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GENDER AND SEXUALITIES STUDIES IN DIFFICULT TIMES: UNCERTAIN PRESENTS, COALITIONAL FUTURES

This themed section of *Socioscapes. International Journal of Societies, Politics and Cultures* problematises the sense of crisis as ‘exceptional’, which circulated in the media and political discourses during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. As we resume interrupted conversations in, through and against our ‘business as usual’, as the normative background against which we pause on and press against, we feel a renewed sense of urgency in looking at persistent and enduring inequalities – some long-standing, already endemic, and others exacerbated by the intersecting crises of our times, including and exceeding COVID-19.

The section is also a proposal for making connections between geographies (across countries) and temporalities (across times) to address better ‘liveable’ futures for LGBTQI+ groups and individuals. As queer scholars we want to acknowledge our debt to the ways that queer communities have responded to health crises across the past and into the present. Queer responses stretch across disciplines too, offering new directions for socially engaged humanities and social sciences. Narrative accounts of pandemics and illness provided by queer-feminist scholarship have documented, for example, the impact of HIV/AIDS on LGBTQI+ communities and on women, particularly lesbians, who provided care work in the absence of adequate health care and support networks (see, Sontag 1978, 1988; Sedgwick 1993; Cvetkovich 2000). Then and now, the rhetorical use of the “war(s) against the virus(es)” has been used to justify and gloss over acts

of institutional violence, framed as attacks against the “enemies of the state”. Time and time again these battles and enemies – embodied as contagion, disease and threat – become materialised in and across borders, as (non)citizens are rendered (un)entitled to access to care, tasked with self-managing risk, and becoming culpable in breaching the public with supposedly private issues if they fail to be ‘resilient’. In the early days of the current “health crisis”, coverage pulled towards ostentatious narratives, with “the world being different after this” and this being a “life-changing moment”. Rather than anticipating a post-pandemic future, we ask what can be learned from queering past and present “crises” and “pandemics”, as an ongoing, unfinished project, building on connectedness, as opposed to generational or geographical separateness.

Contributors deploy gender, queer and intersectional approaches to the past-present-future of crisis pandemic times. Conditions of vulnerability are shared by marginalised, oppressed, and under-represented groups – extending to casual and sessional workers, sex workers, care workers, the homeless, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, and people living in contexts of conflict. Contributors were prompted by a series of questions about times of “crises” as seen, felt, lived through from “the margins”, and as expressed and materialised as collective strategies for “living in difficult times”. The section opens with “An ‘Infectious Example’: Early Italian HIV Activism”, with interviews from HIV/AIDS activists and LILA members drawing upon Italian queer and transfeminist autonomous

research centre and archive CRAAAZI-Centro di Ricerca e Archivio Autonomo trans-femminista queer “Alessandro Zijno”. Significantly, Alessandra Cerioli and Diego Scudiero’s testimony from the early years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic represents the first publication on Italian AIDS activism from an insiders’ perspective available in English. Through an analysis of the organisational and intersectional aspects of HIV/AIDS activism in Italy, this pathbreaking contribution sheds light on the development of a queer coalitional politics at the intersection of stigma, relationality, freedom, and desire. [...] In the following essay, *Domande aperte. Albi illustrati e questionamenti di genere ai tempi del COVID-19*, Elena Fierli, Giulia Franchi, Giovanna Lancia, and Sara Marini from the leading Italian association for social promotion SCoSSE build an intersectional and transfeminist approach to analysing gender stereotypes in illustrated books. The article builds on the experiences collected by the authors through workshops based on the publication of their *Fammi capire. Le rappresentazioni dei corpi e delle sessualità nei libri illustrati 0-18*, which sought to centre children’s and adolescents’ bodies, pleasures, and desires against the ruses of cis-heteronormativity within and outside the school doors. This matters during lockdown and school closures, as stressed by the authors, since young people are no longer allowed interactions with peers. Roberta Trapè also focuses on the Italian educational sector in *Gender Equality in Difficult Times: Women’s (In)Visibility in Spaces of Power in Italy’s Response to COVID-19. Education to Foster Equality*. Trapè uses the findings of a pro-gender equality citizenship language-learning project developed at upper secondary school level to dissect male-dominated responses to the pandemic in the press and media. This is framed within the broader persisting gap in the number of women occupying leadership and decision-making roles nationally, including in medical and care work.

In the second group of essays, Indulata Prasad and Sunny Sinha’s essay, *The Increased Precarity of the Provisionally Hypervisible: Experiences of Informal Laborers During India’s Pandemic Lockdown* looks at the 2020 lockdown and its effects on informal laborers in India, as particularly vulnerable to violence, starvation, and death. Prasad and Sinha discuss the lack of policies from the national government versus the “informal

networks of care” these laborers manage to develop. Prasad and Sinha also recount episodes when they were asked to provide support, thus becoming stand-ins for institutional provisioning themselves. In reading such accounts it is important to hear the pressures and failures of such presences in trying to mitigate and act against the consequences of global “crises” felt by marginalised subjects. Kazi Ashraf Uddin explores the social and economic disenfranchisement experienced by India’s hijra community in *Heteronationalistic Necropower: Pandemic Double Disenfranchisement and Alienation of Hijras*. Specifically, Uddin uses the notions of “homonationalism” (Jasbir K. Puar), “bare life” (Giorgio Agamben), and “necropolitics” (Achille Mbembe) to look at how the very possibility of living are severely threatened under the rising “heterosexuality” in times of COVID-19. Reduced access to social and economic resources combined with strengthened moral prejudice against India’s hijras means that recent wins - recognition as third gender and voting rights - are now being put at severe risk. The section closes with an essay by Cara Judea Alhadeff framing the responses to the pandemic within the context of “authoritarian-industrialized capitalism” and environmental destruction. In *Queering the Apocalypse: Climate Chaos and the Ob-scene*, Alhadeff identifies the current crisis in urgency as both a sign and a symptom of social illnesses that are typical of late-capitalist societies in the West. Contrastingly, Alhadeff advocates “queering the Apocalypse” as anti-phallogocentric strategy through which to disrupt the perceived sense of impending disaster and collapse in order to embrace difference as “individual and collective co-creativity [that] necessitates intellectual, aesthetic, infrastructural risk-taking”.

The work of any collection of essays is asynchronous. We all work differently. We think and feel our work in different times, time zones, and languages. In this themed section we bring together a range of queer responses to the time of the pandemic. We highlight repetitions and pressure points while seeking and hoping for change, across and against difficult times.