

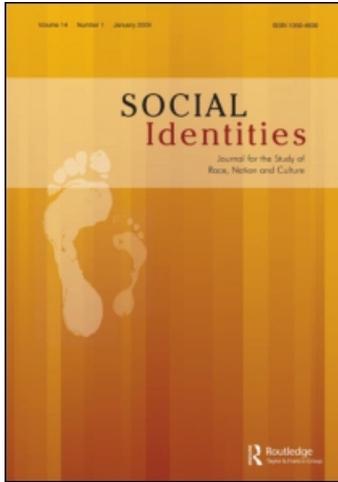
This article was downloaded by: [Jaworski, Katrina]

On: 30 September 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 926983307]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Social Identities

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713445719>

## The author, agency and suicide

Katrina Jaworski<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

Online publication date: 15 September 2010

**To cite this Article** Jaworski, Katrina(2010) 'The author, agency and suicide', Social Identities, 16: 5, 675 – 687

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/13504630.2010.509572

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2010.509572>

## PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## The author, agency and suicide

Katrina Jaworski\*

*Research Fellow, Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia*

*(Received 11 November 2009; final version received 10 May 2010)*

In the essay, ‘What is an Author?’, Michel Foucault contends that ‘the author does not precede the works’. If this is the case, then what happens when the notion of the author as never outside discourse is grafted to suicide? What happens when suicide – most commonly defined as a deliberate taking of one’s life – is read through the idea that the one who is doing the taking does not precede it? Does this not obliterate agency in suicide: the key ingredient necessary to marking the individual as the sole author of their death? This article responds to these questions by first considering what Foucault’s contention might offer to understanding the constitution of agency in the act of suicide. The author then draws on elements of Judith Butler’s work to consider a way of thinking of suicide which furthers Foucault’s contribution. The article argues that positioning suicide as already part of discourse does not undermine the individual as the author of death, or makes the act of taking one’s life any less deliberate. Conclusions are then drawn with a comment on Foucault’s position on death being power’s limit, and what this might mean for understanding suicide.

**Keywords:** suicide; agency; author; performative; relational; Foucault

Suicide is commonly understood as an explicitly individual choice and act that, with some exceptions, takes place in private (Andriessen, 2006; Hasley et al., 2008). As one definition describes, ‘[s]uicide can be defined as the deliberate taking of one’s life’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, p. 3). The problem with this understanding of suicide lies in *how* agency is recognised. There is an assumption that the person intending to carry out the act must come before the act in order for the act to be deliberate. The ‘ontology’ of suicide in this regard resides outside discourse, suspended from contexts and norms that may frame and condition what it might mean to be deliberate. But what if, as Foucault (1984a, pp. 118–119) claims, ‘the author does not precede the works?’ How can someone be the author of their act of suicide if the one who is doing the taking does not precede it? At best, does this not compound the problem of agency even further? At worst, does this not obliterate agency altogether: the key ingredient on which the intelligibility of suicide as individual choice and act depends?

The article responds to the above questions by examining the constitution of intent and agency in the act of suicide. I will argue that the act of suicide can be read as relational, and as such, as never outside discourse. If the act of suicide appears as outside discourse, it is because its intelligibility is already part of discourse. This,

---

\*Email: [katrina.jaworski@unisa.edu.au](mailto:katrina.jaworski@unisa.edu.au)

I will also argue, does not undermine the individual as the author of their death, or makes the taking of one's life any less deliberate. Rather, situating suicide as relational offers a more nuanced understanding of agency, without taking for granted what it is that conditions the ontology of suicide. This is important for, as Foucault (1986, p. 23) contends, '[w]e do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another'.

To pursue the argument, I will begin by considering what Foucault's (1984a) approach to author and authorship offers to understanding intent and agency in the act of suicide. I will then draw on elements of Judith Butler's work on performative and performativity to theoretically explore a way of thinking of suicide, which furthers Foucault's contribution. I will discuss coronial inquest practices to make a case. Finally, I will close with a comment on Foucault's position on death being power's limit and what this might mean for understanding the intelligibility of suicide. Throughout the analysis, I do not examine in detail differences between suicidal outcomes. I also do not assume that there must always be a specific outcome for it to count as suicidal and intentional. Instead, my aim is to unpack heuristically *how* agency is epistemologically configured in the very idea of someone choosing to take their life.

### **Suicide as explicitly individual and deliberate**

Let me return to the definition introduced earlier. Suicide can be defined as 'the deliberate taking of one's life' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, p. 3).<sup>1</sup> In this manner, suicide is situated as an explicitly individual act where the individual, as the author *of* the act, is responsible *for* the act. There is an agent behind the act, recognised as being the one who decides *on* the act. At the centre of the act stands an individual, to whom the decision to die belongs. As such, the deliberate choice decided by the agent appears to be determined largely by the activities of a disembodied mind. Yet suicide is an explicitly individual act not because a person is automatically responsible, but because they are invoked *as* being responsible. By having responsibility *attributed to them*, individuals are situated as the origin of the deliberate intention to suicide. At the same time, suicide is marked as a 'doing' constituted by the *taking* of life that expresses an outcome. The outcome, however, is not made clear by the definition – other than that there must be, or will be, an outcome as a sign of the taking of one's life. What is made clear is that the intention behind such an activity must be deliberate in order to have an outcome recognized as suicide.

For suicide to be defined as the deliberate taking requires a vehicle or a medium. Although this particular element is not directly named, it is there in order for the taking of life to occur. It is there even if the taking of life appears to be largely marked by what the disembodied mind decides. In other words, the medium or more specifically a body is the reference point through which the doing of suicide can be identified. It provides a point of origin as the basis for determining the material, tangible existence of suicidal intent and outcome. Without the body, intent cannot be identified with certainty, making suicide difficult to determine, particularly in the legal sense (Hallam, Hockey, & Howarth, 1999). As a *site* of activity to which suicide can be attributed, or a surface yielding its material signs, the body appears to exist as

neutral, stable and self-evident, even though the inscriptions it might bear signify a lack of stability and order in relation to life and living. It is an inert material basis for the act of suicide, divorced from discourse and culture. As such, the suicided body does not need direct naming. Such existence can be summed up as an absent presence.

The definition of suicide I have engaged here offers what can be referred to as conditions of possibility upon which suicide is constituted. Such conditions materialize self-destruction as an intentional and deliberate act of death, one that denotes a wholly contained, obvious phenomenon, which can be distinguished and described. In this sense, suicide refers to an 'event', as Dorothy Smith (1990, p. 141) notes, 'assumed to exist prior to or independent of the process of inquiry'. It can be argued that such conditions constitute the existence of suicide as prediscursive. That is, regardless of the institutional processes which are part of producing any definition, suicide is named as having an *a priori* status. The individual is assumed to be the origin of the intention to die, a reference point for the activities of a disembodied mind filled with agency. This too is presumed to exist prior to any process of interpretation, despite the fact that making such an assumption is already an act of interpretation. This recognition of suicide through interpretation assumes that suicide already exists, and that its existence is outside any contexts. While the naming of suicide requires a body, that body also appears as ontologically secure. It is a neutral, self-evident and stable biological absent presence that yields the evidence of suicide. Yet despite the necessity of the body, it is as if suicide transcends the body. Put simply, suicide is all in the mind.

### Foucault's author and the act of suicide

In the essay, 'What is an Author?', Foucault's (1984a, p. 101) concern lies with the relationship between text and author, and in particular, how the former situates the latter as an antecedent. For Foucault (1984a), the individuality of the author's name is questionable. Rather than claiming that authorship has disappeared, Foucault (1984a, p. 105) argues that authors as individual writers – those who hold *a priori* status – have disappeared. Foucault explains his argument by suggesting that it is necessary to deprive the subject as the originator of discourse precisely so that the subject can be analysed 'as a variable and complex function of discourse' (1984a, p. 118). And in so doing, what is left of the author is a name that serves to represent 'a certain mode of being of discourse' – one which Foucault expresses elsewhere as being constituted via particular practices that 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1997b, p. 49). Thus, instead of doing away with authorship, the traditional idea of it is reversed.

Foucault's (1984a) stance on authorship is significant for it enables a finer understanding of what conditions constitute the author, and in particular, the relationship between knowledge and power. This is because the author's name projects the individual as a coherent source of expression to neutralise the normative yet contradictory workings of power relations in a way that their workings remain foiled (Foucault, 1984a, pp. 108, 113). In a sense, authors are never located outside discourse. If they are prediscursive, then this is only 'if one admits that this prediscursive is still discursive, that is, that they do not specify a thought, or a consciousness, or a group of representations' (Foucault, 1997b, p. 76). Locating

authorship as a mode of discourse allows one to perform two tasks: to 'bring out the conditions of acceptability of a system and follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence' (Foucault, 1997a, p. 54). In other words, one has to identify what conditions constitute a given field of intelligibility through the power-knowledge nexus, and track down the limits that do not constitute what they claim (Butler, 2004a, b). Failure is significant, as it offers room to think of changes which otherwise may not have been possible to envisage.

To graft Foucault's line of thought to suicide, it would seem that the individual does not come before the act of suicide. If suicide is understood as the deliberate taking of one's life, then the individual as the origin for the expression appears to be absent. In this sense, it would appear that the individual is less likely to be the sole author of their death, if an author at all. With this lack of authorship, it seems that the wilfulness to take one's life deliberately is in doubt, since the individual as the source of expressing the act is suspended by something outside them. If a 'taking' is taking of place in the act, then this taking does not belong to the individual and, presumably, the act of death is not theirs, nor the agency required to enable the deliberateness behind the act. If this is the case, then to whom does the act of killing belong? If the taking of life does not belong to the individual who presumably chooses to end their life? To settle for this resolve, only to pose further questions, however, would be a mistake, since Foucault's position can offer more to understanding the constitution of agency in the material act of suicide. To get there, I want to draw on elements of Butler's work on performative and performativity, as it enables a nuanced reading of suicide, through which it possible to gain insights into the macro discursive mechanics of Foucault's contribution to understanding the author and authorship.

### ***Butler theorises performative and performativity***

In her earlier work on sex and gender, Butler (1990, p. 25) re-articulates Nietzsche's view that there is no doer behind expressed deeds, as the doer and the deeds are constituted by expressions themselves, rather than the doer being the original source for constituting the expressions. In this sense, gender as performative is 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance' of sex as the natural and original source of expressing gender rather than being a discursive effect like gender (Butler, 1990, p. 33). According to Butler, the very idea of gender taking on meaning occurs under the cultural compulsion to take on meaning, constituted by processes and practices governed by social and cultural hetero norms (Butler, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 2004a). If one is compelled to take on gender, then it is impossible to theorize the body without meaningful reference to cultural meanings, especially since corporeal enactments 'are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through ... discursive means' (Butler, 1990, p. 136, original emphasis). Thus, the body is 'irreducibly cultural and material at once' (Butler, 2004a, p. 87).

Butler builds on her earlier stance in her later works by contending that performativity is a reiterative and citational practice. There performativity, or the capacity for language to command or produce what it appears to name or describe, is reworked 'as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names' (Butler, 1993, p. 2). For Butler, this means that naming signals

'the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm' (1993, p. 8). This means that gender is repeated and ritualised through actions that precede, constrain and exceed the doer, whether it is through particular bodily gestures, speaking, or being hailed by bodies and actions of others (Butler, 1993, 1997). The trick of power is to make the doer and the deed look like the deed belongs to the doer as the sole author of the deed. Nevertheless, this 'trick', or effect of power, shows that 'discourse has a history that not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages' (Butler, 1993, p. 227). What is important about such conditioning, as Butler articulates more recently, is that it has the 'capacity to alter norms in the course of their citation', which means that 'the very apparatus that seeks to install the norms also works to undermine that very instillation' (Butler, 2004a, pp. 52, 42).

Butler continues to rework and draw on performative and performativity in her work on speech acts. Drawing on Althusser's linguistic notion of interpellation or hailing, Butler (1997) argues that performativity as citationality reiterates and cites the meanings through which subject positions are conferred. That is, '[t]he act of recognition becomes an act of constitution: the address animates the subject into existence' (Butler, 1997, p. 25). For this to happen, however, a subject must recognise the position to which it is called, meaning that interpellation needs authority in its address. The authority of the address is possible, Butler (1997, p. 33) states, because 'of the citational dimension of the speech act, the historicity of convention that exceeds and enables the moment of its enunciation'. Performativity continues to involve the body since speaking is a bodily act, and as such, it cannot occur in isolation, but must always be attempting to communicate itself (Butler, 1997, 2002, 2004a). In being addressed, 'it is not merely the body of the speaker that comes into play: it is the body of the addressee as well' (Butler, 1997, p. 12). In this article, this is especially important for the analysis of suicide for it suggests that performative acts are not singular, nor do they derive their power from a prediscursive subject. Instead, performative acts are bound to the contexts in which they occur, 'implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings' (Butler, 2004a, p. 20). To examine what this might mean in relation to understanding more the author in the act of suicide, I now turn to working heuristically through the idea of suicide as a performative act.

### **Reading suicide as performative and performativity**

Suicide can be read as performative in that it can be seen as a 'doing'. Suicide has a performative representation – a set of repeated bodily acts. These produce the effect of the individual as being the author of taking their own life – as being deliberate in and through the taking. To draw heavily on Butler, suicide is constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results. Across the surfaces of the suicided body, suicide is produced and rendered visible by rituals that condition the deliberateness in the taking of one's life. For the sake of clarity, I will situate these as a set of interrelated imagined 'movie stills', bearing in mind that these may or may not lead to particular outcomes. The taking of life by someone might consist of: a) thinking about suicide; b) imagining possible outcomes; c) writing a note; d) gaining access to specific means to do it; e) estimating what might be lethal, or perhaps what is a culturally and socially 'appropriate' method; f) planning the location of the act; g) performing the actual act, e.g., pulling the trigger or swallowing the pills; and h)

awaiting the loss of consciousness unless it has already happened, providing no one has intervened. In other words, suicide materialises on the basis of these particular rituals and corporeal gestures that bring into existence the taking of one's life. These gestures are bodily acts, already part of the activities of the mind, even if they appear disengaged from the mind.<sup>2</sup>

Yet suicide as performative does not rest with the individual alone. Whether someone lives or dies, different bodies of knowledge and their discursive sites of practice such as coronial inquest findings, medical autopsy reports and/or psychiatric assessments, become part of interpreting whether the outcome is a suicide, and, importantly, if the individual was deliberate in their intentions. From another perspective, is the individual capable of taking their own life, without prior knowledge of something called 'suicide' – knowledge which in turn is shaped by experts, particular concepts, individual experiences and society at large? Linnell Secomb's philosophical work on death as an inter-relational rather than an isolated event highlights the point:

We only become human in our relations with others: we approach our Being through others, adopting their habits, imitating their techniques of living and being, and also learning modes of dying from them. Our 'outmost' experience of dying is founded on a prior experience of the other's death. (Secomb, 1999, p. 114)

The point I am making is that if suicide is interpreted as the deliberate choice to take one's life, then this interpretation itself is possible because of the reiterative and citational power of assumptions that situate the individual as sole author of their act. In this sense, the deliberate in the act of taking one's life can be thought of as reflexive precisely so that it can become individual, and therefore, be deliberate.

To further my point, I want to suggest that it is clear that something other than the individual taking their life already exists. If this were not the case, then patterns of suicide, be they in relation to gender, age, race/ethnicity, or suicide methods, as some instances, could not be documented by the ABS (2004), or understood at a macro level as Durkheim (1951/1897) stipulated more than a century ago. In this sense, suicide can be read as a reiterative and citational practice, made possible through norms, meanings, assumptions, and knowledges identified within existing historical conditions and patterns, through which something about the act can be hailed and understood as a deliberate taking of one's life. For instance, let me consider suicide methods, as methods are particularly important in materializing the act of taking life. In an earlier monograph, the ABS (1994, p. 9) notes that during the period between 1971 and 1998, the most common method was hanging, followed by firearms, car exhaust and substance overdoses. Trends, however, fluctuate over time. While firearm use peaked during the 1970s, hanging appears to have taken over this position 20 years later (ABS, 1994). It also appears to dominate more recently (ABS, 2004). Thus, my argument is that the act of suicide as individual is not novel; and neither are the intentions original, because suicide has a discursive history that conditions the meaning of a particular bodily gesture – a point I return to later.

What then might be said of agency? If much of what constitutes the act resides outside the act, then how can the deliberate taking exist? The issue here, however, is not about attempting to disavow the presence of agency in the act of suicide. Instead, my point is to say that agency has a layered history on which the deliberateness in the

taking depends. What constitutes one's authorship is dependent on something other than the individual without the act ceasing to belong to the individual's choice to self-kill. As Butler (2004b, p. 16) explains, 'Our acts are not self-generated, but conditioned. We are at once acted upon and acting, and our 'responsibility' lies in the juncture between the two'. This is what makes deliberateness, authorship and 'sole' responsibility possible. One can take one's life, and be deliberate about it, precisely because such a taking is shaped by repetitive conditions and prior takings, re-articulated when the taking occurs. Butler (2004a, p. 32) suggests that we come into the world on the condition that the social world is there, which means that we cannot be ourselves without being preceded and exceeded by something other than ourselves. To follow on, we cannot depart from this world, or at least try to, without something paving the way for the taking to take place – which for some leads to death. In this sense, suicide can be read as relational – as never being outside discourse without undermining the individual as the author of the act, or making the act of taking one's life any less deliberate. In so doing, it might enable thinking about what conditions the deliberate in the taking, and the taking itself, who and what is part of the process of interpretation, and whose interests do the interpretations serve. It might also open the possibility that we are not entirely alone even in the course of dying via the act of taking one's own life.

#### **'Finding of inquest': performative speech acts in legal discourses of suicide**

To further explain the case for suicide as relational and never outside discourse, I want to draw on the example of coronial inquests in the Australian state of South Australia. The purpose of an inquest is to determine the cause of death that has occurred due to violent or unusual circumstances (Hassan, 2000). The starting point of an inquest is the evidence of a dead body within a given jurisdiction (Matthews & Forman, 1986). The South Australian Coroners Act 2003, s. 3 stipulates that the '... body of the dead person means the whole, or any part, of the body (whatever its physical state may be)'. In so doing, the Act infers the meaning of the body as biological, and as distinct from the deceased mind or person. The dead body is a vessel, or as Naffine (1999, p. 105) notes in relation to legal theorising, 'mere housing'. This vessel that once housed a living person, however, plays a crucial role in understanding the act of suicide.

Throughout coronial inquests, the dead do not speak. Nevertheless, a form of performative legal speaking on their behalf takes place. Some examples of how the dead are pronounced can be located at the beginning of each 'Finding of Inquest' document.<sup>3</sup> These are as follows:

I, the said Coroner, do find that Anthony Roy Graetz, aged 28 years, late of Loxton-Berri Road, Loxton, died at Loxton on the 3rd day of April, 1997 as a result of traumatic brain damage complicating contact .22 calibre gunshot wound to the midline of the forehead. (Coroner's Court of South Australia, 2000a, Finding of Inquest No. 9, para. 1)

I, the said Coroner, find that, Norman Samuel Dean Ball, aged 35 years, late of 37 Hamley Crescent, Mansfield Park, South Australia, died at Mansfield Park on the 31st day of December 1999 as a result of neck compression from hanging. (Coroner's Court of South Australia, 2001, Finding of Inquest No. 20, para. 1)

I, the said Coroner, find that Mary Brady, aged 64 years, late of Unit 2, 2 Second Avenue, Payneham South, South Australia, died at Payneham South on the 15th of January 2000 as a result of haemorrhagic bronchopneumonia complicating Doxepin overdose. (Coroner's Court of South Australia, 2001, Finding of Inquest No. 13, para. 1)

The above examples illustrate a repetitive and coherent pattern in languaging death. This pattern includes significant details such as name, age and place of residence of the deceased. It also communicates where and when the deceased died, and most importantly, the cause of death. Paraphrasing the results of post-mortem examinations which are included in later parts of summaries, such statements do not invoke suicide directly. Instead, particular bodily inscriptions describe suicide indirectly. A gunshot wound to the forehead, neck compression due to hanging and a haemorrhage as a result of an overdose – each inscribe 'suicide' onto a body, as far as the 'evidence' is read, but onto a person, as far as the coronial finding positions the report sequencing. Here, fields of knowing intersect: a socially 'identified' person, then a scientifically established set of diagnostic marks. Therefore, the interpretation of suicide relies not only on the fact that there is an inscription once etched by the individual who carried the act, but also on the manner in which such an inscription is recognised. While, as Foucault writes, '[t]he body manifests the stigmata of past experience', it is not the actual marks on their own that matter, but rather how by joining in a body the marks 'achieve a sudden expression' (1984b, p. 83). This expression is interpreted on the basis of what is physically inscribed upon the biological surfaces of the body as the point of origin for the act, bearing the mark of suicide. In this sense, as Grosz (1995, p. 35) writes, '[b]odies speak, without necessarily talking, because they become coded with and as signs'. The Coroner's pronouncement encodes the intelligibility of suicide, and in so doing, the individual as the sole author of their act of death.

I want, however, to consider the manner through which deceased bodies are bespoken as performative speech acts – means through which the intelligibility of suicide emerges as never outside discourse. In coronial inquests, the dead cannot respond to the Coroner's hailing, and cannot 'recognise' they are being hailed when the Coroner declares, 'I, the said Coroner, find that'. Instead, the Coroner hails suicide; rendered intelligible by the citing of particular bodily inscriptions, simultaneously declared as the causes and methods of death. Even though the dead cannot 'speak', speaking on their behalf is made possible by coronial law that prescribes and regulates inquest proceedings on the basis of particular procedural rules to which the Coroner's courtroom is bound (Coroners Act, 2003, s. 42). This is how the Coroner's speech act gains power, and why particular statements become legitimate. What is performative about the Coroner's declaration, however, is not founded on any material act of suicide. Rather, suicide is constituted in the act of naming. A Coroner can for instance, and does, pronounce a negative finding: that a given death is not a suicide – or that no finding can be established. Suicide is discursively installed through a tightly controlled linguistic mode of address, mobilized by legal power to name particular forms of corporeal visibility.

The authority of the Coroner's address depends on an already established and reiterated legal convention, bound to the history of its own practice (Murray, 1998, 2000; Waller, 1992). Thus, suicide cannot be named outside of the history of coronial practice – nor can it be named outside the norms and codes which navigate the

interpretation of significant elements. Therefore, the Coroner's hailing does not reside in the Coroner alone; nor is the interpretation of suicide bound to a single hailing, because the sources inciting speaking on behalf of the dead derive from previous speech acts. To draw on Butler's (1997, p. 33) terms again, whether someone responds to being hailed, hailing still "works" in part because of the citational dimension of the speech act, the historicity of convention that exceeds and enables the moment of its enunciation'. My point is that the deceased body is not the only source of determining the individual as the author of their death. As such, authorship itself is dependent on the manner of how an act is interpreted as suicide. In a legal sense, without this interpretation, suicide cannot be qualified, nor the individual as author of their death. Authorship is rendered dependent on something other than the author as the source of agency and intent.

Several issues come to light as a result of what I have argued. First, if understanding suicide is dependent on the intent inscribed on deceased bodies and is made available through the one who speaks on the behalf of the dead, then this can only make sense providing one acknowledges authorship and agency are dependent on 'a language whose historicity exceeds in all directions the history of the speaking subject' (Butler, 1997, p. 28). This, I think, undermines the interpretation of agency and authorship as already independent, and suggests that the former and the latter can be read as relational. Secondly, it is clear that the Coroner's pronouncement encodes and asserts a 'presence': in this case, the presence of a certainty or 'truth', made available via the material and visible conditions of the body. This 'truth', however, is not a factual matter of determining something as true or false, but rather, as Foucault (1997a, p. 50) argues, is based on connections '... that can be identified between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge ... such that a given element of knowledge takes on the effects of power in a given system where it is allocated to a true, probable, uncertain or false element'. By this, I do not mean that there can never be something called 'suicide', or the individual cannot be the deliberate author of their death. What I do mean is that perhaps in constituting truths about deaths such as suicide, even the individual as author, who in most instances dies alone, is *never entirely lonely*. If individuals are truly authors of their own deaths, this can be precisely because as Butler (2009a, para. 19) asserts, 'I think we can lay claim to what is "my own" if there is someone before whom the claim is made and/or a language through which the claim is made legible'. In this sense, the author of the act of suicide cannot precede the act so that they can be the author, and importantly, be deliberate about, and responsible for their taking of life.

### **Foucault and death as power's limit**

Foucault (1978, p. 138) puts forward the view that 'death is power's limit, the moment that escapes it'. Butler (1996, p. 71) disagrees with Foucault's claim by arguing that 'in the maintenance of death and of the dying, power is still at work and that death is and has its own discursive industry'. In relation to suicide, death is not necessarily power's limit, since meanings and assumptions and the processes that are part of making sense of suicide will constitute the 'truth' of suicide. That is, the individual might be 'free' from that which was unbearable in life. Nevertheless, who and what they were *before* death continues to be interpreted and reinterpreted *after* death. As demonstrated briefly, this appears to be the case in relation to coronial

inquests.<sup>4</sup> The fact that an understanding of suicide as an explicitly individual choice and act exists indicates that there is what can be referred to as an ‘afterlife of words’ (Butler, 2005, p. 29) – an afterlife that precedes and exceeds individual deaths and their authors, and produces what can be recognised as ‘truth’. Dead or alive, it may not be possible to be free of operations of power, as a result of the effects such operations materialize. What might be possible, however, is that someone may no longer literally suffer from unbearable circumstances. Nevertheless, this does not curtail the production of truths concerning their deaths, whether true or false, even though as Foucault (2001, p. 212) points out, ‘[i]f there is a break – and there is – it takes place with regard to what surrounds the self’.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps what is needed is further rethinking of *how* the break is constituted, and how this break – as liberating movement and moment by which one is able to grasp the world in face of ceasing who and what they are (Foucault, 2001, pp. 279–280, 282) – constitutes what surrounds the self in the material act of suicide.

My position on understanding suicide as relational, and thereby as never outside discourse and power relations, raises a serious question: is it not possible to be *completely* free of power at least in death, especially if death for some becomes the means of resisting experiences deemed unbearable? I cannot answer this question here, other than to suggest that something about suicide’s intelligibility remains out of reach since the material act tends to take place in private. If this is the case, then there may be a limit to the way power operates, enfolded by what is said and known of suicide and, importantly, what remains unsaid and silenced. To borrow from Agamben (1998, pp. 19–20), it might be useful to consider the possibility of a zone of indistinction: an interstitial threshold where meanings of life and death pass over into each other on a relational and nonrelational basis. In this way, it may not be possible to summon the exact truth about the act of taking one’s life since a passing over signals ambiguity rather than clarity. Yet something of the truth about the act may remain, caught between those who ‘have explanations for everything’, and those who ‘refuse to understand’, and generate explanations which offer so little to those who remain to grieve for, and remember, the dead (Agamben, 2002, p. 13). The task of further rethinking I signalled earlier might involve tracking down the breaking points between what is said and unsaid in wider discourses of suicide to see what these points say of those who no longer can speak, overshadowed by those who continue to speak. Maybe then, as Foucault would have it, knowledge can become ‘a means of surviving by understanding’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 7), precisely because the individual ‘can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself [sic] and solely through his activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him’ (Foucault, 2001, p. 17).

## Conclusion

I want to make a confession. Compelled by Foucault’s (1983, 1997a) instance on not being completely comfortable with certainties, to see them as dangerous rather than bad, I am suspicious of the idea of a subject who, embedded in classical liberal political forms, is deemed self-sufficient and autonomous. My suspicion stems from the fact that, as Andriessen (2006, p. 534) acknowledges, it is impossible to identify fully the intentions of the deceased even after the efforts that go into understanding the complexity of the material act of suicide. Furthermore, my suspicion stems from

what appears to be a taking for granted of the corporeal body in suicide – a body that is present and wired into the activities of the mind rather than existing as an absent presence. This corporeal body, I think, must be acknowledged and recognised as never outside discourse so that the suffering one undergoes in the taking of one's life is not misrecognised, or even worse, unrecognised. Thus, in arguing that suicide – as an explicitly individual act and choice – can be read as relational *my intention* has been to offer a kind of feminist critique, one that wrestles with a masculinist idea of a subject, who, in its self-sufficiency and autonomy, is rendered a-social, and as Butler (2009a, para. 27) highlights, presumes misleadingly that 'any of us can exist outside the condition of dependency'.

To understand the author, authorship and agency in suicide more fully, I think, requires not to do away with ontology in suicide, but rather, to offer what Butler (2009b, pp. 2–3) calls 'a new bodily ontology', through which '[t]he "being" of the body to which this ontology refers is one that is always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations ... that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing'. If something about authorship and agency in suicide is understood not only in relation to the individual, but also in relation to 'something' and 'someone', then perhaps we can avoid more often the taking for granted of epistemological conditions through which our deaths are rendered coherent and legitimate, and importantly, our lives are deemed as worthy of remembering. In the course of remembering, perhaps then we will find ways of altering norms, interrogating the mechanics and effects that contour epistemological landscapes of their materialization. If, as Foucault (1988) claims, knowledge can become a means of surviving by understanding, this might because understanding is never outside recognition, as neither is remembering the authors who no longer abide in the world of the living.

## Notes

1. Legally established as Australia's central statistical authority, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is '... responsible for providing statistical services to all Australian governments, and the community more generally' (ABS, 2006). This responsibility primarily includes collating, analysing and distributing information pertaining to different facets of the Australian society (ABS, 2006). Thus, this definition is significant because it provides the official understanding of suicide in Australia.
2. I have argued this point recently in relation to suicide and gender, see Jaworski (2010a).
3. The production of 'Findings of Inquest' document is prescribed by coronial law: 'The Coroner's Court must, as soon practicable after the completion of an inquest, give its findings in writing setting out as far as has been ascertained the cause and circumstances of the event that was the subject of the inquest' (Coroners Act 2003, s. 38(1)). South Australia is unique in that its Courts Administration Authority makes a large number of finding inquest summaries available to the public online. These contain a substantial amount of detail and include deaths by suicide. Copies of findings are available at: <http://www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/findings/index.html>. The website states that '... these are unofficial copies of the Coroner's findings. They are unsigned and do not bear the seal of the Court. They are provided for information only and should not be represented as official documents' (Courts Administration Authority, South Australia 2006). Although summaries of findings are available to the public, the information nevertheless remains sensitive and thus the names have been masked.
4. For a more in-depth analysis of coronial inquests, see Jaworski (2002).

5. I showcase this point in relation to the representations of Palestinian female suicide bombers in Australian newsprint media (Jaworski, 2010b).

## References

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. (2002). *Remnants of Auschwitz: The witness and the archive*. (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). New York: Zone Books.
- Andriessen, K. (2006). On 'intention' in the definition of suicide. *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior*, 36(5), 533–538.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (1994). *Suicides, Australia 1982–1992, Cat. No. 3309.0*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2004). *Suicides: Recent trends, Australia 1993–2003, Cat. No. 3309.0.55.001*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2006). ABS role and the national statistical system. Retrieved September 17, 2009, from Australian Bureau of Statistics website: <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/4a256353001af3ed4b2562bb00121564/b1042c4ee5af9c71ca256a46008278d9!OpenDocument>
- Butler, J. (1987). Variations on sex and gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault. In S. Benhabib & D. Cornell (Eds.), *Feminism as critique: On the politics of gender* (pp. 128–142). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory [Electronic version]. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519–531.
- Butler, J. (1989). Gendering the body: Beauvoir's philosophical contribution. In A. Garry & M. Pearsall (Eds.), *Women, knowledge and reality: Explorations in feminist philosophy* (pp. 253–262). New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1996). Sexual subversions. In S.J. Hekman (Ed.), *Feminist interpretations of Michel Foucault* (pp. 59–75). University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2002). Afterword. In S. Felman, *The scandal of the speaking body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or seduction in two languages* (pp. 113–123). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Butler, J. (2004a). *Undoing gender*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004b). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London: Verso.
- Butler, J. (2005). On never having learned how to live. *Differences*, 16(3), 27–34.
- Butler, J. (2009a). Antigone's claim: A conversation with Judith Butler. *Theory and Event*, 12(1). Retrieved from [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/)
- Butler, J. (2009b). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* London: Verso.
- Coroner's Court of South Australia. (2000). *Finding of inquest no. 9, Chivell, W.C.* Retrieved September 17, 2009, from Courts Administration Authority, South Australia Web site: [http://www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/findings/findings\\_2000/graetz.finding.htm](http://www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/findings/findings_2000/graetz.finding.htm)
- Coroner's Court of South Australia. (2001a). *Finding of inquest no. 13, Chivell, W.C.* Retrieved September 17, 2009, from Courts Administration Authority, South Australia Web site: [http://www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/findings/findings\\_2001/brady.finding.htm](http://www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/findings/findings_2001/brady.finding.htm)
- Coroner's Court of South Australia. (2001b). *Finding of inquest No. 20, Chivell, W.C.* Retrieved September 17, 2009, from Courts Administration Authority, South Australia Web site: [http://www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/findings/findings\\_2001/ball.finding.htm](http://www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/findings/findings_2001/ball.finding.htm)
- Coroners Act. (2003). Coroners Act 2003, Commonwealth of Australia. (South Australia). Courts Administration Authority, South Australia. (2006). *Coroner's findings*. Retrieved September 17, 2009, from Courts Administration Authority, South Australia Web site: <http://www.courts.sa.gov.au/courts/coroner/index.html>
- Durkheim, E. (1951). *Suicide: A study in sociology*. (A. Spaulding & G. Simpson, Trans.). New York: The Free Press. (Original work published 1897)

- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality, vol. 1*. (R. Hurley, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. (1983). Afterword: The subject and power. In H.L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Eds), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (2nd ed.) (pp. 208–226). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (1984a). What is an author? In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault reader: An introduction to Foucault's thought* (pp. 101–120). London: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. (1984b). Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault reader: An introduction to Foucault's thought* (pp. 76–100). London: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces [Electronic version]. *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22–27.
- Foucault, M. (1988). The minimalist self. In L.D. Kritzman (Ed.), *Politics, philosophy, culture: Interviews and other writings 1977–1984* (pp. 3–16). New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1997a). *The politics of truth*. (S. Lotringer & L. Hochroth, Eds.). New York: Semiotext(e).
- Foucault, M. (1997b). *The archaeology of knowledge*. (A.M. Sheridan Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1972)
- Foucault, M. (2001). *The hermeneutics of the subject: Lectures at the College de France, 1981–1982*. (G. Burchell, Trans.). New York: Picador.
- Grosz, E. (1995). *Space, time and perversion: The politics of bodies*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Hallam, E., Hockey, J., & Howarth, G. (1999). *Beyond the body: Death and social identity*. London: Routledge.
- Hasley, J.P., Ghosh, B., Huggins, J., Bell, M.R., Adler, L.E., & Shroyer, L.W. (2008). A review of 'suicidal intent' within the existing suicide literature. *Journal of Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 38(5), 576–591.
- Hassan, R. (2000). Suicide in Australia. In A. Kellehear (Ed.), *Death and dying in Australia* (pp. 189–206). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Jaworski, K. (2002). Bodily inscriptions and gender in legal discourses of suicide. *Sister in Law*, 6, 168–184.
- Jaworski, K. (2010a). The gender-ing of suicide. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 25(63), 47–61.
- Jaworski, K. (2010b). The male preserve of martyrdom: Palestinian female suicide bombers in Australian newsprint media. *Feminist Media Studies*, 10(2), 119–133.
- Matthews, P., & Forman, J.C. (1986). *Jervis on the office and duties of the Coroners with forms and precedents* (10th ed.). London: Sweet & Maxwell.
- Murray, A. (1998). *Suicide in the middle ages: The violent against themselves, vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Murray, A. (2000). *Suicide in the middle ages: The curse on self-murder vol. 2*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Naffine, N. (1999). 'But a lump of earth'? The legal status of the corpse. In D. Manderson (Ed.), *Courting death: The law of mortality* (pp. 95–110). London: Pluto Press.
- Secomb, L. (1999). Philosophical deaths and feminine finitude. *Mortality*, 4(2), 111–125.
- Smith, D.E. (1990). *The conceptual practices of power: A feminist sociology of knowledge*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Waller, K. (1992). The modern approach to coronial hearings in Australasia. In H. Selby (Ed.), *The aftermath of death* (pp. 1–9). Annandale, NSW: The Federation Press.