

Chapter 10

Suicide, Agency and the Limits of Power¹

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Suicide is commonly understood as an explicitly individual choice and act (Andriessen 2006). As one definition describes: “Suicide can be defined as a deliberate taking of one’s life” (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2004: 3). With some cultural exceptions, this deliberate taking takes place in private. The problem with this understanding lies in how agency is recognized in the material act of suicide. 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 lies outside discourse, suspended from contexts and norms that may frame and condition the idea of a deliberate taking. But what if, as Michel Foucault claimed, “the author does not precede the works” (1984a: 118–19)? How can someone be the author of their 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 element on which the intelligibility of suicide as individual act and choice depends?

In light of these questions, I have two aims in this chapter. One is to examine the epistemological wiring of intent and agency in suicide. The second is to understand further how power shapes the material act of suicide. These aims cover three areas of analysis. First, I will examine what Foucault’s contention offers towards understanding the constitution of agency in the material act of suicide. I will deploy elements of Judith Butler’s work to theorize a way of thinking of suicide that furthers Foucault’s contribution—namely, his take on author and authorship as a site of examining agency in suicide. I will argue that positioning suicide as relational and already part of discourse does not make the act of taking one’s life any less deliberate. Secondly, I will use my argument to rewire a little the conceptual mechanics of Emile Durkheim’s approach to understanding agency in suicide. I will not retheorize Durkheim’s approach to suicide, as this is not my purpose. Instead, I will examine one limit in Durkheim’s work to see what it offers towards understanding agency in suicide. Thirdly, I will return to Foucault

1 This chapter draws on, and continues my earlier work on, suicide and agency, published in *Social Identities*. Once again, I draw on Judith Butler’s work on performativity as a methodological tool. As such, this chapter is another installment in my theorization of agency in suicide. Here, I pay more attention to how power shapes the material act of suicide. For earlier publications see: Jaworski (2003, 2010a, 2010b).

by examining whether death is power's limit, and the implications this has for understanding freedom through suicide.

My intention in this chapter is twofold. One is to rethink suicide as a verb instead of assuming that it is always a noun. If we theoretically re-render suicide as a verb, perhaps we will get closer to understanding whether we can be free when we die. The second is to push at the epistemological limits of conceptualizing suicide. This, I think, will enable us to understand how suicide—as an ontological given—depends on the context in which it becomes a social and cultural reality.

The Deliberate Act of Taking One's Life

I want to return to the definition introduced earlier, namely, suicide as “the deliberate act of taking one's life” (ABS 2004: 3). In this manner, suicide is situated as an explicitly individual act where the individual, as the author of the act, is solely responsible for the act. At the center of the act stands an individual to whom the decision to die belongs. The deliberate decision of the agent appears to be determined largely by the activities of a disembodied mind, and the absent presence of a body, which does the taking of life. The latter is not identified directly, even though it is the necessary site of activity. Yet suicide is an explicitly individual act not because a person is automatically responsible, but because they are hailed as being responsible. By having responsibility *attributed to them*, the individual is situated as the original source of the intention to suicide. At the same time, a “doing,” made apparent by the taking of life that expresses an outcome, marks suicide. It is unclear what the outcome will be, other than there must be one to signify the taking. What is made clear is that the intention behind the taking must be deliberate in order to have the outcome recognized as a suicide.

For suicide to be defined as deliberate taking requires a medium. Although this particular element is not directly named, it is there for the taking of life to occur. 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 to determine the material, tangible existence of suicidal intent and outcome. Without the body, intent cannot be identified with certainty, making suicide difficult to determine (Hallam, Hockey and 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 and self-evident. 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 (Shilling 1993).

By referring to the body as an absent presence, I mean two things. First, the body is not recognized as a valid object relevant to understanding the meaning of suicide, even though the very idea of suicide depends on what lethal signs the fleshy body yields. Secondly, the body is assumed to be self-evident and obvious to the point where it is superfluous to speak of it. It becomes absent in its presence.

This absent presence is conceived via language, through which, as Foucault (2006) wrote, the body disappears because it appears as a transparent medium of activity. It disappears into function, operation and action (Bishop 2010). But this disappearance is dependent on language failing to hail the body's presence directly. This failure is not an inherent feature of language. Rather, it relates to how language is used to render suicide intelligible. Thus, I am concerned with how the body is *interpellated as absent* so that suicide becomes the property of the disembodied mind, filled with agency to do the body's deliberate taking.

What I have explained above can be framed as conditions of possibility upon which suicide is constituted conceptually. The conditions, I am suggesting, are informed by the classical liberal construction of the subject or personhood—one that is deemed as self-sufficient, autonomous, and presumably free to fulfill one's intentions (Butler 1990). Under such conditions suicide materializes as an intentional and deliberate act of death, one that denotes a wholly contained, obvious phenomenon, which can be distinguished and described. It can be argued that such conditions constitute suicide as *prediscursive*: as possessing its own ontology, regardless of the institutional and interpretive processes that contribute towards making sense of suicide. This is important for it frames the individual as the author of their choice to, and act of, suicide. But what if the individual is not the author?

Posing such questions comes with a risk of upsetting established and widely accepted ways of conceptualizing suicide in fields such as sociology and anthropology. The classic work of Emile Durkheim continues to be influential, and attributed to establishing suicide as a social observable fact. While Durkheim recognized suicide as a collective symptom of society, he still assumed the individual to be autonomous to choose suicide, with suicide possessing its own distinct (social) nature. As Durkheim (1897: 44) explained, "the term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result." For Durkheim, this result was not a mere sum total of independent events, but "is itself a new fact *sui generis*, with its own unity, individuality and consequently its own nature—a nature, furthermore, dominantly social" (Durkheim 1897: 46, original emphasis). In this sense, suicide depends on the individual in order to become social. Durkheim (1987) presumed individual authorship is entirely individual even if influenced by social conditions. But what if individual authorship depends on something else other than the individual? More importantly, how can a focus on authorship be a site of examining agency in suicide?

Author and Authorship as a Site of Examining Agency in Suicide

For Foucault, the individuality of the author is questionable. Foucault's concern was with the relationship between text and author, and in particular how the former situates the latter as an antecedent. Rather than claiming that authorship

has disappeared, Foucault suggested that authors as individual writers—those who hold a priori status—have disappeared. Instead, what is left of the author is a name that serves to represent modes of being via particular practices that “systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1997a: 49). Thus, the author’s name projects the individual as a coherent source of expression to neutralize the normative yet contradictory workings of power relations in such a way that their workings remain foiled. In this 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 1997a: 76). This does not do away with authorship, but instead reframes how we ought to think of it in order to be more aware of the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault 1997a).

To graft Foucault’s line of thought to suicide, it would seem that the individual is less likely to be the sole author of their death. With this lack of authorship, it seems that the willfulness to take one’s life deliberately is in doubt, since the individual as the source of expressing the act is missing in action so to speak. If a “taking” is taking 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. To settle for this resolve, 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 more nuanced reading of suicide, through which it is possible to gain insight into the macro discursive mechanics of Foucault’s contribution to understanding the author and authorship, and thereby agency in suicide.

Butler’s Theoretical Approach to Performativity

In her work on sex and gender, Butler (1990: 25) re-articulated 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 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: 33). According to Butler, the very idea of gender taking on meaning occurs under the cultural compulsion to take on meaning, constituted by practices governed by social and cultural hetero norms (Butler 1987, 1988, 1990, 2004a). If one is compelled to take on gender, then it is impossible to theorize the body without meaningful references to cultural meanings, since corporeal bodily material acts make sense through discursive means (Butler 1990). Thus, the body is “cultural and material at once” (Butler 2004a: 87).

Butler (1993) built on this position later by contending that performativity is a reiterative and citational practice through which discourses of sex and gender produce the effects they name. Gender is repeated and ritualized 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, 1997a). 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. This “trick,” or effect of power, shows that discourse has a history that precedes and conditions our actions. This becomes apparent in the way we articulate, and speak of, our actions. What is important about understanding conditioning in such terms is that it has the capacity to change norms in the course of their reiteration and citation. This means that the very discursive “apparatus . . . [that] seeks to install the norms also works to undermine that very installation” (Butler 2004a: 42). The challenge is to work out exactly how the discursive apparatus undermines itself in the course of installing itself. I will not consider this here other than to suggest that such knowledge compels me to take on Foucault’s (1997) task and identify suicide’s conditions of intelligibility so that I can track the limits and breaking points to see what they offer towards rethinking suicide as a verb. With this in mind, I now want to turn to heuristically working through the idea of suicide as a performative act.

Reading Suicide as Performative

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 being the author of taking their own life—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, for example 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 materializes 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.

Curiously, suicide as performative is dependent on material objects. Guns or pills, as some examples, are the means or methods through which suicide is performed. Yet these methods are material *objects* as much as they are *methods* of

suicide. We could not understand the material act of suicide without understanding methods as objects, or *material instruments* that are part of inscribing suicide *on* and *through* the corporeal body. My point is that objects are part of constituting suicide as performative. Objects are part of generating repeated bodily acts; they mold the meaning of corporeal gestures. This suggests that the mind of the individual is engaged with its intentions. This suggestion is acceptable providing we admit that the body is entangled with the intention to take one's own life, and thereby with the ontology of suicide.

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, in particular, whether 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 that in turn is shaped by experts, individual experiences and society at large? It is clear, for instance, that something other than the individual taking their life already exists. If this was not the case, then patterns of suicide, be it in relation to gender, age, race/ethnicity, sexuality, class or suicide methods, could not be documented (ABS 2004), or understood at a macro level as Durkheim (1951/1897) argued 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.

Hailing suicide as a deliberate taking of one's life is not only ever outside modes of knowing and investigating suicide, but also operations of power through which effects are generated. This, I am arguing, depends on Butler's (1997) re-interpretation of Althusser's (1971) linguistic notion of interpellation. Butler (1997) argued that performativity as citational reiterates and cites meanings through which subject positions are conferred. For Butler, "the act of recognition becomes an act of constitution: the address animates the subject into existence" (Butler 1997: 25). For this to happen, a subject must recognize the position to which it is called. This can be difficult in completed suicides because the dead are not in a habit of responding literally. Nevertheless, suicide is still hailed because as Butler (1997: 12) argued, interpellation requires authority in its address, "a venue of power by which its performative effects might be materialized," enabled by history, contexts, knowledges and conventions, which name suicide. Contexts in particular are generated by wider social and cultural understandings of suicide as in the case of gender (Jaworski 2010a). Power lies not only in the moment of articulating meaning about suicide, but also in the context through which suicide is made sense of, based on extant knowledge of what the material act of suicide involves and the extent to which it is intentional.

What then might we say 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 kill themselves. As Butler explained: "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" (2004c: 16). 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: 32) suggested 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 deliberate taking to take place—which for some leads to death. In this sense, it is possible to read suicide 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*.²

Given my earlier emphasis on objects as part of theorizing suicide as performative, I want to return to this to explain further suicide as relational. Drawing on guns as one example, Latour (1999) argued that objects too have agency, by which he means they are part of agency.³ A person cannot kill another without a gun. Nor can a gun alone kill a person. The killing is enabled by the relationship between the two, in the situation and context in which it occurs. Latour argued that agencies "are always presented in an account as *doing* something, transforming some As into Bs through trails with Cs" (2005: 52–3, original emphasis). So if we consider suicide through Latour's lens, the doing of the taking of one's life can be read as transforming some people (A) into suicides (B) through trails with the methods such as guns (C). Therefore, agency for the action lies in the relation between A, B and C. The person uses a gun to do the taking of their life, but the gun also does the taking because the person interacts or uses the gun.

2 My argument raises the question of whether there are possibilities for slippages, disruption and subversion in the citational nature of suicide. I consider this in greater depth in earlier publications, which focuses on gendered disruptions in the production of suicide as a masculinist discourse (Jaworski 2010a, 2014). Lack of space here prevents me from elaborating any further. However, I wish to thank Jocelyn Chua in particular for raising this important issue in my work.

3 I would like to thank Ludek Broz and Ben Sellar for drawing my attention to Bruno Latour's arguments about objects and agency, and directing me to relevant works, and patiently explaining the ontology of objects to initially a very perplexed yet intensely curious listener.

While the point about objects might be obvious, it is difficult to understand it in suicide because action and agency are attributed to humans as sovereign sources of intentions, and somehow these intentions are not seen as affected by objects. As Latour explained: “If action is limited a priori to what ‘intentional,’ ‘meaningful’ humans do, it is hard to see how a hammer, a basket, a door closer, a cat, a rug, a mug, a list or a tag could act.” Understanding the agency of objects is difficult because, as Latour continued to explain, they are deemed to exist “in the domain of ‘material’ ‘causal’ relations, but not in the ‘reflexive’ ‘symbolic’ domain of social relations ...” (2005: 71). Yet suicide as social cannot be understood without objects that affect the particularities of suicide as performance. This is something that undermines Emile Durkheim’s theorization of suicide as social—to which I turn next.

Durkheim’s Approach to Understanding Agency in Suicide

Emile Durkheim’s sociological theorization of suicide did not directly focus on intent or agency. In *Suicide*, Durkheim’s contention was that suicide is a social fact, one that is observable and therefore recognizable. For Durkheim, intent fails to substantiate suicide as observable because “it is too intimate a thing to be more than approximately interpreted by another” (1897: 43). Intent is the property of the individual even if, as Durkheim argued, the individual is never outside the social (1897: 46). Suicide must have “an easily recognizable feature” (Durkheim 1897: 44). This feature is recognized through statistics, which Durkheim regarded as expressions of collective social afflictions (Durkheim 1897: 51). Numbers embody expressions of suicide as social.

I have a problem with Durkheim’s understanding of suicide as a recognizable fact. In making the assumption that suicide can be recognized through numbers, Durkheim assumed that suicide must have its own ontology. This is despite the fact that suicide is the product of collective ideas, social currents and struggles. In this sense, ontology is collapsed into capacity, with functioning acting as a point of reference (Butler 2000). Recognized through suicidal outcomes—which for Durkheim referred to completed suicides only—capacity establishes the social ontology of suicide. This, however, is not entirely clear because Durkheim was dependent on society to frame and recognize the social uniqueness of suicide. At the same time, the individual occupies a space external to society since the causes that lead to egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic suicide are themselves external (Lehmann 1993, 1994). Thus, the ontology of suicide is dependent not only on the individual capacity to take one’s life but also on the fact that the causes themselves are external.

What I see as a limit and a problem offers an opportunity to rethink agency in suicide. This begins with Durkheim’s recognition of suicide as performance. In discussing individual forms of the four social types of suicide, Durkheim wrote:

“There are really very different varieties of suicides, and these differences appear

in the way suicide is performed. Acts and agents may thus be classified in a certain number of species; these species also correspond in essential traits with the types of suicide” (1897: 287, my emphasis). A few pages later Durkheim (1897: 291) made a connection between performance and methods of suicide. He emphasized that there is no connection between suicide and “the most common methods of performance,” identified as strangulation and hanging, drowning, firearms, jumping, poisoning and asphyxiation (1897: 291). For Durkheim, the “form of death chosen by the suicide is therefore something entirely foreign to the very nature of suicide. Intimately related as these two elements of a single act seem, they are actually independent of each other” (1897: 293).

I want to argue that, while methods of suicide bear no (statistical) relationship to suicide as social, the two cannot be ontologically independent. Suicide has to be carried out by particular means to understand it ultimately as a social outcome. Put differently, how can you have a performance without the performance being constituted by and through something that shapes that performance? My point is that the ontology of suicide is informed by what the performance of the act hails. This does not mean that suicide is a matter of performing something. Rather, suicide is bound to the way particular methods shape it as a social outcome, enabled rather than disabled by the body. Thus, Durkheim’s contradiction reveals suicide as performative.

This contradiction is sustained via Durkheim’s reliance on the Cartesian mind–body split to situate his view of what it means to be human. He wrote: “civilization can be fixed in the organism only through the most general foundations on which it rests. The more elevated it is, the more, consequently, it is free of the body.” For Durkheim, the social is literally superimposed on the body (Durkheim 1893: 346). Transcending the material conditions of the body is what enables the social to materialize (Gane 1983; Witz and Marshall 2004). Rationality enables this transcendence because “what characterizes the morality of organized societies ... is that there is something more human, therefore more rational, about them” (Durkheim 1893: 407). Thus, the social constitutes what it means to be human, enabled by the capacity to transcend the natural body, aided by the rational abstract mind. This, I think, explains why for Durkheim suicide was the property of the disembodied mind, and why it belonged to the realm of the social unlike the material, biological body. Transcending the material conditions of the body is a necessary ingredient to theorizing suicide as social.

Regardless of how Durkheim’s conceptual contradiction is sustained, it still tells us that the taking of one’s life is dependent on the body as much as the mind. Against Durkheim’s intentions, suicide as social is in fact corporeal—something Durkheim attributed to women’s yet not men’s suicides. I will not dissect Durkheim’s approach to gender, as I do this elsewhere (Jaworski 2014). Rather, I want to suggest that Durkheim’s limit offers an entry point into rethinking how suicide is constituted through what Butler called a bodily ontology through which “the ‘being’ of the body to which this ontology is given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations ... make possible the body’s persisting

and flourishing” (2009: 2–3). So if we are to increase our understanding of the ontology of suicide, we need to draw on faulty premises precisely so that we can rework them into something different. In this way, we may recognize agency as social as much as individual, and the body as generative rather than inert matter through which the taking of life materializes.

Are We Free in Suicide?

Questions about agency invariably raise questions about power and freedom. Suicide can be framed as an act of empowering oneself even though those who die do not live long enough to know what this freedom means. I want to address power and freedom in suicide by turning to Foucault’s view of death and power. Foucault argued that “death is power’s limit, the *moment* that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence” (1978: 138, original emphasis). Elsewhere, Foucault described this as man’s “invisible truth, his visible secret” (Foucault 1973: 172).

Foucault’s understanding of suicide explains further his claims about death. He saw suicide as something that testifies to “the individual and private right to die, at the borders and the interstices of power that was exercised over life” (1978: 139). This is important, because as Foucault explained, suicide marked “one of the first astonishments of a society in which political power has assigned itself the task of administering life” (1978: 139). Death made visible the *moment* in which the body, as a site of discipline and regulation, limited power’s capacity to manage life.

The notion of moment is important. Death seems to be an end point, a marker of finitude, or the last movement in what Foucault called “movements of existence” or “art of living” (Foucault 2001: 85, 86). Death is a moment of transformation, a “sudden ... event which drastically changes and transforms the subject’s mode of being at a single stroke” (Foucault 2001: 211). Freedom is possible because it occurs within rather than outside contexts of existence, in which a subject is able to contemplate what it means for them to be in relation to themselves and others. The individual becomes “ready to die” through contemplation (Foucault 2001: 265). For Foucault (1978, 2001), this readiness is the private rebellion against the workings of sovereign power. Strangely, this relates a little to Durkheim’s (1897) conceptualization of egoistic suicide, where the individual is not integrated enough into society due to excessive individualism (although *how* one becomes excessively individual is unclear). To use a metaphor, someone turns on their heels, tells life and society to get lost (politely speaking) and walks away from it all, presumably free.

It is tempting to assume that old age marks a readiness to die. This, however, does not have to be the case. For Foucault, what made someone ready to die was based on *how* one has lived their life, and whether this *how*—a mode of being in the world—made them feel satisfied with who and what they have been. This is best demonstrated through Foucault’s view of suicide, which he saw as “not a way

of cancelling the world or myself,” but rather a moment of potential authenticity, or a way of “rediscovering the original moment in which I make myself world” (cited in Miller 1993: 351). This moment is a moment of liberation. “[T]here is not a piece of conduct more beautiful,” Foucault wrote, “more worthy of careful thought than suicide. One should work on one’s suicide throughout one’s life” (cited in Miller 1993: 351). In a Heideggerian (1996) sense, the reality of death must be acknowledged and embraced by the living to achieve an authentic existence (Afary and Anderson 2005).⁴

Butler (1996) disagreed with Foucault’s claim about death and power. She argued 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” (Butler 1996: 71). In relation to suicide, death is not power’s limit, since norms, meanings and assumptions, and the processes that are part of making sense of suicide, will constitute knowledge of suicide before, during and after the act of taking one’s life. Unlike Foucault, Butler did not see context as freeing, even if it enables our capacity to act. The fact that we can understand suicide as an explicitly individual choice and act indicates that there is what can be referred to as an “afterlife of words” (Butler 2005: 29)—an afterlife that precedes and exceeds individual deaths and their authors. Dead or alive, it may not be possible to be free of operations of power, as a result of the effects of such operations. Whether we like it or not, truths about our lives will be produced, and in death this production, be it true or false, is truly out of our hands.

Foucault’s (1978) utopian belief in technology as a means of preserving life is at the heart of Butler’s (1996) disagreement.⁵ Addressing this in the context of epidemics, Butler argued that Foucault’s view “fails to account for the way in which technology is differentially deployed to save some lives and to condemn others” (1996: 71). Foucault’s (1978) stance does not take into consideration that “the regulatory discourse on sex could itself produce death,” especially in relation to the AIDS epidemic (Butler 1996: 72). Thus, Butler’s (1996) argument draws attention to the fact that tactics of power are deployed to decide that some lives are valuable, and thereby worth saving from the start. It also draws attention to the question of what counts as a life. More recently, Butler (2009: 1) wrote: “the ‘being’ of life is itself constituted through selective means; as a result, we cannot

4 It is tempting to conclude that Foucault advocated suicide (he did not and nor do I). Foucault’s statement, as I understand it, is more nuanced and profound. In some ways, suicide is beside the point. Instead, suicide is about resisting that which is enforced as an “exterior” truth about one’s self at the price of disavowing something more “interior,” even when this interior is already part of the exterior. In the concluding pages of the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault wrote, “Must I suppose that in my discourse I can have no survival? And that in speaking I am not banishing my death, but actually establishing it; or rather that I am abolishing all interiority in that exterior that is so indifferent to my life, and so neutral, that it makes no distinction between my life and my death?” (1997b: 210).

5 In her disagreement, Butler acknowledged that Foucault’s untimely death from AIDS-related complications means that he “could not know the historical future that arrived to defeat his claim” (Butler 1996: 71).

refer to this ‘being’ outside the operations of power.” While Foucault did not see life outside of power, death, I think, is positioned precisely as an act and moment that escapes power.

So is it ever possible to be completely free through suicide? One might argue that we are free in death, and especially when we choose it, because it matters little how we are hailed posthumously, since we are not alive to care. But posthumous hailings might be a problem when they misrepresent the one who died. So perhaps the issue here is freedom from representation rather than phenomenological freedom. If freedom in a phenomenological sense is the issue, then Foucault is right even if the moment that hails freedom remains a secret. If freedom from representation is the issue, then Butler is right. Thus, we need to work out what sort of freedom we are addressing before we can answer whether death limits power.

Turning Towards Freedom in Suicide

I want to return to what Foucault meant by *movement* as a way of grappling with what kind of freedom needs addressing to work out whether death limits power. As described earlier, contemplation is the basis of Foucault’s understanding of freedom through death. Foucault explained that contemplation “is not a movement by which we turn away from this world to look elsewhere” (2001: 265). Rather, contemplation as an act of turning enables us to “grasp the world here as a whole, without ever losing sight of this world here, or of ourselves within it” (2001: 282). The act of suicide can be seen as some kind of “turning.” One turns against oneself to kill oneself in order to turn towards freedom. This turning, I am arguing, needs to be considered as performative. In light of my earlier discussion, I do not need to explain this further other than to say that the turning is constituted in doing the taking of one’s life. This, however, does not explain the moment of turning, which I now want to address.

In response to the earlier critiques of her work on performativity, Butler (1995) argued that her work reformulates rather than dismisses agency. Addressing this in relation to language, Butler explained that

when words engage actions or constitute themselves a kind of action, they do this not because they reflect the power of an individual’s will or intention, but because they draw upon and reengage conventions which have gained their power precisely through a *sedimented iterability*. The category of “intention,” indeed, the notion of “the doer” will have its place, but this place will no longer be “behind” the deed as its enabling source. (1995: 134, original emphasis)

Sedimented iterability is one way of understanding agency in suicide. It is one way of understanding how we are preceded and exceeded by the past in the present, which makes the idea of turning against oneself possible. While methods of suicide are not the only aspects of understanding suicide, they still inscribe the turning,

which I want to situate as the *moment when* the material act of taking one's life takes place. This, I think, situates suicide as a temporal act. Suicide as a relational act depends on its relationship with time. This may come across as obvious. My argument, however, is that time is part of the materiality of the act not simply because the act materialized *in* time, but because norms and assumptions animate the authorship of the act *through* time. Suicide as a verb can only be understood in the past tense—a tense that stands in our way of working out whether we are free in suicide, even if the moment of suicide *might*, for some, signify freedom.

Death-Bound Subjects

How we think about the constitution of the subject and subjectivity is another reason why it is difficult to understand freedom in suicide. This, I think, is not simply because death is impossible for the subject to experience, or to share with another for that matter (Agamben 2002). Rather, it is the way neo-liberalism influences the idea of who and what we are, through which we come to understand ourselves as free and autonomous. This is a deeply cultural assumption, one that presumes that we must be free if we are literally alive. But what if, for some, being alive signifies their lack of freedom? What if agency comes with death instead of life? Abdul JanMohamed addressed this kind of question by arguing that some subjects are “formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death” (2005: 2). JanMohamed referred to this as the death-bound subject, constituted by the deployment of death and terror (2005: 6–11). The threat of death penetrates the capillaries of their subjective structure to the point where their life signifies social death. The context of JanMohamed's study is Richard Wright's account of the numerous lynchings of African Americans in the southern states of early twentieth-century America.⁶

I do not have the space to discuss JanMohamed's (2005) fascinating study in detail. Nevertheless, it is worth saying that recognition plays an important part in JanMohamed's (2005) explanations of agency in death. In analyzing a character called Bigger in Wright's fiction, JanMohamed stated that “it is the recognition (and the embracing) of death that eventually becomes the precondition of his freedom” (2005: 88). This of course is a paradox, yet one that works for Bigger whose life has been condemned to the perpetual state of social death. Actual death becomes a source of freedom, because he is able to interpret his motives and intentions through which death signifies freedom from living in a racist white society. For JanMohamed, this “affirms his agency precisely in dismissing the contingency of events” (2005: 99). Once Bigger accepts his actual death and sees himself as already dead, this “permits him the sense of freedom” (JanMohamed 2005: 103). In this sense, freedom is enabled through reflexivity

6 Janne Flora's discussion of the *qivittoq* in Greenland in this volume has conceptual affinities with JanMohamed's approach to the notion of the death-bound subject.

and critical self-awareness. Bigger is able to assess the meaning and implications of his life—a *secret* that cannot be taken away from him (JanMohamed 2005). This, I think, extends Foucault's (1978) point about death being the most secret aspect of existence. It sheds light on the fact that *how* power works can alter even though it never ceases to work. And so power cannot colonize his death-bound subjectivity *entirely*.

Four implications arise from JanMohamed's (2005) analysis of the death-bound subject. First, it showcases that agency in death is affective, rather than the discursive outcome of effect alone. By this I mean agency in death is shaped by the body's way or potential for preparing itself for action (Massumi 2002). In this sense, action can never be though outside the potential for action. Secondly, it situates agency as not bound to action alone, which for JanMohamed is "inadequately defined with existentialist phenomenology as always being conscious and deliberate" (2005: 105). Thirdly, it showcases freedom as abstract potentiality. Symbolically, one can be "reborn into a new life even in the minimal sense that this new life consists 'merely' of the recognition of life as an infinite positive potentiality" (JanMohamed 2005: 119). Fourthly, it suggests that self-awareness can, to some degree, negate death. One's ability to critically reflect on one's subject formation is truly at stake. We can still have space to know who and what we are even if the right to be is not ours from the beginning. Pulled together, these implications point towards considering the idea of death as agentic.

Before considering what JanMohamed's analysis can offer towards understanding suicide, I want to discuss his point about reflexivity and self-awareness, because it has specific implications for how we can understand freedom in suicide. JanMohamed defined "the turning of the subject on himself [sic]" as "a reflexivity that is fundamental to this subject's differentiation of his old self from the new one" (2005: 67). This differentiation, or self-awareness, does not originate from the self alone, but from others such as family members and friends in Wright's fiction. For Butler (1997b), the turning of the subject, especially on itself, is the basis on which the subject is produced. Butler suggested that in "a Nietzschean sense, the subject is formed by a will that turns back upon itself," which means that the subject becomes the "modality of power that turns on itself; the subject is the effect of power in recoil" (1997b: 6).

JanMohamed drew directly on Butler's (1997b) points to suggest that Wright overcame his racial and political formation by "submitting that very formation to a systematic deconstructive, destructive scrutiny and that his affirmation of himself consisted precisely on negating the negation inherent in his own formation" (JanMohamed 2005: 288). JanMohamed's explanation, I think, extends Foucault's point about contemplation. It further emphasizes Butler's point about subject formation. JanMohamed showed that it is not possible to be a subject without power, because one's formation as a subject is dependent on power. In this sense, I want to suggest that death is not about escaping the grasp of power. Rather, we need to use power—we need to be entangled in its web—to be free. I also want to suggest that perhaps death too is the effect of power in recoil. When hearing

the news of a suicide, we recoil in horror and shock by saying: *how can this be?* While so much more is part of this statement, my point is this: death as power's recoil is not a negation of power but instead of its effects. So what does this offer us towards rethinking agency in suicide?

If we take up JanMohamed's (2005) contribution, we must admit that actions alone cannot determine agency, even though we depend on the subject's actions to make sense of suicide. Therefore, we need to understand agency as affective—as a potential which furnishes how we understand agency.⁷ We need to seriously consider suicide as abstract potentiality, so that we might understand who and what someone is or was *through* the act of suicide rather than *because* of it. By saying this, I am not advocating suicide as a means of gaining freedom. Rather, I am advocating a more nuanced understanding of agency. This understanding needs to wrestle with existential phenomenological understandings. It needs to be critical of causal explanations that refuse to acknowledge *socio-cultural context as an epistemological and ontological grounding* for understanding the agency of suicide. This, I think, will be productive towards conceptualizing suicide as agency.

But there is something else. JanMohamed wrote:

The withdrawal and desire are also existential in that the very *desire* for death ironically affirms the subjectivity as well as the agency of the person who wishes to abandon both. Actual-death is an absolute termination of consciousness and, hence, a negation of subjectivity and agency; however, a *desire* for actual-death cannot be such a termination. (2005: 121, original emphasis)

JanMohamed's (2005) attention to desire is important for it showcases that, for some, their desire for suicide could be freeing precisely because it affirms who and what they are in what might feel like complete disavowal of their subjectivities. This might not only be in relation to suffering from mental illness, but also in circumstances where political suicides are ways of affirming freedom and life when neither are givens.⁸ If we pay attention to desire, then it might enable us to understand that subjectivity in suicide is already relational and not singular, because who and what a person is in the act of suicide is informed by something other than themselves.⁹ Our freedom in death is somewhere between others, the objects and us.

7 See for instance Jocelyn Chua's chapter in this collection to understand the role of affect and emotions in suicide.

8 Deen Sharp and Natalia Linos offer a cogent analysis of freedom and life in dying in this collection. I want to thank Deen Sharp in particular for teasing out with me the notion of the absent present body during the *Suicide and Agency Workshop* at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology during November 2011.

9 Ludek Broz's chapter in this collection demonstrates this point succinctly via his analysis of the soul-double.

Theorizing Agency in Suicide in the Future—Concluding Remarks

I want to conclude by making a series of suggestions. Some of them are tentative, others less so. In theorizing agency, we need to focus more on the value of death as agency—something Paul Gilroy (1993) examined in the context of slavery. This focus, I think, cannot settle on life-as-agency as opposed to death-as-agency, and instead must work out how agency lies in an interstitial zone between the two. We also need to reconsider whether the question of agency in suicide is in fact Eurocentric and masculinist in so far as it assumes a white male heterosexual subject as the only one capable of *truly* exercising agency (Jaworski 2010a, 2014). While Foucault's (2001) attention to contemplation and reflexivity is valuable, perhaps some of us can meditate on whether we are free only because our freedom is a given, and our agency never rendered opaque, undermined or taken away. Thus, we need to address conceptually and analytically what gives suicide its own ontology, and importantly, whose interests such ontology serves.

But there is more. At this point, I am convinced we need to take up Butler's (2009) call for a bodily ontology, based on ethics that hail who and what we are in relation to ourselves and to others. Part of this is the recognition that understanding death is done by the living and not the dead. Another part is us recognizing that “we are acted upon and acting, and our ‘responsibility’ lies in the juncture between the two” (Butler 2002: 187). The taking of one's life does not make anyone less responsible for their actions. This responsibility, however, materializes from more than one reference point.

Finally, the notion of relationality needs more attention in the study of suicide and suicidal behavior. Relationality does not simply mean one thing is related to another. Instead, as Butler argued, “relationality sutures the rupture in the relation we seek to describe” (2004a: 19). And so, as I understand it, suicide can be conceived of as a rupture in how we understand life, and the suture is constituted by our attempts to understand it through which suicide can be viewed as a verb rather than a noun only. This requires a constant focus on the iterable process through which our understanding of suicide materializes. In this way, we will be able to understand more what frames agency in suicide, and whether suicide limits power. Except of course this understanding might not suit the world views of the living and, as such, it will need to be articulated respectfully, honoring the grief of those who are left behind. So perhaps what is at stake is in fact *temporality* and its relationship to how actions are perceived.

My suggestions point towards the need to reframe the way we theorize agency in suicide. This reframing needs to consider questions of representation and phenomenology equally, even if death as death from a phenomenological perspective is impossible to know and understand. We need to consider how conditions of possibility frame agency: how we do the “framing” and how it determines what questions can be asked and how they can be answered. For now, it is important to acknowledge that something about suicide remains out of reach since the material act tends to take place in private. And so there may be a limit to

the way power operates: a threshold enfolded by what is said and known of suicide and, importantly, what remains unsaid and silenced. To borrow from Agamben (1998), it might be useful to consider the possibility of a zone of indistinction: an interstitial threshold where meanings of life and death pass into each other for the purpose of rendering someone free. And so it is necessary to question agency in suicide not as a means of doing away with it, but rather to find out what the limits are, and what those limits actually offer us as we continue to debate the ontology of suicide. Maybe then, as Foucault would have it, knowledge can become “a means of surviving by understanding” (1988: 7).

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