

**THE POLITICS AND INTERSECTIONS OF COVID-19:  
Critical Perspectives from Gender Studies  
Online Talk Series**

Karlstad University, Sweden  
Center for Gender Studies

23rd of September 2020  
and 28th of October 2020



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For questions and registering, email: [luca.tainio@kau.se](mailto:luca.tainio@kau.se)

## Programme

	DAY 1 (23rd September)	DAY 2 (28th October)
Welcome and introductions 09.00 - 09.15	Sebastian Mohr, Tara Mehrabi	Tara Mehrabi, Sebastian Mohr
Session 1 09.15 - 10.45	Max Schnepf, Ursula Probst: Thinking Sex in Times of Corona: Ambivalent intimacies and future desires	Sonia Wong: The New Normal: Rethinking the Everyday in Uncertain Times
	Katarzyna Wojnicka: What's masculinity got to do with it? The COVID-19 pandemic, men and care	Catherine Earl; Nguyen Thi Hong-Xoan; Greeni Maheswari: Normalising gendered inequalities in post-COVID-19 Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Session 2 11.00 - 12.30	Erol Saglam: "IT IS ALL A BIG HOAX, MAN!" Conspiracy Theories, Masculinities, and Global Health Crisis at a Glance	R. Lucas Platero and Miguel A. López-Sáez: Psycho-social impact of the State of Alarm in Spain on LGTQBA+ adolescents
	Sharmila Parmanand: The dangers of masculinity contests in a time of pandemic	Mari Greenfield: Queer birth during Covid-19 in the UK
Lunch 12.30 - 13.30		
Session 3 13.30 - 15.00	Mara Pieri: When vulnerability got mainstream: reading the pandemic through disability and illness	Rebecca Irons: Virus and Vegetables: Peruvian Market Women, COVID-19, and Gender Segregated Quarantine
	Alice L. Pacher and Hirayama Maki: Impact of COVID-19 on Sexuality in Japan	Sreya Banerjea: Intersecting Vulnerabilities of Indian Migrant Sex Workers: A Gender Perspective
Session 4 15.15 - 16.45	María Florencia Blanco Esmoris and Nemesia Hijós: The layers of inequality:	Francesca Ammaturo and Olimpia Burchiellaro: Queering the quarantine: Space,

	Bodies, gender and daily life in Argentina during the pandemic	place and personhood at the queer house party
	Magali N. Alloatti: Gender, racial and social class inequalities in Brazil. An intersectional approach on domestic work amid the Covid-19 pandemic	Tunay Altay: Claiming Cyberqueer Spaces in Times of COVID-19: Digital Clubbing, Queer Solidarities, and Turkey's Club Coweed
Closing words 16.45 - 17.00	Sebastian Mohr, Tara Mehrabi	Tara Mehrabi, Sebastian Mohr

## **ABSTRACTS**

### **DAY 1 - 23rd September, 2020**

#### **Session 1**

**9.15 - 10.45**

#### **Thinking Sex in Times of Corona: Ambivalent intimacies and future desires**

Max Schnepf, Ursula Probst

Over 30 years ago, Gayle Rubin argued in her seminal essay “Thinking Sex” that “sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress” (1984, 143). As the COVID-19 pandemic is expanding across the globe, her words gain new urgency. The presence of the coronavirus among us and the measures to contain its spread raise new questions about how we engage with one another, rendering sex and physical intimacy highly ambivalent issues once again. On the one hand, normative ideas about monogamous coupledom, the heterosexual family and the home as a safe place resurface in discourses about solidarity and the enforcement of social distancing. The re-moralization of non-normative sex particularly affects already marginalized groups such as sex workers and queers. On the other hand, the margins also constitute a site of hope and creativity, where new forms and conceptions of intimacy emerge, and community care is practiced to imagine and enact alternative futures.

Ursula has conducted ethnographic fieldwork about racialized and sexualized constructions of “Eastern European” bodies in Berlin’s sex industry, while Max is preparing a project about the medical HIV-prophylaxis PrEP and how it transforms intimate encounters between gay men in Berlin. Drawing on our respective research projects, we engage in a conversation about how to think sex in times of corona and what queer and feminist thinking in anthropology has to offer for an analysis of the current circumstances. Treating the ambivalence of sex in times of corona with special respect, we pose the following questions: How do the heteronormative underpinnings of quarantine affect us in our everyday lives but also in our fantasies and desires? How are sex and physical intimacy moralized, but also creatively reinvented nowadays? And what kind of socialities and imaginations of the future emerge under the present situation?

#### **What’s masculinity got to do with it? The COVID-19 pandemic, men and care**

Katarzyna Wojnicka

The early data from several countries regarding gender implications of COVID-19 suggest that men are more likely to die as an effect of infection [Purdie et al. 2020]. This has been explained by several biological factors, which I will not discuss, as well as behavioral and life-style measures characterized mostly for men, such as higher rates of smoking among male populations (especially in China) or certain travelling styles that expose men to contact with larger groups of unknown people [EIGE 2019]. On the other hand, several ad hoc analyses that have focused on gendered aspects of the crisis suggest that while more men may die due to the virus, women are more exposed to side effects of the pandemic [Wenham 2020]. They are the majority of health care workers, they are more burdened with care obligations in the family, and they are more likely to become victims of domestic violence, the levels of which have increased rapidly since social

distancing measures have been introduced. What has not been widely discussed however, is the analysis of relationships between men's responses to the crisis linked to (a lack of) care activities and its connection to masculinities models that are still persistent in (European) societies. In this paper I use a model of care defined as a) self-care, b) care for others, and c) care for one's society [Engster 2005] in order to analyse how certain masculine behaviors, rooted in the socially constructed gender constructs, resonate with the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Session 2

11.00 - 12.30

### **“IT IS ALL A BIG HOAX, MAN!” Conspiracy Theories, Masculinities, and Global Health Crisis at a Glance**

Erol Saglam

Since the beginning of 2020, unprecedented socio-economic consequences of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have been felt across the world. Both the governmental measures and the reactions to these measures implemented in each setting have displayed considerable degrees of difference regarding how social lives are to be re-organised in the face of this seemingly global phenomenon. Aggravating of existing inequalities alongside structural inequalities and racism, the process has also revealed its gendered reverberations. Various preliminary reports from public bodies in the US, Italy, and China indicate that the ongoing pandemic affects men more as they get infected, hospitalised, and killed at significantly higher ratios than women. Even though medical research often underlines the robustness of female immunity vis-à-vis that of men, it also hints the possibility of social factors involved, such how men uphold more cynical views that lead them to often downplay the severity of the issue at hand, engage in more (socio-epidemiologically) risky behaviour, and circulate conspiracy theories to socially spread narratives that undermine the efficacy of public health directives. Combining the findings of previous ethnographic research on masculinities with current statistical data and reports, this seminar explores the prevalence of conspiracy theories among men to understand the gendered reverberations of COVID-19 through a comparative analysis. I particularly aim to understand how the circulation of conspiracy theories around the origin, spread, and impacts, and containment of viruses generates socio-political and corporeal implications in gendered ways in Germany, Turkey, and the US. I delineate conspiracy theories as narratives striving to reveal the “secret machinations” behind readily visible forms (e.g., pandemic being a “bioweapon” to rule the world or consequence of “the planned 5G technology”). Exploring how medical arguments and instructions are challenged despite the severity of the implications for public health, I focus on how men circulate conspiratorial narratives to question the authenticity of the pandemic, to undermine governmental policies, and to downplay its potentially fatal effects. Unlike other psychological-philosophical studies, however, I do not approach conspiracy theories simply through their untruthful qualities or as reflections of the narrators' “inability to grasp a well-connected world”. I rather explore conspiracy theories as social practices through which men come to forge themselves as knowing subjects in a sociality, approximate potency, and engender socio-political effects.

## **The dangers of masculinity contests in a time of pandemic**

Sharmila Parmanand

Many compelling arguments have been made against authoritarian approaches during pandemics and in favor of democratic engagement and collective civic efforts. I contribute to the conversation on the politics of public health emergencies by using a feminist lens to examine the performance of masculinity in several national leaders' responses to COVID-19 and suggest the ways in which this may structure the public conversation and the possibilities for action. Masculinity in this case is not meant as essentialist or possessive. It is performative, or something speakers enact or do, often with consistency and repetition, and not something they inherently 'are'. Masculinist political performances provide a framework for interaction between leaders and their publics in terms of mobilising support for specific projects, constructing heroes and villains, and influencing how people think and act in a pandemic. Populist leaders such as United States President Donald Trump, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who are known for their bravado, coarse language, and aggressive political styles, responded to initial reports about COVID-19 with confidence and denialism. Their responses evolved as death tolls rose and public pressure mounted. Trump and Duterte have since adjusted their rhetoric and implemented stronger measures to address COVID, with Trump seeking to reverse them shortly after enacting them. I also look at the differences and shifts in the kind of masculinities they perform. In particular, I look at their feminisation of critics and medical experts, through accusations of cowardice and hysteria; ritualistic performance of male strength through public gestures such as handshakes and disavowing masks; deployment of war metaphors to describe the pandemic and how this has enabled a militarised lockdown in the Philippines and the vilification of foreign enemies (China and immigrants) in the US; cooptation of the language of freedom to reject public health measures; and the process by which they represent and construct their audiences. These are contrasted with more caring, transparent and technocratic approaches of other leaders.

This is a blog post version of my work thus far, and I am currently working on an expanded version, which I would also be happy to share:

<https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2020/04/18/the-dangers-of-masculinity-contests-in-a-time-of-pandemic/>

### Session 3

13.30 - 15.00

## **When vulnerability got mainstream: reading the pandemic through disability and illness**

Mara Pieri

At the beginning of the pandemic, when millions of people were forced to stay at home, work from there, and face the threat of illness, it seemed like everyone was experiencing conditions similar to the ones that people with disabilities and chronic illness live in their everyday. As the situation advanced, however, it became clear that the dominant narratives were going to another direction. In this presentation, I propose a discussion of three of these mainstream narratives through the lens of feminist disability studies and crip theory, that reflect on bodily vulnerability and able-bodiedness as a system of power.

In the first place, I will observe how public discourses developed the idea of fragility in the dichotomy health/illness. In this supposed mainstream state of vulnerability, some lives were more disposable than others: age and pre-existing health conditions became crucial elements of inequality.

In the second place, I will discuss the discourses on accessibility and the sudden advent of working-from-home (WFH). The WFH rethoric contributed to exacerbate the pre-existing inequalities based on gender, age, and, once again, able-bodiedness in access to work, working hours, and equal pay. A closer reading on the debate on accessibility can offer interesting hints to understand the broader context of these changes.

Finally, forced isolation showed the importance of interdependence in networks of care, a topic at the centre of critical disability studies.

The reflection aims at evidencing how the narratives of universalism promoted with slogans such as "We're all in this together" hid profound inequalities and difficulties. Together with gender, sexuality, race, and age, illness and disability play a crucial role in determining the possibilities of survival through the crisis, not only for the bodily vulnerability suddenly exposed to a concrete threat, but also because of the material conditions of life they entail. Because of this, the knowledge produced from a place of vulnerability can show interesting elements to better understand the challenges of this pandemic through an intersectional perspective.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on Sexuality in Japan**

Alice L. Pacher and Hirayama Maki

The outbreak of COVID-19 has a significant impact on the well-being of individuals but little is known how COVID-19 influence sexual behavior and consciousness.

This presentation aims to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on sexuality among Japanese men and women. Japanese contemporary society is characterized by male-centered sexuality, developed sex industry, large gap in wages between men and women, poverty among single mothers and sexless relationships and marriages. Our aim is to find out, how the Pandemic influence the gender perspective, especially on the sexual behavior and consciousness among Japanese people. After an overview of recent trends in Japanese Sexuality, this presentation will show a result based on an online questionnaire, conducted by Hirayama and Pacher, from end of May to June 2020. It will emphasize, how the pandemic had an impact on intimacy, and the gender order in couple relationship, and on sexuality among married and un-married. This outcome will be introduced with an analysis on gender and age differences and we want to highlight the social consequences on sexuality during and after the pandemic. At the end of the presentation, we want to give a brief comparison between western and Japanese societies to help us to give us a better understanding of how COVID-19 effects sexuality in different societies.

## Session 4

15.15 - 16.45

### **The layers of inequality: Bodies, gender and daily life in Argentina during the pandemic**

María Florencia Blanco Esmoris and Nemesia Hijós

This seminar explores the inequalities in Argentina according to the unfolding of daily life during the pandemic caused by COVID-19. In particular, we focus on the house and the body as the protagonist of isolation. We analyze gender roles, inequalities, symbolic violences and the complexity of conciliating time and space during the local and mandatory confinement. This global pandemic does not affect everyone equally. In Argentina, the #StayAtHome motto exposed the boundaries of people's living conditions. For some, it is an overwhelming invitation that appears in the form of tips on social networks, under a performance command. Productivity and self-governance intersect with the fear of getting fat or “losing physical shape” as undesirable effects of quarantine. For others, this is not a possibility because confinement is experienced as a survival odyssey. In this context, not all the bodies are the same and, as we present, not everyone has the opportunity to undergo the lockdown. This is especially important if we take into account that Latin America is the most unequal continent in the world, a paradox that is peculiarly expressed in Argentina. We present statistical material and ethnographic outcomes of these experiences in Buenos Aires. Our seminar is crossed by two dimensions: inequality and gender. The program is organized around three major themes: 1) Bodies, capitalism and the culture of performance; 2) Housing: between intimacy and work tasks; and 3) Uneven privileges: solidarities and individualisms. For this, we will focus on fieldwork results from our own individual researches: the one linked to the body and sport practices is derived from the work of Nemesia Hijós with runners and amateur athletes in training groups, and the other referring to the house and ways of living in Haedo (Province of Buenos Aires) is based on María Florencia Blanco Esmoris study.

### **Gender, racial and social class inequalities in Brazil. An intersectional approach on domestic work amid the Covid-19 pandemic.**

Magali N. Alloatti

The Covid-19 pandemic has pushed forward the discussion on paid and unpaid domestic and care work across the world. In Brazil, the current situation has unveiled long-term social fractures, among them the vulnerability of female domestic workers. It is in the intersection of gender, race, class, and work that we must explore how and in which ways preexisting inequality is being exacerbated. Using secondary quantitative and qualitative data, this presentation explores the complexity of this case. Firstly, I outline some characteristics of domestic work in Brazil: a feminized activity with high rates of informality and vulnerability. Its history and legal regulations are enrooted in Brazil's history of slavery, social class distinction and gender relations. Secondly, this activity is mostly occupied by Black women from low-income groups. Thus, I explore important aspects of this population: i) they are overrepresented in single-headed families; ii) are the main economic sustain of poor households and the recipients of cash transfer welfare; iii) they perform more care and domestic unpaid work than man; iv) are the main victims of domestic violence and femicide. Lastly, I examine the consequences of the pandemic and social distancing through the intersection of these dimensions for female domestic workers. Among those working informally, some continue this activity in imposed unfavorable conditions by employers, but most

have lost their job. Both groups lack legal and institutional support. Those with formal jobs, continue working considered ‘essential workers’ in some major cities of Brazil, exposing themselves and their families. In this scenario, enormous immediate and long-term negative effects are to increase intergenerational poverty. This contributes to the need for intersectional approaches to uncover the reproduction of structural inequalities, while justifies new economic and social paradigms.

## **DAY 2 - 28th October, 2020**

### Session 1

9.15 - 10.45

#### **The New Normal: Rethinking the Everyday in Uncertain Times**

Sonia Wong

Hong Kong has been through a tough and turbulent year. Amidst the panic and casualties, the suspension of the "normal" under political instability followed by the COVID-19 pandemic is exposing many of the foundations of our society, offering us a unique opportunity to rethink our everyday life - from personal priority, family relations, work arrangements to more general notions of gender, governance, and freedom. Are we finding new ways of being together with each other and ourselves?

#### **Normalising gendered inequalities in post-COVID-19 Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam**

Catherine Earl; Nguyen Thi Hong-Xoan; Greeni Maheswari

On 10 April 2020, the Vietnamese Government announced a package of VND 62.000 billion (US\$2.7 billion) to support vulnerable groups seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including self-employed, migrants and women. But recovery measures may ingrain gender inequalities in patriarchal Vietnam and further weaken women's economic autonomy. Issues of economic insecurity, underemployment and job loss compounded by COVID-19 are not gender neutral. Significantly more women (44%) than men (30%) work in the sectors most affected by COVID-19 and women are particularly affected by closures of informal, small and medium businesses due to social distancing. Poor access to finance compromises restarting businesses. While more girls participate in education than boys, girls do not realise comparable benefits of education. On average women earn 81.1% of men's incomes, but the gender pay gap among university educated workers is stark at 19.7% and this contrasts with the pay gap for unskilled workers of around 1%. Women and girls with disability face additional barriers stemming from economic and social dependence as well as stereotyping and stigma. Poor health and age-related disability among older manual labourers may compound old age poverty as age pension rates are low and do not provide adequate incomes from relatively young mandatory retirement ages of 55 for women and 60 for men. Ethnicity intersects with gender and age inequalities and migration status shapes economic (in)security and compounds patriarchal norms. This paper draws on current longitudinal qualitative research among unskilled and highly qualified women in Ho Chi Minh City. Taking a postfeminist approach, we analyse, firstly, micro-entrepreneurs restarting their informal

businesses as online goods and services, and secondly, recent graduates launching careers in professional services during COVID-19 recovery. We explore how social inequalities structure the current crisis and how the crisis will come to shape social inequalities in the future.

## Session 2

11.00 - 12.30

### **Psycho-social impact of the State of Alarm in Spain on LGTBQA+ adolescents**

R. Lucas Platero and Miguel A. López-Sáez

Having access to accurate information about the psycho-social impacts of the state of alarm on the LGTBQA+ population in Spain can be essential for the provision of effective health care and the promotion of public policies in accordance. We must consider that LGTBQA+ people are subjected in their daily lives to situations that range from more subtle violence to more hostile ones, with intersectional consequences. There is solid scientific evidence in this area, and a theoretical background has been created based on these daily stressors under the nomenclature "minority stress" (Meyer & Frost, 2013). In the precise moment of crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic, these stressors do not disappear and also put LGTBQA+ people in Spain in a situation of unrest to cope with the situation, specially those whose lives are at the crossroads of multiple inequalities. Some of the youth have had to return to their homes and family neighborhoods, where they have to be in the closet; others cannot access their treatments (hormonal, retroviral, etc.), others do not have support networks to turn to (friends, family, communities), others go through previous complicated situations to which one more complication is added. All these situations generate an increase in risk factors that can lead to greater anxiety, depression, in some cases to substance consumption, and suicidal thoughts. In our research, we obtained 2832 questioners of LGTBQA+ participants, of which 93 were youth under 18, showing six relevant factors concerning their psychosocial health: decrease in their positive social interactions; increase in their negative social interactions; increase in distress linked to the uncertainly situations experienced; search of coping mechanisms; lack of specific attention to sexuality at their schools, and lastly, some have seen their long-awaited gender recognition or access to treatments in pause due to the State of Alarm ruled by the Spanish Government.

### **Queer birth during Covid-19 in the UK**

Mari Greenfield

#### Background

The global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic concerns all people, but has a specific extra effect on those who are expecting a baby during this time. The advice in the UK changed rapidly, with 14 different sets of national guidance issued within one month. Individual NHS Trusts released different guidance relating to the withdrawal of homebirth services, the closure of birth centres, restrictions on the number of birth partners (if any) allowed during labour, and whether any visitors were allowed to visit after birth. With the landscape of maternity care changing so rapidly, research was carried out to provide real time data capture of the lived experiences of expectant families.

#### Methods

An online qualitative survey was carried out over two weeks 10-24 April 2020. The survey was

open to; those in the third trimester of pregnancy, those who had given birth since the beginning of the 'lockdown' period in the UK, and their partners. The survey asked questions about how respondents holistic antenatal experiences had been affected, whether their plans for birth had changed, and how they felt about these changes. It also collected demographic data, including sexual orientation and gender/gender identity.

#### Presentation

Never before has the UK and other high income countries had to face emergency planning in maternity services during a global pandemic. The literature shows that pandemics reinforce inequities within societies. UK perinatal services have been shown to be cis-hetero-normative. This presentation will describe the experiences of lesbian/gay, bisexual, pansexual, non-binary and trans men who were/whose partners were due to give birth during the period from 9th March to 3rd July 2020. The presentation will situate these experiences both within the wider context of all survey respondents, and the wider literature on LGBTQ+ birth.

### Session 3

13.30 - 15.00

#### **Virus and Vegetables: Peruvian Market Women, COVID-19, and Gender Segregated Quarantine**

Rebecca Irons

Gender and public markets have long been intertwined in Peru, and it follows that so too has the Covid-19 pandemic become intimately interwoven with gender and the marketplace. The vast majority of market-sellers are women, and they are often limited to what they can sell: vegetables, fruits, and grains: the 'essentials' (Babb,1991). Scholarship on gender in the Andes has highlighted the fundamental role that market-selling has played in the economic independence and rural-to-urban migration of women, and this kind of work has long been intimately related to women's positions of power and agency within a deeply patriarchal society (Weismantel,2014). However, with the arrival of Covid-19 in Peru, and the global lean towards restricting movement for the purchase of 'essential' items only, the woman-centred space of the market place has taken on a new meaning. Whereas this may once have been seen as a place of female empowerment, the market is now a dangerous viral vector- in May, 79% of Lima market sellers tested positive for Coronavirus (Guardian,2020). Further still, Peru's quarantine policy drove women to the markets en-masse, whilst men sheltered safely at home. Peru was one of only three countries to introduce a gender-segregated quarantine, with men and women allowed out on alternate days. It failed and was withdrawn early due to its spectacular, although unsurprising, failure. Peru discovered, perhaps too late, that women did all the food shopping and consequently overwhelmed the virus-hub markets, causing a total inability to social distance on women's days. Across the world, women engage in unpaid, devalued labour. However this lecture will explore the Peruvian case to discuss how women have arguably been forced to extend this to gendered health labour - shouldering the viral burden to protect men who are more susceptible to infection, and being further burdened themselves in the process.

## **Intersecting Vulnerabilities of Indian Migrant Sex Workers: A Gender Perspective**

Sreya Banerjea

Dark shadows of the Covid-19 pandemic rapidly covered India a few months after the enactment of The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) on December 12, 2019. What does this mean for migrant sex workers who are afraid of losing their homes as they struggle to survive the Covid-19 pandemic? This presentation employs a transnational feminist perspective and offers an intersectional analysis on the social and economic impact of Covid-19 on migrant sex workers in India. I am concerned about the well-being of women, trans and/or queer sex workers whose practical needs are overlooked or insufficiently addressed through government policies and protective measures in the context of this pandemic. I offer critical reflections on the various forms of implicit and explicit violence in the professional and intimate lives of migrant sex workers that are triggered by the coinciding issues of the CAA and the pandemic. These include economic inequities, the possible shift to digital platforms or other methods of engaging in sex work, homelessness, abuse, lack of access to essential resources, deterioration of mental health, etc. First, I explore the ways in which intersecting oppressions of gender, class and sexuality experienced by migrant sex workers have been exacerbated as a result of the conditions formed by the pandemic. Secondly, I look at the extent to which migrant sex workers are included and excluded from government responses to the pandemic. This draws attention to the entrenched legacies of colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy that foster various forms and layers of violence in society, that cause vulnerable populations such as migrant sex workers to become disproportionately exposed to immediate and long-term threats of such global crisis. The third and final aim is to engage with feminist notions and practices of care, healing and 'affect' to think about how they inform sex worker mobilization and coping strategies within their restricted milieus.

### Session 4

15.15 - 16.45

## **Queering the quarantine: Space, place and personhood at the queer house party**

Francesca Ammaturo and Olimpia Burchiellaro

LGBTQI+ spaces have always provided LGBTQI+ communities with forms of intimacy and belonging beyond the heteronormative precincts of everyday life. In the wake of COVID-19, however, new forms of LGBTQI+ sociality, solidarity and community have emerged. These are in response to the social isolation and economic vulnerability engendered by the crisis but have also exposed some of the limitations of 'actual' LGBTQI+ spaces themselves. The 'queer house party', a weekly virtual event which takes place on an online video-sharing platform and attracts around 200-300 participants every Friday night, is one such form of community and place-making which demonstrates the different forms of life that develop in times of crisis. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted at these virtual queer parties with the DJs, performers, participants and activists who populate these spaces, the paper will investigate how LGBTQI+ people navigate virtual worlds during COVID-19 and how these spaces reconfigure participants' relationship to space, place and personhood. In particular, the paper is interested in doing away with deterministic depictions of technology as either our saviour or as evidence of our impending doom, and with understandings of virtual forms of belonging as 'failed intimacies' that disrupt the flows or 'normal life'. At a time in which established flows, certainties and 'normal' experiences of space and time

have been reconfigured, the paper will ethnographically attend to the ‘queerness’ of the virtual and the virtuality of ‘queerness’ in order shed light on the practices of social interaction and intimacy that emerge through LGBTQI+ virtual worlds

### **Claiming Cyberqueer Spaces in Times of COVID-19: Digital Clubbing, Queer Solidarities, and Turkey's Club Coweed**

Tunay Altay

Cyberspace provides shared space for all communities and is particularly suited to the communication needs of marginal groups. This is no less true for LGBTQ+ communities all around the world. In the face of a global pandemic, Club Coweed, an Istanbul-based online queer party group, started hosting weekly events via Zoom on March 28, a week after Turkey's first nation-wide curfew. Since then, Turkey has implemented a series of restrictions on mobility and public gatherings, which affected the music and entertainment sector profoundly. Responding to these challenges, Club Coweed has aimed to support Istanbul's queer performers and offer a cyber queer community for people who are struggling with trauma and loneliness. This seminar interrogates the rising popularity of online queer communities at the time of the pandemic and studies digital platforms as new fleeting spaces for queer intimacies. I employ the literature on queer geographies and spatial ontologies (Morton 1995; Robards et al. 2018; Rodat 2014; Tudor 2012; Wakeford 2002), and I approach to cyberspaces not as fixed ontologies but as elusive, ephemeral and always in the process of becoming. At the confluence of the pandemic, LGBTQ solidarity, and clubbing, I argue that that the digital affordances granted by Zoom, such as anonymity, collectively shared screens, and visual filters, allow participants to claim internet's ‘placelessness’ as a new and ephemeral queer congregation. Therefore, Club Coweed, as a cyberqueer space, allows its participants to explore their sexuality while expressing affective intensities caused by the pandemic.