NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research

Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/swom20

Tied Together by Death – Post-Mortem Forms of Affective Intimacy in LGBTQ People's Stories of Partner Loss

Varpu Alasuutari

To cite this article: Varpu Alasuutari (2021): Tied Together by Death – Post-Mortem Forms of Affective Intimacy in LGBTQ People's Stories of Partner Loss, NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research, DOI: 10.1080/08038740.2021.1903554

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2021.1903554

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 21 Apr 2021.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 366

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=swom20

NORA—NORDIC JOURNAL OF FEMINIST AND GENDER RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2021.1903554

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS   Check for updates

Tied Together by Death – Post-Mortem Forms of Affective Intimacy in LGBTQ People's Stories of Partner Loss

Varpu Alasuutari

Department of Gender Studies, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

ABSTRACT

In the Western social imaginary, death cuts people apart from their loved ones on the embodied level while the connection may persist on the emotional level. In bereavement studies, this has been theorized as continuing bonds. In this article, I explore these bonds by focusing on their affective and intimate nature. I examine the topic through 10 in-depth interviews conducted with LGBTQ[1] people who have lost partners and ex-partners to death. Following feminist and queer theories of affect and intimacy, I ask how post-mortem forms of affective intimacy appeared in the interviewees' stories, how they felt about it, and how it had affected their new romantic relationships. For many, affective intimacy was an important, yet sometimes involuntary, part of grieving and remembrance. It appeared as complex and enduring entanglements of both positive and negative affects with an ability to interfere with the interviewees' relationships, challenging the boundaries of monogamy. Following the logics of queer death studies, this article rethinks bereavement studies by bringing affective intimacy into focus and deepening the analysis of LGBTQ people's stories of partner loss.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 22 July 2020
Accepted 10 March 2021

KEYWORDS
affective intimacy; continuing bonds; partner loss; queer death studies; LGBTQ

Introduction

Bereavement studies have explored the existence and endurance of emotional ties between the living and the dead, theorized as continuing bonds, since the 1990s (Klass et al., 1996). These ties are considered to be beneficial for the bereaved if related to meaning-making, reconstructing, and internalizing the relationship with the deceased in personally meaningful ways, but also potentially harmful if such meaning-making fails (Neimeyer et al., 2006). The theory of continuing bonds has contradicted the earlier Freudian theory of grief, according to which the purpose of grief is to sever one's emotional ties to the dead and to move on by creating new ones to the living (Freud, 1917/1957; Granek, 2010). However, despite the theoretical durability of and the growing interest in continuing bonds (Valentine, 2008; Florczak & Lockie, 2019), their entanglements with affects, intimacy, and queer modes of living require more in-depth attention.

Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews, this article is a by-product of my PhD project focusing on death-related losses in LGBTQ people's lives in Finland (Alasuutari, 2020). Inspired by the thematic richness and affective depth of the interviews, I explore here the interviewees' stories of partner loss by taking a look at post-mortem forms of affective intimacy. By this term, I refer to the intimacy between the bereaved and the deceased partner that lingers on and takes new shapes in the aftermath of loss.

The article rethinks bereavement studies by following the theoretical and empirical logics of queer death studies (Radomska et al., 2019; 2020). Queer death studies is an emerging

CONTACT Varpu Alasuutari varpu.alasuutari@utu.fi

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

interdisciplinary field that aims to renew death studies and bereavement studies in 'relentlessly norm-critical' ways and is 'affirmatively looking for new alternatives' by applying feminist and queer perspectives to the study of death, loss, and mourning (Radomska et al., 2019, p. 5). I participate in this process by utilizing new theoretical angles – that is, feminist and queer theories of affect and intimacy – to explore continuing bonds and to take a deeper look at what happens within them. As an empirical contribution, I foreground the experiences of LGBTQ people to shift the focus away from the heteronormative modes of living within which continuing bonds, partner loss, and repartnering have traditionally been theorized (Nolan et al., 2019; Stevens, 2002; Wu et al., 2014). Thus, this article brings new insights into the study of bereavement by spotlighting the 'multiplicities of non-normative modes of life and companionship' (Radomska et al., 2020, p. 88) that are too often cast in the margins in the study of death and bereavement.

Relatedly, the article sets out to deepen the analysis of death-related partner loss among LGBTQ people. Unlike earlier studies, this article does not take disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002) or the lack of legal or social recognition of same-sex relationships as its main focus (Bristowe et al., 2018; McNutt & Yakushko, 2013). Moreover, my aim here is not to locate what is specifically LGBTQ-related in the interviewees' bereavement stories.[2] Instead, this article deepens the study of such losses by taking a novel focus on the post-mortem forms of affective intimacy, telling new stories of loss and love, and rethinking old theories to produce new, nuanced knowledge. Without limiting the analysis to what makes the minority differ from the majority, I am able to expand the research narrative produced on LGBTQ people and partner loss and to see *what else* is going on in the interviewees' stories beyond the often-emphasized minority status. In some (if not in most) regards, the analysis and insights produced here can be applicable beyond LGBTQ people, highlighting the unifying experience of what it means to be human in the face of death and the loss of love.

To reach these aims, I address the following research questions: 1) How do post-mortem forms of affective intimacy appear in LGBTQ people's stories of partner loss?, 2) How did the interviewees experience such intimacy? and 3) How has it affected their new romantic relationships? In what follows, I first introduce the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this study and then proceed to the analysis. Finally, I conclude the article by revisiting and discussing its aims and contributions.

Queering intimacies

In feminist theorizing, intimacy is linked with the embodied emotions and actions taking place in close relationships in the private sphere, including familial, romantic and friend relations (e.g. Wilson, 2016; Povinelli, 2002). It also relates to the normative ideologies supporting and constructing 'normal love' and other institutions of intimacy in the public sphere (Berlant, 1998). As intimacy is governed by the rules and norms of the society – or in Gayle Rubin's (1993)[3] terms, divided between the charmed circle and the outer limits of appropriateness and acceptability – intimacy relates to both the private and the public, taking place in their intersection. However, Lauren Berlant (1998, p. 286) has argued for the rethinking of intimacy by calling for transformative analyses that would pay attention to 'the detritus and the amputations that come from attempts to fit into the fold' of hegemonic patterns and fantasies of intimacy. For Berlant, to rethink intimacy is to observe, and to celebrate, the intimacies that people are already living or imagining beyond the normative folds.

My discussion on intimacy aligns with the queer paradigm for studying intimacies (Hammack et al., 2018). Walking along the path paved by Berlant, this paradigm aims at shifting the analytical focus away from the 'normative assumptions of human intimacy' and towards 'an embrace of diversity, fluidity, and possibility' (ibid, pp. 556-557). While queerness in this regard may center on the varied forms of intimacies between people of different genders, sexualities, and relationship models within and beyond the LGBTQ spectrum, my discussion takes a broader focus, concentrating on what Phillip L. Hammack et al. call intimacy occurring 'in other possible forms yet unknown'.

Although my analysis deals with people self-identifying as LGBTQ, what makes intimacy queer in the empirical material is not (only) this identification. Instead, it is also how intimacy in the interviewees' stories exceeds the normative shapes and finds new, ghostly forms in the domains of grief and remembrance, crossing the (seemingly uncrossable) divide between life and death (see also Dernikos, 2018).

To analyze such elusive and intangible, or haunting, forms of intimacy, I follow feminist scholars who have taken up the concept of affect[4] to explore intimacies in new ways (Ahmed, 2014; Kolehmainen & Juvonen, 2018). As argued by Sara Ahmed (2014), affects are born and produced in entangled ways with and through our interactions with our social, cultural and material surroundings. Building on this idea, I propose that analyzing how intimacies are affectively produced helps to navigate the complexities of human attachments. Additionally, it allows us to rethink intimacy and explore what it means to feel intimacy with someone who no longer exists in the world as an embodied being.

Seeing intimacy where the physical connection can no longer exist is, admittedly, at odds with the theories linking intimacy with physical closeness, corpo-affectivity or touch (Maclaren, 2014; Lykke, 2018; Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019). Kym Maclaren (2014, pp. 60-61) has suggested that experiencing enduring intimacy requires a shared world and an embodied connection with an intimate other.[5] Death is where Maclaren sees the intimacy to break and the shared world fall apart, together with the embodied connection. Likewise, in Nina Lykke's (2018) discussion on corpo-affectively experienced compassionate companionship, death cuts the companionship apart. However, the idea of embodied connection is complicated by Jane Ribbens McCarthy and Raia Prokhovnik (2014) who have pointed out that embodied relationality may continue within the body of the living in felt experiences and material practices, which are explorable via affects.[6] Similarly, I suggest that when losing intimate others to death, a shared world is no longer needed for intimacy to linger on within the bereaved and in their interactions with the world. To understand this lingering, we need to take a look at the affects attached to, and born in close proximity to, the objects, places and modes of being reminding us of the world once shared.

Data and methods

The article follows a qualitative research design and re-explores the interview data collected in 2015–2017 for my PhD project (Alasuutari, 2020). This article digs deeper into the experiences of partner loss, analyzing 10 interviews conducted with LGBTQ people who had lost a partner or an ex-partner to death. Although it may appear counterintuitive to include ex-partners in the discussion of partner loss, I see this as an important possibility for queering such discussions. Including ex-partners not only helps to make visible the diversity of intimate relations among LGBTQ people but it also breaks the binaries between intimate relations more broadly, highlighting how intimacy may abide despite the transformation of the relationship from romance to friendship, or something in between.[7]

The interviewees were recruited by circulating the research call via the online mailing lists of Finnish LGBTQ organizations and social media. They were white, Finnish-speaking Finns of varying ages, identifications, and educational, occupational and relationship backgrounds (see Table 1). The recounted losses had taken place between the late 1990s and 2017, with most of them having happened in the 2010s.

The interviews followed feminist interviewing practices, taking the form of open-ended, in-depth, and free-flowing thematic interviews (Hesse-Biber, 2007). As an interviewer, I took the role of an attentive and compassionate listener. Being an insider in terms of queer lives but an outsider in terms of bereavement, my position as a researcher can be described as that of a partial insider. As a feminist practice of situating oneself, I shared this position with the interviewees, making visible the shapes and limits of our mutuality and the kind of vision that I was 'seeing together' with them (Haraway, 1988, p. 586). Each interviewee was interviewed once in a location chosen by them. Some

Table 1. Interviewees and their relationships.

Pseudonym	Age	Self-identification[8]	Lost person	Repartnered[9]
Aaro	late fifties	gay man	live-in partner	no
Hannu	early fifties	gay man	long-distance partner	yes (once; currently unpartnered)
Inka	late thirties	bisexual woman	registered partner	no
Jarkko	mid-forties	gay/queer man	undefined ex-partner	yes (already at the time of the loss; more than once after the loss; currently unpartnered)
Mika	late thirties	gay man	live-in partner	yes (once; currently partnered)
Reino	early seventies	gay man	live-in ex-partner	no
Saara	early thirties	bisexual/ pansexual/ queer woman	partner	yes (more than once; currently partnered)
Susanna	early forties	lesbian woman	registered partner	yes (once; currently unpartnered)
Tiina	late sixties	bisexual transgender woman	married partner	no
Veikko	late fifties	gay man	non-monogamous live-in partner	yes (already at the time of the loss; more than once after the loss; currently unpartnered)

preferred being interviewed at home, some at the university, and some through Skype. The length of the interviews ranged from 1.5 to 4 hours. Before each interview, the interviewees were sent a consent form to be signed and a short list of themes that the interview would focus on.[10] Compared with a structured interview, a free-flowing method better allowed for new and surprising themes to come forward. Affective intimacy with late (ex-)partners was an unanticipated yet important theme which inspired the writing of this article.

The transcribed and anonymized[11] interviews were analyzed by following the qualitative content analysis and its thematic coding, in which the themes were identified both inductively based on topics that reoccurred in the empirical material and deductively based on earlier research (Leavy, 2007). The identified themes included descriptions of affective intimacy born in proximity to objects, places, and modes of (being in) the world, the affective complexity and persistence of such intimacy, and how it challenged the prevailing monogamous ideation of love and relationships. Next, I offer a descriptive discussion of these themes, tying them together with theory and earlier research findings.

Post-mortem forms of affective intimacy

The interviewees described in varying ways how their deceased (ex-)partners continued affecting their lives. As Aaro expressed:

> AARO: 'What is curious about death is that even though the person is no longer here . . . the impact of that person stays here, for a long time.'

Many shared the view that death did not signal an immediate end to the experienced connection. Intimacy took new affective shapes in its post-mortem state, becoming something that was carried along when building a new life. For many, this kind of intimacy was an important part of internalizing the loss and keeping the deceased as a continued part of their lives, as is typical for continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996; Neimeyer et al., 2006). When looking at where and how the intimacy with the dead was experienced, it appeared to intensify in proximity to certain objects and places (Sturken, 1997; Johnsson, 2019) and in relation to certain modes of the world, and modes of being in the world, as I later demonstrate.

One of the places that created a sense of proximity to, and intimacy with, the dead intimate other was a shared home, filled with objects that had once belonged to the deceased. Being near such objects, and going through them, could become an important part of remembrance:

> MIKA: 'There was a lot of sorting out, of memories . . . and things; it was very important to me. For example, I rummaged through the whole apartment. [–] I went through all that stuff, because . . . first of all, it was somehow a nice way to remember [the late partner].'

As argued by Marita Sturken (1997), objects and places may operate as 'technologies of memory' enhancing remembrance. Instead of being passive vessels of memory, Sturken suggests that they actively participate in the processes of remembering by producing memories and engaging the bereaved in their meaning-making (Sturken, 1997, pp. 9-10). In addition to reminding the bereaved of the dead, they are also physical reminders of their absence. This observation resonates with research on homes as deathscapes, or in other words, as 'emotionally fraught' places of remembrance (Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010, pp. 4-5). In particular, this discussion has focused on intentionally created home memorials like visual shrines with photographs and candles. However, in the stories of this study, the continued sense of intimate connection lingered on more freely. While some of the interviewees, like Inka, indeed had a shrine of photographs of her late partner on display at home, affective intimacy was also attached to, and produced by, objects in and parts of the home without intentional planning.

The personal belongings of the dead were heavily saturated with intense affects, which posed a problem regarding their future use. As argued by Annika Jonsson (2019), what makes certain objects particularly meaningful in bereavement is the simultaneous absence-presence they signal and make visible. This was the case especially with clothes 'echoing the body that once filled them' (Sturken, 1997, p. 192). Some interviewees had started wearing the clothes of a late same-sex partner both as a practical solution of not wanting the clothes to be wasted and as a comforting solution of wanting to be near to what had been, in such an intimate way, near to the lost partner. To be able to do so without feeling weird about it was sometimes not expected by the interviewees. As Aaro explained: 'Surprisingly enough . . . [his] clothes fit me, and I am able to wear them. We were more or less of the same size. So like . . . it does not feel bad to wear them.' For Veikko, the most affectively charged items were not clothes but other personal belongings of his deceased partner. His description signals the powerfully affective and intimate nature of such items: 'The closer you go to the person's skin, the harder it was to pick those things up. Like eyeglasses, and a necklace and . . . stuff like that.' Eventually, however, he started wearing a necklace worn by his late partner. In the interview, nearly twenty years after the loss, he showed me how he still kept wearing the same necklace.[12] I propose that the intense affects attached to clothes and other personal items of the dead resonate with what Taina Kinnunen and Marjo Kolehmainen (2019, p. 46) have referred to as 'ghostly traces of touch', manifesting through 'a repertoire of lack, longing and absence'. To be near such items is to be touched by them when no longer being able to be touched by the dead themselves.

To further understand these stories, I follow Ahmed's (2014) theory of sticky objects and affects stuck to those objects. According to Ahmed, the interpretation of the affectivity of objects depends on our orientations towards those objects and what they seem to promise or bring along. What the objects get sticky with is dependent on the 'histories of contact that have already impressed upon the surface of the object' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 90). In other words, the affective value attached to certain objects shows us where the object has traveled. In terms of objects that have belonged to a dead intimate other, or the places shared with them, the objects and places can be considered sticky with intense affects, promising a continued sense of connection.

The bedroom, and the bed itself, were central places of affective intimacy, demonstrating further both the idea of ghostly traces of touch and sticky affects. For instance, Tiina described feeling the presence of her lost partner in bed when falling asleep: 'I have lain there quietly, and it has felt just

like someone else would lie there next to me, and the mattress like presses down and moves. And I feel like this warmth, warmth next to me.' Sensing the presence of the dead is a common experience in partner loss (Steffen & Coyle, 2011). I read this as a sign of affective intimacy, enhanced in Tiina's case both by the memories of physical proximity and by being physically embraced by the bed that used to embrace them both. What lingers on in those moments is the ghostly memory of touch, emerging through the experienced lack of touch and being touched by affective objects, like the bed, instead.

However, the bed once shared could also become saturated with negative affects, signaling the complexity of affective intimacy. Mika explained how he had to relearn to use the bedroom after finding his partner dead on the bed, following his suicide. In Tiina's and Mika's stories, the histories of contact between the bed and the bedroom differed greatly from one another, resulting in different affective outcomes. For Tiina, the bed and the bedroom were places of lasting connection, sticky with the warm memories of the deceased partner. For Mika, the tragedy of the death itself made the bedroom sticky with the negative affects of shock and anguish, occupying the affective atmosphere of the room for months before he could gradually start spending time in the room and sleeping on the bed again.

Intimacy could also linger on in the modes of being at home. For instance, Inka experienced sudden flashbacks of her late partner when watching TV shows they had watched together ('I wish Tepa could see this!'). Aaro, in turn, explained how he sometimes caught himself waiting for his late partner to return home in the evening, only to remember that 'he is no longer coming home'. The intimacy of this kind can be understood as a type of phantom pain following amputation, as an uncontrollable feeling of absence-presence, sensed where the dead partner used to be and belong (see also Krasner, 2004). However, in addition to sudden affective surges, one could also choose to dwell in such affects more purposefully, as Veikko elaborated:

> VEIKKO: 'I have always been such a drama queen, so I kind of even ... enjoyed the feeling of grief for the first year. For instance, I set the table for two, and ... it wasn't at all like I had anticipated Matias to appear there or something like that ... but instead, I wanted to wrap myself in it; that back then it was like this.'

Similar intentional habits of holding on to intimacy can also be seen in Susanna's and Aaro's manner of talking to their deceased partners about their daily lives. Their monologues were conducted in the safety of the home where the affective connection to the lost was strongest and where others would not witness, nor question the sanity of, this intimate habit. However, sometimes it was questioned by the bereaved themselves. Susanna belittled her habit by saying how 'others talk in therapy or somewhere, and I just talk to my dead spouse', showing how affective intimacy with the dead could also be entangled with the affect of shame.

Given the varying relationship types, not all interviewees had access to the personal belongings or living space of their late intimate other.[13] Moreover, even those who had shared a home could already have moved into a new apartment with no spatial memories enhancing intimacy. For them, it was other places and modes of being that were loaded with intense affects. For example, Hannu described how he kept traveling to places where he had traveled together with his late long-distance partner. For him, these were travels on memory lane, creating and maintaining the sense of intimacy. For Saara, who had not lived together with her late partner, the affectively sensed connection with him was not tied to a particular place but to the time of the year when the partner had died, illustrating how not only can certain places but also moments or modes of the world, like seasons, spark post-mortem forms of affective intimacy: 'Sometimes I notice that if the fall comes late, the grief is also postponed. I think it relates to the state of nature.' Veikko, in turn, no longer lived in the city where his late partner had died. Instead, he had relocated to his hometown where he had originally met the partner. Through these changes of location, his intimate connection with the dead partner had also shifted, focusing now on their early moments together, echoed by his current surroundings:

> VEIKKO: 'Every corner and building, even though the town has changed a lot, screams with memories. Nearly every Sunday I go to drink wine in the bar where we met with Matias and I sit on the same chair. And every time I think that well, there he used to sit. And it was a very long time ago.'

The intimacy experienced in these examples resonates with affective geographies and how the interviewees become 'connected to the assemblages of environment' (Dragojlovic, 2015, p. 316) with a particular kind of affective significance attached to the assemblages. As Ana Dragojlovic (2015) has argued, when studying affective geographies, attention must be paid to how people articulate and negotiate this affectivity and what kinds of meanings they attach to certain environments. Here, the intimacy that the interviewees experienced in proximity to certain objects, places, and modes of (being in) the world, is born in connection with the memories and affects attached to the objects, locations, and modes, as well as to their personal processes of meaning-making, being thus a product of entanglement and interaction.

Complicated intimacy and affective impasses

As the previous section shows, the intricacies of affective reactions appearing in relation to, and within, post-mortem forms of affective intimacy cannot fully be separated from the description of such intimacies. Instead, the complexity of affects attached to, or sticky with, such intimacy has already poured through the analysis, showing how intimate ties to the dead can be experienced as comforting, surprising, shameful, draining, and/or affectively complicated in other ways, including an entanglement of positive and negative affects (see also Florczak & Lockie, 2019). For instance, the earlier discussion of Veikko's shifting affective response to a necklace once worn by his dead partner shows how the post-mortem forms of affective intimacy may both be complex and shift through time. Sometimes, however, it ended up being very persistent. In such cases, it was the endurance of intimacy that became difficult to bear. I now expand the analysis by looking at affective impasses in which the affects stuck to intimacy have made the intimacy persistent, sometimes beyond the wishes of the interviewees.

Berlant (2011) uses the term 'impasse' to discuss how people are shaped by the repeating present. To her, 'an impasse is a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure' (Berlant, 2011, p. 199). Here, I explore partner loss as such a space. Being a textbook example of a 'dramatic life event of a forced loss' (ibid), it forces the individual to both adjust to the loss, to hold on to memories of the lost and to reorganize one's life to go forward from the loss. However, grief is not necessarily something that simply goes away or grows smaller with time. Instead, it is something that the bereaved brings along with them in life and gradually learns to live with (Klass et al., 1996; Neimeyer et al., 2006). This simultaneity of holding on and moving on can be hard and the complex affects stuck within both types of action may keep the bereaved in an affective cul-de-sac which Berlant (ibid) describes as moving on, but in the same space, not necessarily knowing what to do with and in such a life.

For instance, how the geographical surroundings constantly reminded Veikko of his late partner and the affective struggle Mika had with the bedroom and the bed, can be considered such impasses. In addition, Mika recounted how his dead partner kept coming back to life in his dreams. He found this persistent dreamstate intimacy confusing, calling the dreams nightmares: 'In some dreams, I have said [to him] that you just can't come back, this is not okay now.' His dreams, and the distressed affective state that followed, represent a simultaneous longing towards and a wish to move forward from the dead partner.

Sometimes, an affective impasse could be formed around and by the same objects that induced the sense of intimacy, especially as time went on. A decade after the loss, Saara said that she kept storing a box of belongings of her deceased partner:

SAARA: 'I have not been able to throw them away for some reason. I don't look at them or anything, but it feels so harsh in a way . . . because . . . It is so unreal to me, there is this element of unreality, that the person is somehow like gone.'

By holding on to her dead partner's belongings, Saara held on to the evidence of a reality where the partner was still alive. To throw the box away would compromise this reality. Her solution to the affectively complex situation was to let the box remain as it was: stored but untouched, reminding but out of sight.

For Reino, who named himself his ex-partner's unofficial widower, an affective impasse around the objects of the ex-partner was constructed differently. Instead of holding on to the presence of such objects, it was their absence that created the impasse. Although they had shared an apartment, and although Reino was named as the primary heir in his ex-partner's will, some of the belongings that Reino had a legal right to inherit were in the possession of his ex-partner's relatives who were unwilling to give them away. This lingering conflict haunted Reino and made him stay affectively attached to the situation in ways that were difficult to escape years after the loss: 'Sometimes it feels it's not really completed yet. It's still in the halfway because my [inherited] objects are there, and I can't get them.'

Despite the negative connotations of the word impasse, I propose that such affective states should not be seen as entirely negative but as demonstrating the inherent complexity of affective intimacy experienced in the context of partner loss. Although affective intimacy can be experienced as comforting, this can also change over time, being sometimes hard to bear or being both wanted and unwanted at the same time. Furthermore, the affective state of an impasse does not entirely stop the personal processes of meaning-making regarding the loss. Despite appearing as repeated or stopped 'holding stations' (Berlant, 2011), the interviewees had found ways of dealing with these impasses and living on with and within them.

Effects on new relationships – challenging the boundaries of monogamy?

A context in which post-mortem forms of affective intimacy clashed with other, more mundane forms of intimacy in a deeply affective way was the process of repartnering. The interviewees' stories revealed that new or existing[14] partners did not always understand the role that post-mortem forms of affective intimacy played in their lives, resulting in complicated affective atmospheres when building and maintaining romantic relationships in the aftermath of loss. I propose that one complicating factor was the co-existing intimacy with two partners (one dead and another alive) which exceeded and disentangled the boundaries and ideals of monogamy.

In what Elizabeth F. Emens (2004) calls 'monogamy's mandate', romantic actions and emotions are directed towards one partner at a time. In addition to exclusivity and commitment, this mandate is described by possessiveness and jealousy and, in its strictest forms, it suggests that people can have only one partner who is 'right' for them (Emens, 2004, pp. 287-292). A death-related partner loss poses a challenge on this ideal: the deceased partner may be outside of material existence but not so much of the affective one. Moreover, contrary to breakups, relationships ending in death have not ended because the emotions have died out. This can result in feeling intimate with two people at the same time, challenging what seems to be the foundation of monogamy. Despite being a common situation for people who have experienced partner loss, there is little cultural guidance on how to navigate such affective landscapes in a monogamous culture. As Saara described, such a navigation could stimulate feelings of guilt:

SAARA: 'I felt guilty for having a new partner, like . . . I felt like, does this mean that I did not love my previous partner? It was a moral echo from something old, something that was not really my, my [thought].'

The guilt of repartnering, or deciding to postpone or to avoid repartnering altogether, has been interpreted to emerge from a wish to remain loyal to the dead partner (Stevens, 2002; Florczak & Lockie, 2019). Building on this idea, I propose that repartnering after partner loss can be considered

sticky with guilt due to the persistence of monogamous ideals, suggesting that staying loyal to the late partner requires abstinence from new relationships. Moreover, the complex emotions around repartnering, or the wish to avoid such actions, may stem not only from guilt or loyalty but also from the affective intimacy lingering on and filling the space left behind by the dead partner. According to this reading, there might simply be no need, or emotional space, for a new relationship. This may have been the case for the interviewees who had not experienced repartnering at the time of the interview. Ghostly traces of intimacy could also guide new desires. For instance, Hannu, who did not have a romantic relationship at the time of the interview, described how men who physically reminded him of his late partner kept catching his attention and interest, thus bridging the gap between past and future intimacies.

> HANNU: 'I always say to my friends that I like dark, brown-eyed older men and . . . Juha was like that, and well . . . I stand by my opinion. *laughter*'

As the state-provided bereavement support was often considered inaccessible for and by LGBTQ people, the support received from private social networks had a highlighted importance in the interviewees' stories. In addition to friends, romantic partners were named as valuable supporters, especially when repartnering took place soon after the loss (Alasuutari, 2020, pp. 170-171). In such cases, the deceased partner could become an integral part of the growing relationship. Rachel Nolan et al. (2019, p. 14) have called such relationships 'triadic', borrowing the vocabulary from a non-monogamous relationship model including three people. Contrary to their findings however, this integration did not always go smoothly. For example, Susanna described how her new partner found it bothersome that she could not compete with someone already dead. Consequently, she brought the deceased partner up continuously in her quarrels with Susanna. Susanna, for her part, had a habit of complaining about the new partner to the deceased partner in her inner monologues ('Couldn't you have sent me a more compatible partner? Was I supposed to learn something from this? What did you want to say to me by sending this person to me?'). In Susanna's case, the conflictual new relationship ended but her continued sense of connection to the dead partner lingered on. Although not directly discussed by Susanna, the jealousy felt by the new partner can be considered to operate as an underlying affective state in her story. Jealousy could appear also when losing an ex-partner to death. In Jarkko's case, the loss renewed an affective connection with an ex-partner, which his current partner failed to understand. Negative affects attached to ex-partners could also end up limiting the possibility of support. As Jarkko explained: 'I could have offered friendly support to [ex-partner's current partner], but he did not want to have much to do with me'.

As the affective intimacy felt with the deceased partner fluctuated over time, so did its role in the new relationship. Sometimes it could be intentionally diminished. Mika explained how he had distanced himself from his late partner by no longer attending a commemorative picnic held annually by their circle of friends in order to make space for his new relationship:

> MIKA: 'I wanted . . . to tone it down a bit, because I am now in a new relationship and . . . my current partner knows all these things and so on, but then it started to become like . . . a bit too highlighted that this thing [the loss] is always returned to and there are like these . . . rituals. [–] Somehow, I felt like the first couple of years it was fine, but now it starts to feel a bit weird already.'

Mika's story reflects how co-existing intimacies with both the dead and the current partner can feel out of place, needing an intervention. Moreover, his reference to time resonates with the discourses on the stages of grief ending in the eventual letting go (Florczak & Lockie, 2019; Granek, 2010). Here, feeling intimate both with the dead and the current partner becomes acceptable as a passing phase but not as something that would go on indefinitely. At this point, the aforementioned spatial connection that Mika had with his late partner also started to change. He continued living in the same apartment that he had shared with the late partner, sharing it now with the new one. The bedroom that had once so strongly echoed with the absence of the late partner was now filled with

a new kind of intimacy. However, Mika highlighted the symbolic importance of changing the bed, showing how the negative affects stuck to certain objects were too strong to overwrite.

Interestingly, co-existing intimacies could pose challenges also when the interviewee had practiced consensual non-monogamy before the loss. Veikko recounted how he had ended the relationship with his lover following the death of his partner, contrary to his lover's wish of becoming a couple. Veikko's sudden decision surprised even himself: 'It was curious, I don't even remember the reason [for ending the relationship]'. However, after this initial reaction, Veikko had had multiple new relationships while his intimate connection with the dead partner remained strong, posing no similar affective complications. I suggest that eventually Veikko's familiarity with non-monogamy was of help when navigating the co-existing intimacies, allowing him to hold on to the deceased partner while building relationships with new ones.

Conclusion

This article illustrates how intimacy is not only something that appears in close relationships with an embodied connection (Maclaren, 2014) or with technologies to connect with the intimate other (Wilson, 2016). By utilizing the logics of queer death studies, I have searched for new theories to rethink intimacy in bereavement and within continuing bonds in norm-challenging and affective ways. The analysis above shows how intimacy is not necessarily cut apart by death but can linger on affectively like phantom pain long after the person that one has been intimate with has left the material world. Admittedly, this kind of intimacy can be considered one-sided compared with intimacies between the living. However, one-sidedness does not make it any less real, important, or enduring. Moreover, it can be considered that the objects, places, and modes of (being in) the world sticky with intense affects participate in the production of such intimacy, as analyzed in this article. This challenges the idea of one-sidedness, showing how material and other-than-human elements can participate in producing post-mortem forms of affective intimacy and maintaining the bereaved people's affective attunements to the world once shared.

Furthermore, the article has brought affective depth in the analysis of LGBTQ people and partner loss which more often has focused on, and further emphasized, disenfranchised grief and minority status. With a new analytical focus, I have been able to analyze how affects and intimacy linger on in LGBTQ people's stories of partner loss and repartnering in multiple queer ways, queering what it means to grieve for, or hold on to, a lost loved one. The interviewees' stories also reveal how post-mortem forms of affective intimacy keep the dead (ex-)partner as a part of one's web of intimate relations in ways that can exceed, and queer, the normative expectations of monogamy.

By becoming attuned to affects, I have deepened and complicated the study of continuing bonds by exploring their affective details and by showing how affective intimacy lingering on in such bonds can persist, fluctuate and interfere with the lives of the living. While it has been debated whether continuing bonds are beneficial for the bereaved or not (Neimeyer et al., 2006; Florczak & Lockie, 2019), I have shown here that such bonds, and the affective intimacy inscribed in them, have simultaneous beneficial and distressing elements that may fluctuate over time and space. Affective intimacy with the dead is therefore a complex, nuanced and constantly evolving phenomenon, bearing in its affective complexity important similarities to the intimacies between the living.

Notes

1. The acronym LGBTQ refers to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, and queers. This acronym was chosen over other more inclusive ones because it reflects the self-identification of the participants (see Table 1) and is thus the most suitable for this study.
2. Studies with such a focus already exist (e.g. Nolan et al., 2019; Bristowe et al., 2018). Moreover, I have produced such an analysis elsewhere (Alasuutari, 2020).
3. Rubin's (1993) original discussion on the charmed circle and the outer limits relates to sexuality. However, I suggest that the analogy is applicable in the wider discussion on intimacies as well.

4. Defining affect is, in itself, a multifaceted and ongoing debate, both within and beyond feminist research traditions (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Here, affect refers to embodied intensities, sensations and attachments that 'catch people up in something that feels like something' (Stewart, 2007, p. 2).
5. It can be argued, following Ara Wilson (2016), that a shared world can also build on a connection maintained by digital communication technologies. However, this is equally impossible in terms of intimacy discussed here.
6. McCarthy and Prokhovnik (2014) wrote in the context of 'caring after death' instead of intimacy per se, but their argument bears important similarities to mine.
7. Both late partners and ex-partners were missed with similar loving affection by the interviewees of this study which further justifies the decision of not separating these experiences from one another. However, a distinction would have been called for had the late ex-partners *not* been intimately close with the interviewees in question.
8. Self-identification regarding gender and sexuality was asked with blank boxes in a background information form filled in by the interviewees with no pre-given options to choose from. The aim was to provide flexibility in categorization and find out what words the interviewees used to describe themselves.
9. Repartnering here refers to new romantic relationships of any length or type, in contrast to studies counting only remarriage or cohabitation (Wu et al., 2014). As the repartnering of the interviewees took various forms, the table aims to shed light on this variation. Current partnership status refers to their status at the time of interviewing.
10. The themes included the description of the lost relationship, the event of the death itself, funeral and other practicalities, grief and support, and reconstructing one's life after the loss (Alasuutari, 2020, p. 45-46). The topics covered in this article were most often discussed in relation to the last two themes.
11. All names mentioned in the interview quotations are pseudonyms.
12. Veikko's shifting affective response to such an intimate object speaks for the inherent complexity related to post-mortem forms of affective intimacy, as I will further discuss in the next section.
13. This was further affected by Finland's normative inheritance law that prioritizes blood relatives. As pointed out by Antu Sorainen (2018), LGBTQ people are vulnerable to the normative legislation, especially as will-writing remains rare among them.
14. One interviewee had a non-monogamous lover at the time of the loss, and one who had lost an ex-partner had already had a new partner, see Table 1.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors of the special issue for giving me valuable feedback on the earlier versions of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

The data collection process was supported by the Juno Doctoral Program in History, Culture and Arts Studies, in the University of Turku Graduate School UTUGS.

Notes on contributor

Varpu Alasuutari is a Postdoctoral Researcher in Gender Studies at the University of Turku, Finland. Her research interests include e.g. affect theory, queer death studies, queer kinship studies and queer cultural memory. Her doctoral research focused on death and loss as a part of queer and trans lives in Finland. She has published on death, bereavement, queer families and queer friendship.

References

Ahmed, S. (2014). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Second Edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Alasuutari, V. (2020). *Death at the End of the Rainbow: Rethinking Queer Kinship, Rituals of Remembrance and the Finnish Culture of Death*. Turku: University of Turku.

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Berlant, L. (1998). Intimacy: A Special Issue. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), pp. 281–288.
Bristowe, K., Marshall, S. & Harding, R. (2016). The Bereavement Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Trans* People Who Have Lost a Partner: A Systematic Review, Thematic Synthesis and Modelling of the Literature. *Palliative Medicine*, 30(8), pp. 730–744.
Dernikos, B.P. (2018). Reviving Ghostly Bodies: Student-Teacher Intimacies as Affective Hauntings. In Juvonen, T. & Kolehmainen, M. (eds.). *Affective Inequalities in Intimate Relationships*. London: Routledge, pp. 218–230.
Doka, K.J. (ed.). (2002). *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges and Strategies for Practice*. Champaign: Research Press.
Dragojlovic, A. (2015). Affective Geographies: Intergenerational Hauntings, Bodily Affectivity and Multiracial Subjectivities. *Subjectivity*, 8(4), pp. 315–334.
Emens, E.F. (2004). Monogamy's Law: Compulsory Monogamy and Polyamorous Existence. *N.Y.U. Review of Law & Social Change*, 29, pp. 277–376.
Florczak, K.L. & Lockie, N. (2019). Losing a Partner: Do Continuing Bonds Bring Solace or Sorrow? *Death Studies*, 43 (5), pp. 281–291.
Freud, S. (1917/1957). Mourning and Melancholia. In Stachey, J. (ed. & trans.). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV*. London: The Hogarth Press.
Granek, L. (2010). Grief as Pathology: The Evolution of Grief Theory in Psychology from Freud to the Present. *History of Psychology*, 13(1), pp. 46–73.
Hammack, P.L., Frost, D.M. & Hughes, S.D. (2018). Queer Intimacies: A New Paradigm for the Study of Relationship Diversity. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 56(4–5), pp. 556–592.
Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), pp. 575–599.
Hesse-Biber, S.N. (2007). The Practice of Feminist In-Depth Interviewing. In Hesse-Biber, S.N. & Leavy, P.L. (eds.). *Feminist Research Practice*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE, pp. 110–148.
Jonsson, A. (2019). Materializing Loss and Facing the Absence-Presence of the Dead. In Holmberg, T., Jonsson A. & Palm, F. (eds.). *Death Matters: Cultural Sociology of Mortal Life*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 25–44.
Kinnunen, T. & Kolehmainen, M. (2019). Touch and Affect: Analysing the Archive of Touch Biographies. *Body & Society*, 25(1), pp. 29–56.
Klass, D., Silverman, P.R. & Nickman, S. (1996). *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis.
Kolehmainen, M. & Juvonen, T. (2018). Introduction: Thinking with and through Affective Inequalities. In Juvonen, T. & Kolehmainen, M. (eds.). *Affective Inequalities in Intimate Relationships*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–15.
Krasner, J. (2004). Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs: Literary Portrayals of Embodied Grief. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 119(2), pp. 218–232.
Leavy, P.L. (2007). The Feminist Practice of Content Analysis. In Hesse-Biber, S.N. & Leavy, P.L. (eds.). *Feminist Research Practice*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE, pp. 222–248.
Lykke, N. (2018). When Death Cuts Apart: On Affective Difference, Compassionate Companionship and Lesbian Widowhood. In Juvonen, T. & Kolehmainen, M. (eds.). *Affective Inequalities in Intimate Relationships*. London: Routledge, pp- 109–123.
Maclaren, K. (2014). Intimacy and Embodiment: An Introduction. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 13, pp. 55–64.
Maddrell, A. & Sidaway, J.D. (2010). Introduction: Bringing a Spatial Lens to Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance. In Maddrell, A. & Sidaway, J.D. (eds.). *Deathscapes: Spaces for Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance*. Amsterdam: Taylor & Francis, pp. 1–16.
McCarthy, J.R. & Prokhovnik, R. (2014). Embodied Relationality and Caring after Death. *Body & Society*, 20(2), pp. 18–43.
McNutt, B. & Yakushko, O. (2013). Disenfranchised Grief Among Lesbian and Gay Bereaved Individuals. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 7(1), pp. 87–116.
Nolan, R., Kirkland, C. & Davis, R. (2019). LGBT* After Loss: A Mixed-Method Analysis on the Effect of Partner Bereavement on Interpersonal Relationships and Subsequent Partnerships. *OMEGA: Journal of Death and Dying*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0030222819831524
Povinelli, E. (2002). Notes on Gridlock: Genealogy, Intimacy, Sexuality. *Public Culture*, 14(1), pp. 215–238.
Radomska, M., Mehrabi, T. & Lykke, N. (2019). Queer Death Studies: Coming to Terms with Death, Dying and Mourning Differently. An Introduction. *Kvinder, Køn og Forskning*, 28(3–4), pp. 3–11.
Radomska, M., Mehrabi, T. & Lykke, N. (2020). Queer Death Studies: Death, Dying and Mourning from a Queerfeminist Perspective. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 35(104), pp. 81–100.
Rubin, G. (1993). Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality. In Abelove, H., Barale, M.A. & Halperin, D.M. (eds.). *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 3–44.
Seigworth, G.J. & Gregg, M. (2010). An Inventory of Shimmers. In Gregg M. & Seigworth, G.J. (eds.). *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 1–25.

Sorainen, A. (2018). How the Inheritance System Thinks? Queering Kinship, Gender and Care in the Legal Sphere. In Agha, P. (ed.). *Law, Politics, and Gender Binary*. London: Routledge, pp. 81–103.

Steffen, E. & Coyle, A. (2011). Sense of Presence Experiences and Meaning-Making in Bereavement: A Qualitative Analysis. *Death Studies*, 35(7), pp. 579–609.

Stevens, N. (2002). Re-Engaging: New Partnerships in Late-Life Widowhood. *Ageing International*, 27(4), pp. 27–42.

Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Sturken, M. (1997). *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Valentine, C. (2008). *Bereavement Narratives: Continuing Bonds in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Routledge.

Wilson, A. (2016). The Infrastructure of Intimacy. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41(2), pp. 247–280.

Wu, Z., Schimmele, C.M. & Ouellet, N. (2014). Repartnering after Widowhood. *Journals of Gerontology*, 70(3), pp. 496–507.