

*Undoing Suicidism: A Trans, Queer, Crip Approach to Rethinking (Assisted) Suicide*, Alexandre Baril, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2023. 334 pages. \$110.50 hardcover, \$32.95 paperback, free open-access edition available. Publisher webpage: <https://tupress.temple.edu/books/undoing-suicidism>

Rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM) scholars are increasingly critical of the complex relations of power and ideology that infuse normative models of healthcare and wellness, particularly those that reinforce systemic inequities and the oppression of marginalized groups. Indeed, many of us are concerned with the rhetorical construction and effects of intersecting structures of discrimination, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, among others, within RHM contexts. To this multi-dimensional matrix of domination, Alexandre Baril (2023) challenges us to add “structural suicidism,” a term designating a formerly unnamed mode of subjugation expressed in ideologies and policies that frame suicidality as a defect in urgent need of corrective repair (p. 7, emphasis in original).

Baril’s *Undoing Suicidism: A Trans, Queer, Crip Approach to Rethinking (Assisted) Suicide* will appeal to RHM scholars seeking to better understand how structural suicidism disables possibilities of rhetorical agency for suicidal people by rendering them vulnerable to violence under the guise of prevention. In the foreword, Robert McRuer brings this issue to the forefront by repeating a question Baril poses later in the text, with reference to the work of Gayatri Spivak: “Can the suicidal subject speak?” (p. xiv). The inquiry directs us to consider the conditions incapacitating suicidal people from freely participating in acts of public address constituting the broad domain of rhetorical life. Hence, Baril’s book is well-poised to help RHM scholars consider the rhetorical dimensions and ramifications of structural suicidism.

Baril begins the book by connecting his personal experience to the theoretical content, performing what he calls “autothanatotheory” which gives readers access to the lived knowledge informing his perspectives as a self-identified suicidal person confronting the material realities of suicidism (p. 28). Baril critiques the dominant logic of prevention that imposes upon suicidal people a “compulsory aliveness” manifested in rhetoric that frames the suicidal person’s desire to die as madness or a pathological abnormality necessitating rectification, even if by force (p. 11). Relying on an intersectional methodology indebted to trans, queer, and crip theoretical approaches, Baril analogizes suicide prevention methods to that of conversion therapy for LGBTQ+ people, insisting that suicidal people are often forced to lie about their experiences with suicidality out of fear that they will be coerced into carceral settings and undergo involuntary treatment regimens. For Black, Brown, and disabled people, their precarity in these situations is heightened by the statistical likelihood of experiencing abuses by police and medical professionals. Meanwhile, Baril highlights that suicidal people perceived as “unproductive” and valueless within neoliberal capitalist frameworks—such as disabled, sick, and elderly people—are often considered justifiably suicidal and even made icons in advocacy campaigns supporting the right to die by physician assistance. While emphasizing the ableism saturating this line of suicidist thinking, Baril ultimately advocates for a social movement toward anti-suicidism, which would, in practice, dissolve preventionist scripts and enable suicidal people to explore their ideations more freely and, if necessary, obtain access to assisted suicide regardless of their health or viability as economic producers. An anti-suicidist world, Baril argues, would save lives by ending stigmas and practices that only compound the hardships suicidal people regularly face.

The book's first part, "Rethinking Suicide," consists of three chapters reconceptualizing suicide. In Chapter 1, Baril traces the configuration of suicidality from the vantage of medical/psychological, social, public health, and social justice perspectives, criticizing the varied ways each of these positions perpetuate suicidism and sanism through discourses and treatment models conflating suicidality with Madness and vice versa. In Chapter 2, Baril articulates a vision of anti-suicidism premised in intersectional queer and trans theories. Attending to the ways that suicidist ideologies circulate in commonplace rhetorical constructions of the suicide crisis within LGBTQ+ communities—a population impacted by disproportionately high rates of suicidality and suicide—he advances a queering and transing of suicidality that subverts dualistic ways of understanding so-called "good" and "bad" ways to live and die (p. 101). In Chapter 3, Baril more thoroughly contextualizes notions of suicidism within Disability, Crip, and Mad Studies, demonstrating the limitations of each of these fields regarding the unique needs of suicidal people. Baril closes the chapter by recommending that scholars and activists in these fields move beyond simplified explanations of suicidality as a mere consequence of ableist and sanist worldviews by focusing on the ways ableism and sanism collaborate with suicidism to marginalize suicidal people and other disabled communities.

The book's second half, "Rethinking Assisted Suicide," contains two chapters centering the promise of assisted suicide in anti-suicidist thought and praxis. In Chapter 4, Baril examines the signature argumentative strategies of the right-to-die movement. His analysis shows contemporary campaigns for assisted suicide rely on neoliberal conceptions of individual liberty, which covertly cast the desire for aided self-killings as a rational choice and non-assisted forms of suicide as impulsive and aberrant. Baril asserts the right-to-die movement rhetorically reproduces suicidist ideology in its messaging and sustains a biopolitical regime demanding suicidal people to stay alive no matter the cost. Throughout Chapter 5, Baril makes a case for assisted suicide as a vehicle for resisting suicidism and cultivating an anti-suicidist world. To do so, Baril confronts factions of the anti-ableism movement arguing that assisted suicide is an inherent threat to disabled people, a population more likely to be victimized by a logic of disposability endemic to conservative austerity politics positioning disability as economically inefficient and thus suitable for eradication. While acknowledging assisted suicide, like any mode of treatment, can be weaponized nefariously, Baril offers a "queercrip model of (assisted) suicide" that would dismantle existing oppressions intensifying rates of suicidality within marginalized groups, and generate spaces for suicidal people to openly communicate their suicidality and pursue the full range of options available for either continuing or discontinuing their journeys on Earth (p. 211). Baril ends the chapter by encouraging the adoption of a practical ethical stance rooted in "thanatopolitics," or a "politics of death that concerns *living suicidal individuals* rather than only dead ones or the dead-to-be" (p. 247, emphasis in original). The thanatopolitics Baril imagines ameliorates the harms caused by structural suicidism, creating the potential for more lives to be saved, as scholars, activists, and ordinary people fight for the right of all consenting adults to choose assisted suicide (p. 246).

The conclusion offers perhaps the most relevant point of entry for RHM scholars interested in incorporating the insights of *Undoing Suicidism* into their research. Therein, Baril gestures toward understanding of suicidal people's voices as "microresistance" (p. 251). In doing so, he discusses feeling silenced, as he has many times before when discussing his personal experiences with suicidality, while completing the book. According to Baril, both "scholars and people in the publishing industry who are open to cutting-edge scholarship have expressed concern about the controversial nature of my arguments" (p. 252). Such skepticism reflects the

rampancy of suicidism as a mode of foreclosing expressions of suicidal people's rhetorical agency across academic and other contexts.

Certainly, much needs to be done to dismantle suicidism and refine anti-suicidist positions in humanistic scholarship and advocacy. RHM scholars are well-equipped to take up Baril's invitation to *undo* suicidism, especially given the field's growing investment in producing politically charged analyses that lay bare the rhetorical operations and inner workings of oppressive power structures and ideological formations. RHM scholars should consider picking up where the book leaves off, in the messiness that is the embodied knowledges and experiences of suicidal people. If I have any criticism of the book, it would be its failure to consistently center the material realities and voices of suicidal people other than the author over the course of its engagement with abstract theoretical concepts. However, I also recognize that acquiring access to first-hand perspectives on suicidality is difficult precisely due to the suicidism Baril indicts as culpable in the silencing of suicidal people. For this reason, I see immense potential for RHM scholars to begin building the foundation for an unapologetically anti-suicidist rhetorical studies by recovering the long-hidden rhetorical practices and agencies of suicidal people. If RHM goes in this direction, we would do well to cite, critique, and extend Baril's findings in *Undoing Suicidism*. Perhaps we will eventually discover that a new future untethered from the violence of structural suicidism is the one best suited for living because it respects the diversity of a full range of ontoepistemological standpoints toward matters of life and death.

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