufacturing the human against the backdrop of 'worth-less', undifferentiated nonhuman life, often to be exploited with impunity. It is that very mechanism that stands behind the valuation of nonhuman life. The machine keeps on 'jamming', while manufacturing grievable and non-grievable lives and deaths (cf. Radomska 2020). Although the concept rightly captures the anthropological machinery, Agamben remains blind to the crucial factors/power differentials that are key in the functioning of the machine: race, gender, class, sexuality, age and species are absent from his argument. As scholars working at the intersection of critical race studies, gender studies, and critical animal studies, such as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020), Mel Y. Chen (2012), or Aph and Syl Ko (2017), emphasise, the antiblack logic and racial hierarchy not only have formed part of the shaping of sex and gender, but also and most importantly, have been at the core of the Enlightenment humanism and its idea of the human. As Jackson notes, the bestialisation and thingification of blackness, combined with the violent imposition of colonial myths, have directly contributed to the foundation of the liberal notion of the human (2020, 1).

We have reached the limit of overexploitation and expropriation of what colonial philosophy and science defined as natural and human resources. But perhaps, this is precisely due to the fact that we have been all too 'human'? (Gane 2006). As writer Laura Gustafsson and artist Terike Haapoja remind us, 'In anthropocentric traditions the definition of what constitutes humanity relies on essential difference' (2019), which subsequently 'legitimises' abuse and violence towards those expelled beyond the set boundaries of the 'properly human'. The history of humanism consists of numerous attempts to cleanse humanity from its animal foundation. Yet, what makes us fully human in an ethical sense is also what makes us vulnerable. How – forced by the intricacies and uncertainty of the pandemic – can we imagine the human differently? And conversely, how does the process of othering and its complex social and ecological implications affect our understanding of the virus?

9. A 'hidden' group of creatures particularly sacrificed in the pandemic (and broadly in biomedical research) is horseshoe crabs, which are 'milked' for their blue blood. Crabs' blood is the source of limulus amebocyte lysate, a substance used to detect contaminants in drugs (including Covid-19 vaccines). In 2016 a synthetic alternative (rFC) to crab lysate was approved for the use in Europe. Yet, in 2020 the American Pharmacopeia, which sets the safety standards for drugs in the US, claimed the safety of rFC is insufficiently proven, which means the use of crab lysate in the US will prevail. See: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/07/covid-vaccine-needs-horseshoe-crab-blood/>.

Interlude II¹⁰

What is the intersection between bacterial floras and flowers? What is the cultural and semantic resonance between 'floras' ('floras' in Spanish) and 'flowers' ('flores' in Spanish)?

The image: the extension and expansion of the territories to which it refers. The propagation, nomadism, interconnection and interference of what is not identical.

Between flowers and humans, between anatomy and botany, there is an abomination of the mystery of evolutionary leaps. Sources of hybridisation and exploration among extinct lineages.

Vignette IV: Non/living agencies and their discontents

Finally, this brings us to the virus as a *non/living* entity, which is often presented as having its own agency. How is such an agency 'catalysed' and implied in different processes?

SARS-CoV-2, like any virus, lingers in an ambivalent space of the non/living (Radomska 2016): not precisely a form of 'life', and not a 'non-life' either. If we look at it from a philosophical perspective, the virus challenges the conceptual boundaries of what 'life' is. It emerges as an enmeshment of processes defying (or queering) straightforward classifications and binaries. Looking at the virus from a biological point of view, it does not fulfil the four basic criteria of 'life' (the entity has a body; it metabolises, reproduces and is capable of movement). In the context of viruses, the criterion of reproduction (combined with the inheritance of genetic information) is not valid because, in order to replicate, viruses need host cells. Thus, we may see it as an 'actant' (Haraway 1992) disturbing clear-cut classifications and simultaneously having a great impact on both human and nonhuman organisms and systems.

The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered conversations around the potential agency of the virus (from blogs, via critical commentaries and online lectures, to internet forums).¹¹

What these discussions return us to are the old disagreements between new-materialist/Actor-Network-Theory arguments for non-human agency and more conventional standpoints committed to the human-centric notion of agency. While for the latter the essential characteristic of agency is intentionality (and thus, responsibility), the former define agency as a mere capacity to act/have an impact, without the necessity of intentionality. A potential conflict between the two parties essentially consists in discussing *two different* things.

The non/living emerges as an entity/a process of ambiguous character, occupying the space in-between: neither an organism proper, nor inorganic inert matter. Here, agency is exercised as a 'capacity to act', while escaping human control – yet *without* intentionality. While it does not fit the anthropocentric definition of agency, the virus forces people to act and react. Yet, we may also ask how much the discourse on viral agency obscures and how much it reveals. If we stick to a more open definition, then we may see that Braiding Friction itself has emerged as a result of the combination of viral agency, the international art community and technological infrastructure. This brings us to the final point: What can be the paths of agency? Perhaps, to create processes of agency could mean finding creative ways to look for tomorrow, because the expanding future is lost. What aesthetic imaginaries do we have/need to reverse the material horizon of our realities?

Epilogue

The four vignettes and the interludes braided through them constitute the record of our collective engagement with the phenomena of material processuality, ambivalent relations and entanglement between the living and non-living, and their indirectly executed agency as a capacity to have an impact. The four-part quasi-academic story, resulting from conversations, agreements, disagreements, reflections and confrontations, brings to the fore the queering – that is, undoing and challenging normative framings and conventional hierarchies – powers of non/living matters. The seemingly perverse unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic both amplifies and exposes the inherently perverse logic of the global systems of oppression, extraction and exploitation. While bioscience is crucial for the understanding of the pathogen itself and the processes it generates, theory, philosophy and art are essential not only as critical discussants, whose capacities exceed the mere task of 'translation' (as it is sometimes expected from both art and the humanities). In fact, they carry a potential for asking 'why?', 'how?' and '*cui bono?*', and thus shed light on hidden power relations, constructed hierarchies and exclusions.

Simultaneously, they have an ability to challenge taken-for-granted structures and imagine reality otherwise. In a world where but one thing is certain: the uncertainty, and where human and nonhuman vulnerabilities are continuously revealed, art and the humanities, in their transversal dialogues and synergies with science and technology, open up ways to envision, create and activate change. Perhaps, the pandemic is a portal indeed...

10. See: <https://phmuseum.com/mrojo-gomez/story/singular-creatures-f0beb1d574> and <https://www.air-montreux.ch/portfolio-item/mayra-rojo/>.

11. See: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7276839/> ; <http://lab.cccb.org/en/reimagining-the-human-virus-entanglement/> ; <https://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-2004/msg00016.html>.

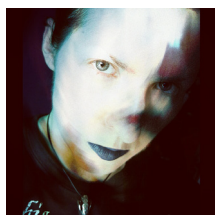
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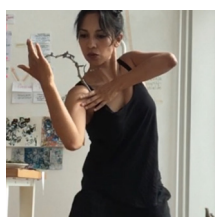
CV



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Marietta Radomska, PhD, is Research Fellow in Environmental Humanities at the Department of Thematic Studies – unit Gender Studies, Linköping University, SE. She is the co-director of The Posthumanities Hub; founder of The Eco- and Bioart Research Network, co-founder of Queer Death Studies Network and International Network for ECOcritical and DECOlonial Studies. Her research lays at the intersection of feminist theory, continental philosophy, posthumanities, queer death studies and contemporary art. She is the author of *Uncontainable Life: A Biophilosophy of Bioart* (2016), and has published in *Australian Feminist Studies*, *Somatechnics*, *Angelaki*, and *Women, Gender & Research*, among others. More: www.mariettaradomska.com



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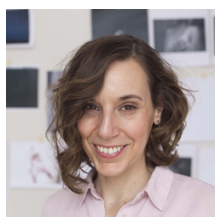
Mexican artist, interdisciplinary researcher and curator in visual arts and body discourses. She developed postdoctoral research about textile and bacterial cellulose. His axes of artistic and theoretical research are the discourses of the body and teratology, the origin of life from what he has called anatomy-botany and liminal tissues. More: <https://mayracitlally.wixsite.com/mayra-rojoartdesign>

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Margherita Pevere is an artist and researcher working across biological arts and performance. Her inquiry hybridises biolab practice and biotechnology, ecology, feminist posthumanities and queer theory, with a hacking attitude to create visceral pieces that hunt today's surging ecological complexity. Her body of work is a garden crawling with genetically edited bacteria, her epithelial cells, sex hormones, microbial biofilm, bovine blood, slugs, growing plants and decomposing biological remains. She is completing a PhD (Artistic Research) at Aalto University, supported by the Kone Foundation. She is a member of the Finnish Bioart Society and of The Posthumanities Hub. More: www.margheritapevere.com

**Terike Haapoja**

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Terike Haapoja is a visual artist based in New York. Haapoja's artworks, publications, writings and political projects investigate the mechanics of othering with a specific focus on issues arising from the anthropocentric world view of Eurocentric traditions. Haapoja represented Finland in the 55th Venice Biennale. Her work was awarded the ANTI prize for Live Art (2016), and the Dukaatti-prize (2008). Haapoja's collaboration with Laura Gustafsson was awarded the Finnish State Media art award (2016) and Kiila-prize (2013). More: <http://www.terikehaapoja.net/>