AN UNCLOUDED VIEW
Compulsory Ontology, Clinical Episteme, and Gendering Dissidence of Suicide

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Abstract:
This paper is but one part of a broader study that examines the gender-specific position of contemporary death and of suicide in particular. As a point of departure, it takes a set of arguments around discourses on suicide as hegemonic, accumulated around the sovereign domain of medical and scientific knowledge and in charge of a compulsory ontology of suicide. I understand this situation, together with Katrina Jaworski and Ian Marsh, in the first place to be highly problematic and lacking constructive counter-proposals. A major task to be undertaken is twofold: first, to scrutinize the centre of the hegemonic (clinical) episteme by penetrating its dynamics of power; then, to offer alternatives to its 'regimes of truth' within the plurality of epistemic models, approaches, and rationalities. To underline the extent to which the gendering process occurs therein is tantamount to this task. Accordingly, I want to argue that the dominant ontology and epistemology of suicide produce a discursively polluted and clouded backdrop where pathological and patriarchal principles still prevail. This paper thus aims at interrogating suicidology further, across its canonic strands of thought and politics of representation. Moreover, it will introduce some unexplored dissident perspectives into an existent counter-hegemonic agenda for an overall liberation from Western scientific epistemicide – the gendering of suicide being no exception to that.

Key words: suicide, gender, representation, epistemicide, necropolitics

Introduction

What is suggested here is not in any way an alternative theory of suicide, or even that such a thing would be desirable, but rather that through a sort of realignment, a change in our line of sight, it may be possible to 'make visible' that which has, over time, slipped from view.

Ian Marsh[1]

The question of suicide is not and has never been singular. Rather it is the matter of an ongoing hermeneutic inconsistency. This paper[2] takes seriously into account such inconsistency and the evidence that the meanings of suicide "are so protean across time and space that it is not so clear that there is one thing, suicide."[3] Scholars, present and

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[1] Ian Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History & Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 75.

[2] This paper relates to my PhD research project *Suicide Cultures. Theories and Practices or Radical Withdrawal – A Transnational Cultural and Media Paradigm (2001–2011)*. Started in 2011 at the Department of Philosophy and Moral Sciences, University of Ghent (Belgium), it is supervised by Prof. Dr. Tom Claes, Director of CEVI – the Center for Ethics and Value Inquiry, and supported by Basileus Scholarship – an Erasmus Mundus Action 2 project for academic exchange between the EU and the Western Balkans funded by the European Commission.

[3] Ian Hacking, "The Suicide Weapon," *Critical Inquiry* 35, 1 (2008), 1.

future, should never overlook the fact that suicide resides in the space of discursive plurality. This is one of the reasons why their analytical approaches should always preferably aim toward resolving the question*s* of suicide*s* (both plural) instead of fitting any existent normative framework. In what follows, I am offering but a modest attempt at addressing the versatile interpretations around this troublesome phenomenon with one particular focus in mind: the gendered position of suicide and its (un)representability in the epistemic hierarchy of scientific and popular discourses. Hence, I will centre on the problem of knowledge on suicide and related issues, most notably as gender-specific. While suffering from Western scientific epistemicide, they will be treated as the victims of patriarchal and scientific demagogies in which the clinical episteme has a privileged power position.

The Compulsory Ontology and Clinical Episteme of Suicide

The production and distribution of knowledge on suicide have been the privilege of power discourses pertaining to healthcare expertise in medical sciences and clinical practice, as discussed by Ian Marsh.[4] Accordingly, the subject has been treated as part of a broader field of knowledge where abnormality, mental disease, psychological disorder, and pathological behaviour play the most distinctive roles. Such dominant viewpoints have, in turn, also produced a boomerang effect. By pointing out the relative validity of normative and hegemonic discourses themselves (or "the ways in which contemporary approaches to suicide could be said to relate to the prevention of suicide, and suffering in relation to suicide"),[5] many professionals have challenged the power positions in the study field. Their need to question the ruling system of knowledge has not emerged from the competitive atmosphere of revolt for the sake of mere criticality. On the contrary, it has evolved from equally strong arguments in discursive analyses producing a kind of situated, 'revolutionary' dissidence. One of their aims is to set the study field free from the so-called "egopolitics of knowledge," about which Grosfoguel and Mielants write the following lines:

> Occidentalism created the epistemic privilege and hegemonic identity politics of the West from which to judge and produce knowledge about the 'Others.' The egopolitics of knowledge of Rene Descartes in the 17th century where Western men replace God as the foundation of knowledge is the foundational basis of modern Western philosophy. However as Enrique Dussel (1994), Latin American philosopher of liberation, reminds us, Descartes' ego-cogito ('I think, therefore I am') was preceded by 150 years of the ego-conquirus ('I conquer, therefore I am'). *The God-eye view defended by Descartes transferred the attributes of the Christian God to Western men (the gender here is not accidental)*. But this was only possible from an Imperial Being, that is, from the panoptic gaze of someone who is at the centre of the world because he has conquered it.[6]

Through what could be termed the violent invasion of scientific epistemology, I comply with the dissidents by arguing that the omnipresent normative perspectives have reached the point of theoretical, institutional, and political *colonization*. More than one knowledge discipline, where suicide has found fertile grounds to be analyzed and discussed critically, make up part of the cognitive and empirical territory from which to launch critical arguments against the imperial 'regime of truth' and to open up possibilities for epistemic liberation. Therefore, when it comes to 'a question of suicide' one needs to account for the epistemic plurality of related and unrelated arguments within the hierarchy of power structures around suicidality. Given the leading positions in such a hierarchy, reserved since the nineteenth century for pathologizing, preventive, patriarchal, and patronizing perspectives, they have also established the principles for an obligatory ontology of suicide. I treat it as the kind of sovereignty where medical discourses and clinical practices have definitely prevailed. However, my stance is that one should never dismiss the coexistence of the plurality of other (ethical, theoretical, and scientific) arguments proposed throughout recent history and across the world. In such a universe of counter-arguments this paper found its point of departure. Marsh, for example, uses the term 'compulsory ontology' when he describes this "necessity of expert knowledge at the expense of other ways of understanding [as] a compulsory ontology difficult to critique."[7] In problematizing contemporary discursive formations of suicide and, more precisely, a contemporary 'regime of truth' in relation to it, he says the following:

> Within the field that has come to be known as 'suicidology,' suicide itself is constituted as an object of scientific study, as are suicidal patients. Epidemiological studies seek to establish the

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[4] Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History & Truth*, 2010.

[5] Ibid., 66 – 67.

[6] Ramón Grosfoguel and Eric Mielants, "The Long-Durée Entanglement Between Islamophobia and Racism in the Modern/Colonial Capitalist/ Patriarchal World-System. An Introduction," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-knowledge* 1 (2006), 8 (M.S. emphasis).

[7] Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History & Truth*, 66.

truth of suicide in terms of quantifiable factors such as age, sex, and means while psychological autopsy studies have sought to correlate acts of self-destruction with categories of mental illness. More recently, studies into the biology and genetics of suicide risk have looked to find evidence of neuro-chemical, neuro-anatomical or genetic abnormalities that could explain why people kill themselves. It is the meeting of science and medicine that dominates the field of suicide studies.[8]

Starting from this controversial meeting-point between science and medicine, Marsh continues his 'guided-tour' around the 'exhibition of power structures' in suicidology. In his words, as regards the matter of practice, attention should equally be paid to the following:

In practice too, for the most part those considered expert on suicide and the management of suicidal people are doctors, particularly psychiatrists. Other professions – psychology, social work, nursing, occupational therapy – tend to work within a medically delineated, and to a large extent controlled, space. Through this meeting of scientific study and medical/psychiatric practice the truths of suicide have come to be (and continue to be) formed. Such ways of thinking and acting come together to produce and reproduce a form of suicide that could be characterized as individual, pathological and medical. Suicide is taken as arising as a consequence of mental illness, a form of pathology or abnormality situated within the individual, and it is thus a matter of medical/psychiatric concern. It is now difficult to talk of suicide without recourse to some notion of mental illness, usually depression, or reference to the 'mental state' of the person involved.[9]

Evidently, Marsh argues that "suicide is constructed within dominant discourses as a unitary act with a singular meaning – pathology."[10] Thus, its abnormality remains situated within the individual (the 'unitary,' and not the social). This discloses the general conditions within which any alternative, counter-hegemonic epistemology, including sociology and social philosophy, encounters obstacles and difficulties in coping with the 'condemnation imperative'[11] of power discourses – or their 'compulsory ontology,' as Marsh calls it, and continues:

> What such a stance makes difficult is the development of other ways of constituting suicide and the formation of alternative objects, concepts and subjectivities in relation to self-accomplished death. Instead there is a continual reproduction of suicide as the tragic act of a mentally unwell individual. As this is taken to be necessary, real and true – described here in terms of a compulsory ontology – it becomes difficult to critique, and shortcomings and negative (even if unintended) consequences that follow from so constituting suicide are for the most part unexplored.[12]

While remaining fully supportive of Marsh's worthwhile stance on the issue at hand, this paper complies with his 'de-colonial' attempts toward the liberation of suicide from its singular and compulsory ontology. Yet beside the plurality to be fought for, widely recognized and applied, there is one – inevitably singular – aspect of suicide(s) that should not be overlooked: its enigmatic, undefinable, and, for the time being, unanswerable nature. Independently from any political, social, cultural, and ethical contexts within which suicides are discussed, ideated, or committed, the singularity of our knowledge (or, rather, ignorance) about suicide and its 'doubles' remains *hermeneutically incomplete*. This incompleteness should not be a reason to stop thinking and looking further than the limited distances imposed by a 'compulsory ontology.' On the contrary, these should be transgressed and expanded. The gendered dimensions of suicide are but a way to be engaged in such task.

Is Death a woman?
Suicide, Gendering and Dissidence

Marsh exposes a larger picture of "a critical inquiry into the formation of suicide as pathological and medical."[13] The gendering (and queering) of suicide has its own place in it. To suggest one example, I will give a hint on this problematic

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8 Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History & Truth*, 65.

9 Ibid., 65.

10 Ibid., 66.

11 Ghassan Hage, "'Comes a Time We Are All Enthusiasm.' Understanding Palestinian Suicide Bombers in Times of Exhighophobia," *Public Culture* 15, 1 (2003), 67.

12 Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History & Truth*, 66.

13 Ibid., 66.

as articulated in his recent study.[14] When he analyses "the ways the 'suicidal homosexual' was constituted in psychiatric discourse," he remarks: "Although at times rather ill-defined – appearing only in the margins or at the periphery of psychiatric thought – such a figure was most often portrayed as 'weak yet destructive,' with the psychiatric profession wavering between pity and condemnation."[15]

Says Marsh:

> Declared a pathological 'type' in the late nineteenth century, the 'homosexual' came to be constituted in relation to a variety of psychiatric theories and practices over the next century. Initially formed as 'degenerates,' 'perverts,' and 'inverts,' later as emotionally immature, disordered personalities, most usually understood as in some way biologically abnormal, psychiatric descriptions of the 'homosexual' also came to include consideration of their perceived propensity to self-destruction.[16]

Here, again, a few things become more than evident, namely: that the psychiatric matrix of power discourses is discriminatory; that it has pretensions towards universalist and patriarchal 'truths'; and that it exposes itself as troublesome in relation to a queer paradigm when claiming the figure of 'suicidal homosexual' (or, for that matter, 'suicidal prostitute,' 'suicidal [poor unmarried] woman,' and so on) to be problematic, i.e. pathological. Therefore, in the current process of epistemic decolonization it is the contemporary 'regime of truth' in relation to suicide that turns out to be itself the point of controversy, as Marsh contends. I will treat the abovementioned 'deviations' from a gendered norm as a family of issues awaiting to be liberated from psychiatric 'compulsory ontology' and epistemic violence. At this point, what interest me most are their visual properties: the ways they have co-existed (as representations of suicidal deaths) in modern and contemporary imaginaries in relation to gender.

So, is Death a woman?

For Karl S. Guthke this question was a starting-point in his iconographic inquiry of Western representations of death and its gendering, in particular through the *figure* of death.[17] His main dilemma revolves around the rationality behind a range of choices, namely, "why is it that in some cultures and times, literature, folklore, and art commonly represent death as a man, in others as a woman?"[18] Guthke's dealing with this issue transcends any arbitrariness. He scrutinizes it as a matter of situated, contextualized, and strategic choice. In a historical overview spanning the period since the middle Ages until the late twentieth century, he discloses a variety of attitudes and understandings of death. He perceives them as a number of possible ways to give meaning to the world and to humanity at large. This is most notably valid for what concerns "the cultural history of the West."[19] He acknowledges "the wealth of images that the creative impulse has produced over hundreds of years of imagining the unimaginable in the Western world," while being aware that "such images may or may not reveal something about the 'nature' of death."[20] Instead, he continues, "they open our eyes for aspects of 'the world as interpretation,' that is, for humans, individuals and groups, orienting themselves in their world by making such images and thereby, ultimately, defining themselves."[21] A certain type of power dynamics must have resided in those choices turning the figure of death recognizable either as a man or a woman: "At any given time, *related and contrary* images of death naturally cluster around the *dominant* ones. Different cultural contexts, differing group-specific views as well as different individual attitudes create different images of death. They are male and female images that each comprises a wide variety of further differentiations: old and young, beautiful and ugly, fatherly and motherly, terrifying and seductive, contemptible and venerable, and so on."[22]

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[14] Ian Marsh, "Queering Suicide: The Problematic Figure of the 'Suicidal Homosexual' in Psychiatric Discourse," in *Queering Paradigms*, ed. Burkhard Scherer (New York: Peter Lang Press, 2010), 141-159.

[15] Ibid., 141.

[16] Ibid., 141.

[17] Guthke, Karl S. *The Gender of Death. A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1999. The German edition of this book was published a year earlier: Guthke, Karl S. *Ist der Tod eine Frau? Geschlecht und Tod in Kunst und Literatur* (München: C.H.Beck Verlag), 1998.

[18] Ibid.,i.

[19] Ibid., 5.

[20] Ibid., 5.

[21] Ibid., 5.

[22] Ibid., 5 (M.S. emphasis).

I want to expose a set of remarks that critically embrace the binaries proposed by Guthke, such as man/woman, male/female, life/death, image/word, figure/abstraction, and seeing/interpreting. This preliminary step is significant inasmuch as it paves the way toward a more nuanced comprehension of gender-related aspects of suicidal death. I understand such death as a specific way of dying turned into a theoretical concept, philosophical issue, and cultural phenomenon. Its materialization in textual and visual terms (i.e. cultural products) imposes one more argument to be addressed as relevant concerning those aspects of analysis that keep being omitted from dominant perspectives. As Marsh argues:

> Thought of in this way – that is suicide and the suicidal as cultural products – self-accomplished deaths can come to be read less as statements concerning the internal, mental state of isolated individuals, but rather as outcomes of a play of culturally situated, relationally unequal forces. Issues of social justice, of fairness, the means by which certain groups come to be marginalized and vilified within a culture can come to the fore in discussions of the reasons why a person may have ended their life. Rather than suicide being interpreted either as an unreasonable, irrational act, determined by illness, or a rational course of action freely chosen, it could perhaps be understood as a product of cultural forces situated outside the individual. Such forces could be understood as constituting the suicidal individual, and even of forming, over time, the act itself.[23]

Guthke's question (Is Death a woman?) implies a complex chain of relations from the outset. First, it implies that there is a *link* between the notion of death and the notion of a woman, even if this does not necessarily result in their equation. Second, it implies that the notion of death demands a certain kind of figuration (instead of abstraction), a personification or *embodiment* of an idea. Third, it implies that such an idea, turned into a *body* through personification, depends on gendered choices between a man and a woman. These choices allow for possible reversals (Death is a man *or* a woman) yet without alternatives (Death is *either* a man *or* a woman). Fourth, it implies that the question (Is Death a woman?) rests upon a doubt, while it also invokes thinking in the opposite direction: if Death is a woman, is Life a man? This switch is acceptable only under conditions whereby there are clear division lines between a 'woman' and a 'man' inasmuch as between 'Death' and 'Life.' Fifth: if Death is indeed a woman and, conversely, Life is a man, what does this process of iconographic segregation tell us about the gendered matrix of power through the language of life/death relationships? How is such a matrix constructed in the cultural history of the West and what are its limits in "the world as interpretation" as Guthke earlier contended? What does 'Life-as-Man' exclude from interpretation and which role does 'Death-as-Woman' play in the gendered matrix of power? If they are supposed to remain separated, is this in order to perpetuate some already established understandings of our world and definitions of ourselves, in Guthke's line of thought? Moreover, are human beings condemned to exist within some strict knowledge framework that has already been set up (by images of death, among other constructions) so as to orient themselves in the world? Why did the cultural history of the West need to represent Death at all and, further on, to have the idea of Death *personified* and *anthropomorphized*? Finally, how to exercise control over life and death if they have no body? Critical strands in sociology and social philosophy may suggest some helpful insights in tracing the answers to these questions.

Numerous contemporary studies have been treating the social patterns of suicidality in relation to (or, rather, in contrast to) dominating macro-sociological perspectives. This criticism is further enhanced by the fact that general attention to suicide, and consequently knowledge on suicide, appeared only throughout the nineteenth century. Due to "the newly initiated mortality statistics… it was generally suspected that the drastic social changes associated with the processes of industrialization and urbanization were somehow related to the rising suicide rate."[24] What interest me at this point are not the statistical and historical evidences around the socially implicated increase of self-inflicted death. Rather, it is an idea that countability has been inseparable from modes of *governance over death* through statistical measures and modernization processes. Some recent studies, in which suicide emerges primarily as a technology of governance, are of valuable support towards this idea. The sociologist Thomas F. Tierney, for example, focuses his analysis on the issue of governance and the governmentality of suicide.[25] Following Michel Foucault's preliminary remarks on bio-power in his *History of Sexuality* (1976), Tierney traces "the relationship between the sociological appropriation of suicide and this uniquely modern form of power."[26] He does so by interpreting Jacques Peuchet in relation to the views of Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim on the subject, while taking their "two nineteenth-century sociological treatises on suicide

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[23] Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History & Truth*, 74.

[24] Ilkka Henrik Mäkinen and Tanya Jukkala, "Suicide in Changing Societies," in *Baltic Worlds* 3(1), 2010, 10.

[25] Thomas F. Tierney, "The Governmentality of Suicide: Peuchet, Marx, Durkheim, and Foucault," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 10, 4 (2010), 357–389. See also Thomas F. Tierney, "Anatomy and Governmentality: A Foucauldian Perspective on Death and Medicine in Modernity," *Theory & Event* 2, 1 (1998), 1–50.

[26] Ibid., 357.

as historical examples of the development of 'governmentality.'"[27]

It is worth remembering that the nineteenth century was a historical epoch that 'gave birth' to institutionalized scientific studies of suicide, most notably thanks to the efforts of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). For better or worse, Durkheim still stands out among many of his predecessors who have remained either excluded from our knowledge of suicide studies or have turned out to be less recognizable in the public domains concerned with those studies.[28] Durkheim's professional attitude toward women, negatively biased when it comes to his over-discussed book *Suicide. A Study in Sociology,*[29] deserves special attention. This is even more necessary when compared with another, easily forgotten study worthy of notice. I am referring, of course, to Jacques Peuchet and his *Memoirs*.[30] Peuchet (1758–1830) was "a leading French police administrator, economist, and statistician"[31] whose *Memoirs from the Police Archives*, published posthumously in 1838, also contained his commentary on suicides in early nineteenth-century Paris. This commentary served as a starting point for Karl Marx (1818–1883) to tackle the issue of suicide briefly in his own work. The issue surprisingly remained scarce in his own writings: "It is Marx's only published discussion of suicide. After he published this brief article in 1846 in *Gesellschaftsspiegel* (Mirror of Society), a small German socialist journal in which Engels was involved, he never returned to the topic."[32] As sociologist Kevin Anderson highlighted on the occasion of the first English edition of *Memoirs*, "it is not, properly speaking, an article by Marx [as] it consists of Marx's brief four-paragraph introduction, followed by his edited translation of [Peuchet's] lengthy excerpts."[33] In the context of my paper, this work is significant because it "contains one of the most sustained discussions of gender in Marx's early writings, [namely] the suicide of women, linking these events to women's oppression inside the French bourgeois family."[34] In Marx's edition, Peuchet's opening words straightforwardly target the causality of high annual suicide rates. He is attacking the *social* rather than the individual rationality behind it, viewing it "as a symptom of the deficient organization of our society."[35] Additionally, he refers to "...no society, but, as Rousseau said, a desert populated by wild animals."[36]

The notion of *family* is of fundamental importance at this point. Here it is seen as a social category of micro-power relations. It differs from the category of single, unmarried, lower-class, unemployed women: the most common category of female suicides at the time. This is precisely the point of contestation where Peuchet (as remarked by Anderson 1999, 13) diagnoses the persistence of that kind of organizational deficiency within which suicidal ideations continue to grow: "The revolution did not topple all tyrannies. The evil which one blames on arbitrary forces exists in families, where it causes crises, analogous to those of revolutions."[37] This analogy (between families and revolutions, between tyrannies and families, and between their respective causalities of crises) is a turning point from which to place the notion of gender in relation to Marx's view on suicide. Says Anderson:

> Marx suggests that the oppressiveness of the bourgeois family is responsible for many cases of female suicide, especially of young women [and] also helps us to grasp more clearly his emerging views on gender and the family in modern society, during the same period in which he was developing his concepts of alienated labour and historical materialism and the beginnings of his critique of political economy and the state.[38]

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[27] See Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Anthropology of the State. A Reader*, Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, eds. (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 131-143; Jonathan Xavier Inda, ed. *Anthropologies of Modernity. Foucault, Governmentality, and Life Politics* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 2006. Also: Majia Holmer Nadesan, *Governmentality, Biopower, and Everyday Life* (New York and London: Routledge), 2008.

[28] Robert D. Goldney, Johan A. Schioldann, and Kirsten I. Dunn, "Suicide Research Before Durkheim," *Health & History* 10, 2 (2008), 73-93. Also: Maria Teresa Brancaccio, Eric J. Engstrom and David Lederer, "The Politics of Suicide: Historical Perspectives on Suicidology before Durkheim. An Introduction," *Journal of Social History* 3 (2013), 607-619.

[29] See Durkheim, Émile. *Suicide. A Study in Sociology* (New York: Simon and Schuster), 2010.

[30] Marx, Karl. "Peuchet on Suicide." In *Marx on Suicide*, edited by Eric A. Plaut and Kevin Anderson, translated by Gabrielle Edgcomb (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press), 1999, 43-75. Originally published in Karl Marx, "Peuchet: vom Selbstmord" (Gesellschaftsspiegel, zweiter Band, Heft VII, Elberfeld), Januar 1846.

[31] Eric A. Plaut and Kevin Anderson, eds., Gabrielle Edgcomb, trans., *Marx on Suicide* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press), 1999, 3.

[32] Kevin Anderson, "Marx on Suicide in the Context of His Other Writings on Alienation and Gender," in *Marx on Suicide*, Eric A. Plaut and Kevin Anderson, eds. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press), 1999, 3.

[33] Ibid., 3.

[34] Ibid., 3.

[35] Marx, "Peuchet on Suicide," 47.

[36] Ibid., 50.

[37] Ibid., 50–51.

[38] Anderson, "Marx on Suicide in the Context of His Other Writings on Alienation and Gender," 22.

But what do the elements of this new constellation have to do with each other when perceived all together (the state, political economy, historical materialism, alienated labour, family, gender, and – suicide)? Does it seem to be but an arbitrary proliferation of terms, notions, and concepts? Have they remained *fixed* exclusively to time and space (the Western world of the post-Enlightenment era) in which both Marx and Durkheim developed their respective theories of society, politics, and culture?

"Certain similarities between the treatment of suicide by Marx and that by Durkheim […], more in social than in psychological terms" give evidence that "both view suicide as symptomatic of broader social ills, and both are interested in empirical data on suicide rather than moral or philosophical speculation."[39] Nonetheless, as Anderson points out, "it is on [the] issue of limiting divorce that Marx's differences with Durkheim would seem to become the sharpest, given Marx's stress on oppressive family relationships as a major factor in female suicide, and his critique of bourgeois marriage as an oppressive institution *that should not be regarded as a fixed universal*."[40] Comparatively, what remains interesting concerning Durkheim's professional relation to women (and thus his category of female suicides) is critically accentuated by Anderson: "At several points in *Suicide*, Durkheim makes extremely disparaging comments about women, writing at one point that women's 'mental life is less developed' than men's because 'women's needs are more closely related to the organism'[…] No comparable statements can be found in Marx's work."[41] Durkheim also understands marriage (and, accordingly, divorce) very differently from Marx, arguing for the strengthening of marriage instead of liberalizing divorce.

Says Anderson:

> Because divorce or 'conjugal anomie' is a major form of anomie, which is itself a major cause of male suicide, he recommends making 'marriage more indissoluble.' Durkheim acknowledges [*and this is the most upsetting comment in my view, M. S.*] 'that the suicides of husbands cannot be diminished in this way without increasing those of wives,' but he seems, however reluctantly, to accept this as a necessary evil. He even asks: 'Must one of the sexes necessarily be sacrificed?'[42]

A perverted link in this interdependency between the wife's slavery and the husband's slaveholding rights, as Peuchet had earlier pronounced it, was "supported by the civil code and the right of property [according to which] she is but a part of his inventory."[43] Hence the *objecthood* of married women used to stand for (and still often does) the most fertile ground on which the authority of their husbands could be indispensably exercised. Within the domain of sovereignty empowered by tacit familial laws of oppression, such exercise was indirectly 'sanctioned' while occurring inside homes and following private 'laws' (i.e. outside of public view and legal control). It is in that domain of privacy where the neuralgic point of the discussion at hand needs to be diagnosed. The family home, being the site of masculine despotism against women (wives, daughters, housemaids), functions in line with gender-biased micro-governance. It also stands for the nodal point around which, in Peuchet's words, the malign symptoms of the "deficient organization of our society" converge. If this is the governance typical of family, as Marx understood it, then its own properties of micro-power (patriarchal, parochial, chauvinist, male, etc.) are nowadays becoming increasingly visible on a macro-scale. If Death is a woman, and Life is a man, the old model of oppression still happens in our global world due to (what contemporary critical theory perceives as) neo-liberal sovereignty, namely: the colonial, capitalist, and racial patterns of imperial domination. This is but one possible answer to my earlier question concerning the many points of intersection in the constellation of power: if there is a name for such constellation today then it must be that of neoliberal 'biopolitical' imperial sovereignty.

Juxtaposing masculine governmentality with female subservience, through the lenses of her supposedly natural predilections for 'mental weaknesses,' has not come hereby as an arbitrary choice. I treat it as a constructive way of dealing with the ongoing matrix of gender-specific power that can *reposition* our general knowledge on suicidality and how it works in the world of visual representations. In that regard, art history gives many illustrative arguments.

In her recent publication, Michelle Facos deals with "the changing relationship between artists and society since the Enlightenment and issues of identity."[44] Relying upon "a common format for representing female suicide … in both

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[39] Anderson, "Marx on Suicide in the Context of His Other Writings on Alienation and Gender," 19–20.

[40] Ibid., 22 (M.S. emphasis).

[41] Ibid., 20.

[42] Ibid., 22.

[43] Marx, "Peuchet on Suicide," 57–58.

[44] Michelle Facos, *An Introduction to Nineteenth Century Art*. New York: Routledge, 2011. See back cover. Also: Ron M. Brown, *The Art of*

contemporary literature and illustration," Facos stresses the fact that in nineteenth-century England "suicidal women frequently were shown casting themselves from windows and bridges into rivers… This penchant for representing drowning women reflected contemporary reality – drowning was the most common means of suicide for women in the nineteenth century; men preferred hanging."[45] In a section of her book centred on "Female Suicide," she gives a brief and curious background to the issue while discussing the topic of "Realism and the Urban Poor." What she points out is a paradox: the countable facts (disclosing a higher number of male than female suicides in the nineteenth-century) stand in opposition to the cultural proliferation of female suicides in the related visual representations of the epoch.

Says Facos:

> The setting for these images was always the city; such despair was specifically associated with urban alienation and desperation […] In England, *although many more men actually committed suicide*, depictions and descriptions of them are rare, while female suicides appeared frequently in popular one-shilling books, novels, newspapers, prints, and paintings. Bridge-jumping was the most commonly represented method of female suicide, *despite the fact* that most women *quietly* filled their pockets with stones and plunged into a nearby pond or canal.[46]

In England at that time, like elsewhere in the European West, it was apparently not rare to find many poor single women among whom some were doomed to prostitute themselves for the sake of mere survival. In the framework as suggested by Facos, the general category of the poor was not only considered emotionally or mentally unstable but, very often, was demonized by the ruling (male) part of the society in order to be governed. In that sense, there is a question still to be answered: why were male suicides, as she writes, "conspicuously absent from nineteenth-century pictorial imagery, although they occurred with three times greater frequency"?[47] Her own response is simple:

> This reflected a gap between popular perceptions and social realities. Suicide was considered deviant behavior, and men – *who did most of the describing and representing* – ascribed all human weaknesses to women. This perpetrated a false impression that women, especially prostitutes, had a high suicide rate. Conclusions of 'scientific' psychological studies – discussed [*by the author herself in the same book, remark by M.S.*] in connection with Géricault's portraits of the insane – justified such attitudes.[48]

Therefore, males – who were empowered by tacit laws (of oppression) and tools (of image production) – were the ones to materialize suicides into images: by doing most of the describing and representing, as Facos says, they also produced a *masculinist version* of suicidal death through images as cultural products (in Marsh's terms, quoted earlier). The female representability of 'mental weaknesses' is hereby traded for male 'unrepresentability' – or the *absence* of males in the images produced *by them* for the sake of *their own* gender-safe representability and governmentality therein. One may think of more than one reason for such an unfair trade to occur: art historians could probably agree that the most evident reasons will remain dependent on the politics of representation that has historically privileged heroism (and not weakness, mental or otherwise) as the matter of men-centred imagery. Such preference was materialized in the prominence of female modes of self-destruction which, according to Facos, were also modified, constructed, or simply fake. This is evident not only in terms of the frequency or popularization (one-shilling books, novels, newspapers, prints, and paintings), but rather in terms of fabricated and spectacular 'truths' about *how* they did it. One may even call this way of self-accomplished death a *withdrawal* from the world: Facos describes it as *quietly*, silently *disappearing* into the water. To quietly disappear into the water does not necessarily mean to jump from a bridge! The latter makes up part of the popular voyeuristic fantasy, on behalf of male image-makers, due to their abundance of self-esteem and lack of ethical stance toward women. They obviously wanted to preserve the memory of those women (poor, single, unemployed, etc.), yet this occurred in a way that created a gendered pattern for representing them as 'drowning women.' The scopic 'regime of truth' thus produced was very different from the facts. Is this enough to answer my earlier question, the one that wraps up the arguments exposed in this paper, how to exercise control over life and death if they had no body?

Suicide. London: Reaktion Books, 2001.
[45] Facos, *An Introduction to Nineteenth Century Art*, 228.
[46] Ibid., 228 (M.S. emphasis).
[47] Ibid., 229.
[48] Ibid., 229.

Conclusion

"The question of unrepresentability leads directly to the way in which political violence may or may not be put into an image."[49] If representability and unrepresentability necessarily imply the issue of violence, this paper has been but an attempt to ask how Death, Life, Man, and – last but not least – Woman expose themselves together not only to political violence but to the violent politics of representation and its epistemic effects. While being rendered visible, embodied and anthropomorphized (through images), female subjects and their male counterparts are thus becoming *open* and *exposed* to our systems of interpretation, or hidden for the same reasons. Hence we, the viewing subjects, have a possibility of engaging in the production of discourses and discursive orders of power, or its lack therein. If by 'images' I want to connote the materialization of what must irrevocably remain hidden or invisible from our view, then by 'political violence' (as a way of conclusion of this paper) I also want to connote something precise that has remained forcefully hidden or invisible under neoliberal sovereignty and its 'biopolitical' matrix of power.

'Biopolitical' power discourses, centred on the management of life and life-related issues, are also sites of exclusion, obscurity, and invisibility. What has remained excluded from their supposedly benevolent, objective, and life-improving concerns, indispensable for the forced logic of neoliberal *positivity* thus promoted, is precisely the logic of *negativity* (pain, suffering, death) within which the majority of world populations reside. What life-politics excludes from our lives, therefore, are the practical conditions of mortality, death, and our proximity to death. While defending the idea of life, the secret of 'biopolitical' power remains obscured, namely, "the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death."[50] This is also why so-called biopolitics has been hiding its proper name – necropolitics. For the Cameroonian philosopher, Achille Mbembe, necropolitics stands for "the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective."[51] This is also the reason why, I keep arguing, the *overrepresentation* of female suicidality in nineteenth-century England (and elsewhere in the Western world) was the result of a necropolitical, patriarchal, and pathologizing sovereign logic of self-defence: a trend that has not been entirely evicted throughout the centuries since. It has certainly remained present not only in what concerns the dominant discourses of suicidology (where, among other issues, the gendered position still silently dwells), but in whatever concerns our ways of being a 'contemporary,' 'civilized,' 'rational,' and 'developed humankind'.

Starting from these lines of thought, preliminary for my future studies around the gender-specific position of necropolitics, I want to conclude now my initial dialogues with Guthke, Facos, Marsh, and Mbembe so that I can go further with this analysis, most notably in my upcoming scholarly texts (foreseen to follow the present paper). To go further means to go beyond the challenges of already exposed arguments, so that one specific type of death (suicide) and its gendering can be put into focus. In order to accomplish such a task, I will rely upon Katrina Jaworski, the Polish-Australian social philosopher, whose work so far (collected in *The Gender of Suicide. Knowledge Production, Theory and Suicidology*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, upcoming) will 'serve' as the major theoretical background for my future analysis: not only against the 'servility' of suicide studies in general and their gendering in particular, but against any 'servility;' a struggle against it that Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls *anti-imperial epistemologies of the global South*.

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[49] Alexander Galloway, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 7–8 (2011), 85. See also Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (London: Verso, 2007), 109–138.

[50] Achille Mbembe, Necropolitics, *Public Culture* 15, 1 (2003), 12.

[51] Ibid., 12.

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