

Nomad Suicidology
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Suicide is perhaps the most intimate and affectively charged of human experiences, yet its formal study, under the general rubric of suicidology, is a science of statistics—biological or social—that is disembodied and aloof. Mainstream suicidology, rather than allowing itself to be affected by the living world of culture, context, and corporeality, takes a limited and fixed view of suicide as its object and generally excludes competing frameworks and alternative interpretations for why people take their lives.

Scott Fitzpatrick, Claire Hooker, and Ian Kerridge demonstrate that contemporary suicidology is a social practice characterized by positivist research methodologies, professional values, and organizational structure, and argue that population data and statistical analysis historically gave suicide “an empirically verifiable form, and provided scholars with new techniques of argumentation that would have a profound impact on shaping the knowledge structure of suicidology.”¹ The ensuing hegemony of mainstream suicide studies has prompted a critical response from researchers and practitioners who do not fit neatly within this orthodoxy—represented in the reply collective by Ian Marsh, Michael Kral, Katrina Jaworski, Jennifer White, and Tom Widger—as well as a self-reflective query into this nonconforming group’s role, status, and objectives vis-à-vis both mainstream suicidology and suicide itself.

Jennifer White, in her response to Fitzpatrick et al.’s description of suicidology as a social practice, explores the position of a “suicidology misfit ... someone who is interested in extending and complicating how suicide is conceptualized ... [and who] ... brings a strong set of ethical and political commitments to the task ...”² As examples of this misfit position, White draws on researchers who challenge the individualism and psychologizing inherent in mainstream suicidology, and on feminist scholars and activists who address discursive and material aspects of living and dying. White’s expressions of hope in relation to the work of these misfits, combined with her emphasis on the ethical and relational dimensions of suicide research, borders on what I would like to explore here as a *nomad suicidology*.

With subjectivity, science, and social organization as my primary sites of analysis, I will take up Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of *nomad science* and *becoming*³ to further probe “the productive potential of taking up a position as a suicidology misfit.”⁴ After elaborating my conceptual framework, I deploy the concept of becoming-woman to extend White’s analysis of Jaworski’s *The Gender of Suicide* and develop my concept of nomad suicidology to rejoin Widger’s envisioning of a “post-suicidological

¹ Fitzpatrick et al., 8.

² Jennifer White, “Shaking Up Suicidology,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 4, no. 6 (2015): 2.

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Continuum, 2004, original work published 1980).

⁴ White, “Shaking Up Suicidology,” 2.

suicidology.”⁵ I end by suggesting that the reply collective itself is a space for nomadic proliferations and becomings.

Science in Two Images

In their respective responses to Fitzpatrick et al., White and Widger describe being rejected by mainstream suicidology, the former from a conference and the latter from a journal, on the basis of their research methods and aims. At a more general level, the reply collective uses Fitzpatrick et al.’s sociological and historical account to trace suicidology’s contemporary contours and passageways, making it out to be a highly stratified and almost impenetrable body for those outside of dominant subject positions and vernaculars. Marsh, for example, proposes that “the imposition and policing of disciplinary norms in the form of rules and hierarchies . . . could be read as a ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault 2002), one that serves particular interests over others”⁶ and Kral characterizes the mainstream as “a revolving door of sameness.”⁷

While mainstream suicidology represents only a minority of researchers—what Widger calls “a few hundred rather idiosyncratic people across departments of medicine, psychology, and sociology”⁸—it constitutes what Deleuze and Guattari call *state science* in that a façade of coherence covers over gaps, anomalies, and outliers in both the data it surveys and the professionals it organizes. At the level of data, this covering over is done through statistical processes that aggregate, average, and quickly lose contact with the singular affects, thoughts, relationships, and milieux of each unique body as it confronts self-accomplished death. At the level of professional organizations, state science projects a unified field by silencing or recuperating aberrant researchers, dissonant findings, and itinerant practitioners. As a state science, mainstream suicidology is perpetually inhabited by peculiar data and idiosyncratic researchers that it must manage in one way or another.

Issuing from the reply collective is a criticism directed at suicidology’s bias for nomothetic (quantitative/population/statistical) studies⁹ and its entrenchment within “positivistic scientism.”¹⁰ While the reply collective authors aptly elucidate the effects of methodological prejudices in terms of the exclusions they enact, it is important to note that even quantitative approaches suffer when researchers aim to bolster rather than disprove trending theories, such as depression or genetics causing suicides. So, while positivism may be used at a professional level to accomplish particular usurpations of power, at an applied level it is itself perpetually producing disconfirming evidence, anomalies, and outliers to favoured theories. This is the first place that I believe Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of state science is useful: state science aims to secure its power by

⁵ Tom Widger, “‘Suicidology as a Social Practice’: A Reply,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 4, no. 3 (2015): 2.

⁶ Ian Marsh, “Critical Suicidology,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 4, no. 6 (2015): 6.

⁷ Michael J. Kral, “Critical Suicidology as an Alternative to Mainstream Revolving-Door Suicidology,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 4, no. 6 (2015): 10.

⁸ Widger, “Suicidology as a Social Practice,” 3.

⁹ Widger, “Suicidology as a Social Practice.”

¹⁰ Kral, “Critical Suicidology as an Alternative to Mainstream Revolving-Door Suicidology,” 1.

burying or recuperating even statistical anomalies and outlier data through maps that provide a coherent overlay to an otherwise disjointed, complex, and chaotic world.

Even within positivism and nomothetic bias we find misfits and nomads—living worlds of data and researchers that are always in excess of the maps state science provides. Deleuze and Guattari argue that state science is perpetually imposing its overlays on the creativity of nomad elements, organizing their inventiveness and limiting their experiments. State and nomad are poles that characterize movements and relationships and reflect what Skott-Myhre describes as “the capacity of all forms to be both striated and smooth simultaneously.”¹¹ State science and nomad science are therefore mutually reliant and productively related rather than a dichotomous pair.

Connected to the critique of positivist bias, the reply collective is consistent in their appraisal of mainstream suicidology as organizationally hierarchical and exclusionary. Here Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of nomad science is useful in conceptualizing a different approach—a science that works through immanence and contingency rather than a transcendent organizing principle that stands above to distribute roles and functions.¹² Immanence and contingency would return our work to the living world of bodies in immediate and unpredictable relationship with each other and would create, in those singular milieux, particular roles and functions necessary for solving particular problems for living and organizing.

Nomad suicidology would therefore organize specialization and function through the particular capacities made possible through relational interaction but would not infuse some roles with authority over others. Nomadism is therefore very pragmatic, using what is at hand to solve immediate problems. Only when solutions and roles are extracted from their milieu and infused with authority do we enter the transcendent aspects of science. As with my comments on positivism containing both statist and nomadic elements, contingent roles are continually pressuring reified roles to incorporate new practices while simultaneously risking transcending their own milieux and reifying themselves as roles to be replicated elsewhere.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari turn to Gothic cathedral building as an example of nomad and state science. They contrast journeymen stonemasons who work at ground level with variations and approximations to state architects who work by abstract, fixed, and perfectible forms. One group works on the ground with materials at hand, the other in a tower with formulas and numbers. It is not that journeymen did not use models and equations, Deleuze and Guattari argue, only that their geometry was “projective and descriptive”¹³—they related to the forces of the material rather than an abstract form. Importantly, journeymen were in a direct corporeal relationship with the objects of their labour. In the field of suicidology, the mainstream may be striated by pre-established methodologies and research goals imparted from councils, governments, and research institutions using abstract and reified concepts to organize its objects and subjects, but a

¹¹ Hans Skott-Myhre, “Outrage and the Question of Minor Marxism,” *Cultural Critique* 86, (2014): 152.

¹² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

¹³ Deleuze and Guattari, 364.

nomad suicidology always populates it on the ground level with researchers and practitioners working directly with individuals, families, and communities. The shape, scope, concepts, and goals of research are generally bounded by the mainstream but nomad suicidologists are always transgressing such boundaries and entering into diverse fields, disciplines, and methodologies. Nomad suicidology is therefore responsive to both the mainstream and to its immanent relationships, it is about experimentation grounded in relationships, the goals and capacities of which could not be articulated in advance of their coming together.

Towards the end of the paper I will use the reply collective as an example of such an interdisciplinary network attempting to set its own goals and methods. Before I get there, however, I want to extend this idea of contingency and relationship by arguing that, at its most nomadic, the study of suicide would give up strict separations between those who research suicide and those who engage with it directly through personal experience, program implementation, or direct “frontline” work. Investigating and analyzing the immediate environments of suicide, I argue, the nomad researcher inevitably comes up against their own affects, subjectivity, and location within the assemblage of suicide.

Subjectivity and Affect

By aggregating and smoothing over the differences and changes that characterize the living world, state science establishes essences, laws, fixed subjects, and normative standards that purport to be transhistorical and transcultural truths. Nomad science, while parallel, runs in a different direction and explores the contingent, changing, and singular. The principles of solidity, essence, and capture on the side of state science and the principles of fluidity, emergence, and metamorphosis on the side of nomad science, however, do not only relate to methodologies, professional roles, and hierarchies of knowledge, they also relate explicitly to the subjectivities produced through these approaches. Subjectivities here, following Deleuze and Guattari, are processes through which human bodies express their capacity for self-creation and self-understanding.

These autopoietic processes produce experiences of being a self through the folding and unfolding of political, economic, discursive, and other forces. Importantly, the body always subjectifies through its relationship to other bodies and social formations and hence through a contingent and perpetually changing exteriority. This is the sense in which nomad science cannot be known in advance and must work with what is at hand. In contrast, state science uses concepts of internality, essences, and universality to establish a fixed nature of both researchers and suicidal subjects. Where a state science may seek the essence of a suicidal subject or the pathology of a diseased body, processes of subjectivity introduce questions about the changes that a body articulates through its interactions with other bodies and forces in a milieu. I would like to argue that a nomad suicidology would explore not only the singular living relations, contextual elements, and processes of change at work in subjectivities that come to be coded as suicidal, but also the subjectifying processes of suicidologists themselves.

Nomadism, in its insistence on the immanent and idiosyncratic relationality, scrambles the abstract codes of state science which attempt to prescribe and delimit what bodies can

do in relationship. It is a recognition that who and what we are is always produced through relationships that are external to who we usually believe ourselves to be. Subject positions of researcher, practitioner, and suicidal person are all abstractions or codes that facilitate or prevent particular movements, actions, and interactions of bodies in the world. For example, discourses on professional roles, research ethics, boundaries, and distance work to reify particular identities and forestall exchanges that might otherwise propel all involved onto unpredictable lines of change.

The question for me, therefore, is to what extent can we disabuse ourselves of the discourses, roles, and material distance that prevent experimentation with our own affects and change processes as we enter into relationships. Again, this is not a binary construction: we are continually moving from subjectifying processes with high degrees of experimentation and change to more rigid and consolidated professional and personal identities. Marsh, in his contribution to the collective, calls for a critical suicidology that, among other things, moves away from the neutral, objective, and detached observations in mainstream suicidology and toward portrayals of suicide that “reflect more the emotional landscape out of which they have emerged.”¹⁴ While Marsh’s proposal calls for a much-needed counterbalance to the distance contemporary suicidology research keeps from its subject matter, I argue that emotional descriptions will only go part of the way—what we need is a nomadism grounded in an ethology of affects, a way of doing suicidology that will enter us into processes of what Deleuze and Guattari call *becomings*.

Nomad suicidology is specifically about the *becomings* of the suicidologist. For Deleuze and Guattari, *becomings* are processes of change that are initiated by some elements of one body entering into a relationship with elements of another. In the case of the nomad suicidologist, this would mean some elements of their subjectivity being drawn into a change process as they connect with the suicidal. *Becomings* are not to be thought of as a movement from one state of being to another. Rather, *becomings* characterize an ongoing process in which we are forever finding ourselves *in-between*. Nomad suicidologists are therefore susceptible, perhaps even vulnerable, to the changes that the intensities of other bodies and subjectivities coded as suicidal bring about in them. A study of our own *becomings-suicidal* would include and encounter and embrace our own suicidal elements, desperations, histories, fears, hopes, perceptions, and pains, which can be intensified through encounter. Our own subjective processes would be inextricably tied to the iterative processes of performing, knowing, becoming, and intervening in what comes to be called suicide and suicidology.

All that is related to suicide contains extreme intensities that evoke all forms of affective and social response. While the goals of much suicide research and prevention practice aim to understand, contain, and reduce such intensities, I am questioning here the potential lines of escape from dominant mappings of ourselves and our work that are made possible through proximity to suicide. How proximal and open can suicidologists become, not just in relation to suicidal subjects, but to all the elements of the suicidal geography? Rather than avoid and control suicide and the suicidal, nomad suicidology

¹⁴ Marsh, “Critical Suicidology,” 8.

would explore what is made possible or brought together by direct engagement as a form of ethics.

As Braidotti suggests, “paradoxically, it is those who have already cracked up a bit, those who have suffered pain and injury, who are better placed to take the lead in the process of ethical transformation.”¹⁵ Changes achieved by entering into these ethical and intense relationships always imply a becoming of the dominant, reified, or secure subject. In our case, the dominant subject is the suicidologist, identified not only by professional status but through the interests and intersections of colonialism, hetero-patriarchy, and capitalism.¹⁶ To enter into a becoming with suicidal intensities is a practice moving away from the accumulations of a secured subjectivity, particularly securities invested in dominant knowledge. As an example such a becoming, I will attempt to extend White’s analysis of Jaworski’s work through Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becomings-woman.

Becomings-Woman

In “Shaking Up Suicidology,” White engages Jaworski’s work to demonstrate how misfit scholars are working on the borders of suicidology and thereby providing openings for unsettling conversations.¹⁷ With a focus on the circular effects of gendered constructions of suicide, Jaworski argues that concepts such as agency and intention, which effectively make suicide a doable and knowable act, rely on gender binaries and masculinist assumptions.¹⁸ For example, she uses autopsy photographs to interrogate how the gendered physical body is decisive for interpretations of lethality and intent. She thereby challenges the gender binaries implicit and explicit in understandings of suicide.

Importantly, her reintroduction of “the fleshiness of the corporeal body”¹⁹ also works at remedying that other abhorrent binary at the heart of Western epistemology: mind/body dualism. Jaworski successfully deploys poststructural and feminist theory to rupture the Western epistemology that structures the object and subject of suicide and thereby provides a way that we might “problematize the conceptual parameters of suicide and create knowledge that is more gender-aware and gender-compassionate.”²⁰ While philosophically powerful, Jaworski’s book does more than critique our knowledge of suicide—it propels a veritable becoming-woman of the reader and the suicidology field more generally. Jaworski’s intellectual work provides a deft deconstruction and counterforce to the hegemonic masculinist epistemology, and her writing style moves us away from a masculinist suicidologist subjectivity through affect, vulnerability, and

¹⁵ Rosi Braidotti, “On Putting the Active Back into Activism,” *New Formations* 68, no. 1 (2009): 53.

¹⁶ Kral, “Postcolonial Suicide Among Inuit in Arctic Canada,” *Cult Med Psychiatry* 36, no. 2 (2012); Marsh, “Critical Suicidology”; Vikki Reynolds, “Hate Kills,” in *Critical Suicidology: Transforming Suicide Research and Prevention* ed. Jennifer White, Ian Marsh, Michael Kral, and Jonathan Morris, (Vancouver: UBC Press, in press); Jennifer White, “Shaking Up Suicidology.”

¹⁷ White, “Shaking Up Suicidology.”

¹⁸ Katrina Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014).

¹⁹ Jaworski, 4.

²⁰ Jaworski, 7.

engagement. In this later sense Jaworski's work provides an opening through which a reader or field can enter into a process of becoming.

Jaworski begins her book with a confession: "It is difficult for me to think and write about suicide. Half of the time I wish I never did. Personal experiences with suicide influence my writing."²¹ She goes on to share her personal experience and in so doing enters with us into a relationship from which we cannot easily recuperate who we were before. With her own relationships with suicide at the heart of her powerful prose, she produces an ensemble of affects that propel a becoming-woman of the reader. Not that becomings-woman are caught up in an essentialist understanding of woman as emotional, vulnerable, or engaged, but that all becomings, all movements away from the dominant subject begin by casting away from what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as "the standard upon which the majority is based: white, adult, 'rational,' etc., in short, the average European, the subject of enunciation."²²

Jaworski not only challenges the Western epistemology that structures how suicide is known, written about, and performed, she herself offers us an alternative. The concept of becoming helps me here to understand how her work is operating at the level of ontology by propelling changes in who the writer and reader of suicide are. I suggest Jaworski's work provides an example of how a nomad science is operating within and outside mainstream suicidology at all times. I hope to show in the final sections of this reply that what Widger calls a post-suicidology is already upon us and that the reply collective is one avenue that is working to network, extend, and amplify these post-suicidal projects.

Contemporary Post-Suicidology

Widger, in his reply to Fitzpatrick et al., puts forward the concept of "post-suicidology," which references a future point in which mainstream suicidology discourse does not preemptively direct or constrain alternative conceptions, explanations, or responses to the range of experience that are now overcoded as suicide.²³ In more philosophical terms, Widger makes his argument this way: "One cannot approach suicide in a way that suicidology has not predicated because suicidology is responsible for both the object and the subject involved."²⁴ My attempt so far in this reply so far has been to divest us of this causal chain. Starting with the material world, I have argued that an infinitely complex array of intermingling bodies produces a variety of events, thoughts, objects, and subjects which then get aggregated, averaged, and parsed into disciplines such as suicidology and subjectivities such as the suicidologists. Not to rehash nature versus nurture debates, my point is that seething within suicidology itself—and, of course, outside its purview—are innumerable subjects and objects not yet coded by the dominant vernacular. Nomadology, I have proposed, is the practice of immanently networking these subjects and objects in ways that ward off their appropriation by the machines that crush

²¹ Jaworski, *The Gender of Suicide*, 1.

²² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 292.

²³ Widger, "Suicidology as a Social Practice."

²⁴ Widger, 3.

singularity into averages—or, better, to outpace those machines through creative production.²⁵

The main point of disagreement between Widger and me, it seems, is that for him, any local event or idea is inevitably caught up in a dialectical relationship with the dominant conceptions of suicide. I am arguing contra this claim that unique ideas and experiences are always in excess of the state science's capture. While I somewhat agree that “ontologically- and epistemologically-localised studies of suicide remain trapped within the suicidological paradigm precisely because they are studies of suicide,”²⁶ I disagree that we are trapped. I believe that when even the most mainstream studies get enacted in specific material contexts, they are perpetually creating anomalies, outliers, and lines of escape from state science. Interestingly enough, Widger hints at this himself when he claims that “we are all suicidologists.”²⁷ He explains that “why people kill themselves remains a topic of constant fascination and debate, and one upon which my informants in the village like nothing more than to ruminate.”²⁸

This statement demonstrates to me that across the globe there are innumerable new variations, extensions, and alternatives to suicide as determined by suicidologists. In this reply I have developed the concept of nomad suicidology to characterize such a process of unending experimentation with relationships and ideas at the ground level. Such work would be constitutively opposed to the hegemony of a dominant form, but would be relatively powerless to prevent the state science's appropriation of its products. Instead of inclusion, recognition, or a settled state of our own, nomad suicidologists can work instead to network and amplify diverse perspectives, affects, and approaches. I believe the reply collective provides us with a good example of how this is done.

Nomadic Networks

To end, I turn to this response and reply collective itself as an example of nomadic networking. Deleuze and Guattari use images of a rhizome to characterize an image of thought adequate to the movements and connections of nomad science.²⁹ They describe rhizomes as heterogeneous multiplicities that connect at multiple points, can be variously entered into, and can propel themselves in diverse directions without recourse to a central agency. The rhizome is contrasted to an arborescent image which delineates main lines, genealogies, and a branching structure that predetermine movements and connections.

Deleuze and Guattari use rats and tubers as examples of rhizomes. In contrast to rhizomes, they speak about hierarchically organized arborescent genealogy “which plots a point, fixes an order.”³⁰ In their view, rhizomatic maps “must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

²⁶ Widger, 3.

²⁷ Widger, “Suicidology as a Social Practice,” 3.

²⁸ Widger, 3.

²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

³⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 7.

entranceways and exits and its own lines of flight.”³¹ As an example of a nomadic mapping, the SEERC structure for the reply collective allows for multiple entry points, a flat (as opposed to hierarchical) plane of connection and relationship, and intensive, expressive, affective engagement.

Arborescent mainstream suicidology organizes disciplines, bodies, and methodologies according to a preestablished hierarchical structure. It is perpetually ingesting, expelling, and repelling nomad suicidology from its body. Suicidologists are not either misfits or mainstream, nomad or statist. We perpetually move between the two, our thoughts and actions always creating lines of escape from the standard while also being recuperated by it. In the hopes of furthering one line of escape, I have in this reply transversally mapped White’s concept of the suicidology misfit with Deleuze and Guattari’s nomad philosophy.

Arguing for our subjectivities to be centred in our work, I have engaged the ideas of Jaworski to provide an example of where this kind of analysis can take us. Lastly, I have contrasted nomadism with the goal of post-suicidology articulated by Widger and provided an image of thought reflective of the workings of the suicidology reply collective. The energy that has sustained me in crafting this reply has come from my enjoyment and appreciation of those involved in this collective. My hope is for us to continue to meet each other anew through our wanderings in suicidology.

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³¹ Deleuze and Guattari, 21.

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