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Glimpses of Gesture: Refusing and Recovering Loss in Honig and Euripides

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How does Greek tragedy *move us* towards action? How does it perform a politics of the body that also reimagines the body politic? In *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Bonnie Honig elevates Euripides' *Bacchae* beyond its status as a play and towards a theoretical and practical model of refusal: a mode of Bacchic reading and Bacchic doing of "what is needed to render patriarchy inoperative."[1] Honig combines and enhances three contemporary critical notions of refusal—"inoperativity" (Agamben), "inclination" (Cavarero), and "fabulation" (Hartman)[2]—through a reading of the *Bacchae*'s female collective, who, as she demonstrates, embody a physical and psychic mode of radical dissent. The Bacchic women, moreover, in their flight to Cithaeron (the play's heterotopia) and their subsequent return to Thebes, enact what Honig identifies as a necessary "arc of refusal," which entails a bidirectional relationship between refuge and return: you leave for "Cithaeron," do your work, *build*, but then return.[3] In order to enact its political arc, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* urges us to "rehearse some new *moves*, [to] *corporealize* different habits";[4] to suspend and intensify the use of our bodies, to throw ourselves into fits, into gestures of sororal care, to dance, and to then come back and to commit, but not too soon, or else, like Agave, risk being led to exile.

Thus, as Honig works through theories of social movement and assemblage, political philosophy, and visual and motion studies (to name a few), the body emerges as vital to the mobilization of a feminist theory of refusal. Across the three main chapters, corporeal movement and pose become the critical limb that holds

1. Honig 2021: 21.
2. With reference to, respectively, "Notes on Gesture" in Agamben 1993; Cavarero 2016; Hartman 2020.
3. Honig 2021: 104.
4. Honig 2021: 104 (emphasis mine).

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together Honig's analysis and amalgamation of Agamben, Cavarero, and Hartman. Through the three theorists and her reading of the *Bacchae*, Honig creates a feminist corporeal figure whose bodily formation and intensification, whose connectivity with other bodies around her, and whose gesture and gait, perform a politics of refusal.

I see *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, in short, as a feminist reclaiming of gestures, and an identification of both visceral and visual forms of dissent. In what follows, I work with Honig in order to read, identify, and mobilize the body as it emerges from the text of drama. I am interested in how one can recuperate the body's gestures and pose from verbal relics;[5] how, as Schneider puts it, one can "touch time through the residue of the gesture or the cross-temporality of the pose";[6] how drama imagines the body to occupy and take up theatrical, and subsequently political, space; and how these somatic spatial relations may relate to a politics of refusal, as conceptualized by Honig.

Below, I read Honig's corporeal refusal with another Euripidean drama, *Trojan Women*, in particular with the staging of its central character Hecuba. The play performs the suffering of the Trojan women (especially that of Hecuba, Cassandra, and Andromache) who are held in captivity by the Greeks after the fall of Troy. I will be focusing on Hecuba, whose static and stationary gestures seem to stand in contrast with the erratic and fluid movements of the Bacchae. The appearance of dissimilitude between Hecuba and the Trojan women, on the one hand, and Agave and the Bacchants, on the other, is precisely the interpretative juncture that will i) elucidate the significance of bodies and pose in Honig's feminist theory of refusal and ii) help us think through the implications that this form of corporeal activism[7] may have on subjects whose bodies are disenfranchised and displaced, bodies stuck between two cities (or rather cityless/*a-polis*)[8] with neither obvious points of refuge nor of return.

The *Trojan Women* is a play about captivity wherein, for a critic interested in reading tragedy via Aristotle, not much happens.[9] But of course, *much happens*:

5. A study of gesture in drama demands that we think through both actual performance (as indicated by stage directions and other explicit expressions of the sort) and the imagined performances that arise via poetic language: that is, either performances potentially imagined by the ancient audience or performances that distance requires us to visualize in the present day. Regardless, it is important to note that the performance of refusal in tragedy, especially the sort of refusal identified by Honig, oscillates between actual performance—what bodies would have done on stage—and the performance of language, or rather the way poetic language imagines and intensifies the possibilities of the body; the way it brings to the foreground minor gestures and puts into focus the significance of a pose.

6. Schneider 2011: 2.

7. Here, "corporeal" activism, versus activism alone, emphasizes the way in which, à la Honig, postures of the body matter when identifying and interpreting refusal: for instance (as discussed below) the significance of horizontal bodily formations in opposition to the standard vertical postures of refusal, as well as the potential movements of the body (or lack thereof) towards refuge and return.

8. A term used in the *Trojan Women* to refer to Hecuba and the city of Troy itself, for instance at 1186 and 1292.

9. As Schlegel 1864: 136 famously claimed, it is impossible for a "piece to have less action, in the energetic sense of the word." Cf. also Aristotle's definition of tragedy at *Poet.* 1449b31.

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captivity and the expositions on the conditions of enslavement that fill the drama are themselves enough "plot" to obviate conventional narrative arcs such as reversal and recognition. Adding further tension, or rather weight, to what I believe is the productivity of stillness, is the staging of Hecuba, who appears collapsed and motionless on the ground from the start of the play,[10] silent for the first one hundred lines, her body at the center of, and grounding, the sort of larger-than-life divine council between Poseidon and Athena that is typical of Greek drama. From there, her movements seem limited in terms of ground covered; she appears to hold her spot and only changes her posture from prostrate to supine, at times lifting her head, at other moments rocking back and forth in mourning, sometimes rising for speech, only to then collapse back to the ground on which she began.[11] Hecuba, moreover, never leaves the stage: there is no refuge, no escape, no Cithaeron.

On the one hand, it is *too easy* to see Hecuba's constant gestures and expressions of mourning (her body on the ground, her immobility, the descriptions of pain and a body beaten down so that all it can do is simply lie there)[12] as a sort of helpless suffering, meant to evoke pity.[13] Moreover, we should refuse a reading that sees her suffering as a moment of reckoning for the Athenian audience, whose imperial ambitions around the time of the play's original production (415 BCE) had actually, or almost, subjected the populations of other city states to the same fate as Hecuba and the Trojan women.[14] Such interpretative gestures, where the suffering body is a surface that reflects the ideology of the patriarchy, are far from a feminist theory of refusal (even if they entail a critique of the city). Drawing sympathy, after all, is not the goal of political refusal, and such readings of the archive—readings that think with and about the Athenian audience—only reinforce the archive.[15] Rather, a feminist theory of refusal urges us to resist this pathologization of mourning and, instead, to find within it a mode of inoperativity (Agamben) and an intensification thereof.

It is important to note that as *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* forcefully argues for a depathologization of the Bacchae's madness, it at the same time makes space

10. Eur. *Tro*. 36–38.

11. Eur. *Tro.* 98–121.

12. See Eur. *Tro.*, esp. 112–19.

13. This is Schlegel's criticism of the play (1846: 136–37). On the history of scholarly criticism of the *Trojan Women*, in particular scholarship on its failures as well as attempts to redeem the work, see Dunn 1996: 101 and Shapiro and Burian 2009: 10–13.

14. E.g., the Athenians' colonizing expeditions to the Greek west, their planned but reversed executions in Mytilene, their enslavement of the women and children of Scione, and the seizure of Melos. On how the play implicates the Athenians in its act of violence see Wohl 2015: 47–48. She also offers a critique of the supposed humanizing effect of this form of pity and the ways in which it fails to bring about justice and political outcome: "Indeed, to the extent that it allows us to feel complacent about our inaction, pity may even impede the impetus toward justice: we can watch this beautiful suffering and cry our humane tears and feel that we have done enough" (48).

15. Not to mention, to quote a reviewer of this essay, that the Athenian audience itself is an essentialist construct—a particular ethos projected and reinforced by modernity.

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for emotional intensity as integral to and even *as* refusal.[16] Perhaps then we can see "the accumulation of helpless suffering" in the *Trojan Women*, which Schlegel claims "wearies us, and exhausts our compassion" (for which reason he claims "Euripides frequently fails"), as an intensification of exhaustion that demands a necessary failure.[17] But this is not a failure of plot or of character development; rather, it is a failure that the play demands of the reader/viewer who expects resolution and reconciliation—an expectation that internal and external critics, from Talthybius to Schlegel, demand of Hecuba but that she refuses, and thus a failure to accept in turn the affective weight of captivity that the fiction imposes on the body on stage.

In her reading of the *Bacchae*, moreover, Honig points us to the ways in which *simply lying down* can be a radical corporeal form of resistance when we understand the significance of horizontality. She reminds us of an often-overlooked moment of the Bacchae's "slow temporality" on Cithaeron, where the women lie exhausted on branches and oak leaves, not drunk, not dancing wildly, not chasing Aphrodite, and asks, "What were they *doing*?"[18] Thinking with Butler's *Performative Theory of Assembly*, Honig answers that their "simple act of sleeping there" is "a way to put the body on the line" and to "prefigure a new horizontality."[19]

Yet unlike the Bacchic women, Hecuba is sleeping neither in assembly nor in peace. But perhaps her restlessness, her articulations of mourning that, although performed in solitude, come to represent the suffering of an entire city, are precisely why the horizontal impasse of her body refuses business as usual. In particular, I have in mind the way her performance questions the possibility of any action, movement, music, or dance that one would expect from a Greek tragedy. As Weiss notes, "In this bleak postwar environment, the women repeatedly question the possibility of any musical performance beyond lament. Above all, they highlight the absence of *choreia*. . . . the audience is even led to wonder if it will feature any choral song and dance at all."[20] Consider how as the Bacchae awaken, they loosen their hair, let it fall over their shoulders, and resume their frenzy and their violence, their twisted choral dance. But Hecuba awakens and expresses her *longing* (πόθος) to move, to rock, to tilt from side to side, to whirl (εἱλίξαι) like

16. Here, like Honig, one can think of the work of Indigenous studies scholars, such as Coulthard 2014, who have argued for expressions of anger, resentment, and grief as signs of protest and outrage that refuse the logic of settler colonialism. Nevertheless, as Honig notes, her argument for a return to the city does not always serve scholars such as Coulthard who problematize a return to the city that "keeps falsely claiming jurisdiction and title over you and your land" (Honig 2021: 1–2 and n.1).

17. Schlegel 1846: 136–37. He goes on further to say that "Euripides was not content with making Hecuba roll in the dust with covered head, and whine a whole piece through; he has also introduced her in another tragedy which bears her name, as the standing representative of suffering and woe."

18. Honig 2021: 24. Honig's quotation of the *Bacchae* and the translation thereof, which I have paraphrased above, is in reference to lines 638–88.

19. Honig 2021: 25 and n.33.

20. Weiss 2017: 100–101.

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the Bacchae, only to find herself *achoreutos*, without dance, without *choreia*.[21] While it seems as though her sustained state of mourning obstructs plot and action (and this itself may be its own form of refusal), I would argue that she more importantly intensifies it, in a way that feels counter to what we consider "action" to be, and therein lies its significance. On the one hand, Hecuba's sense of choral loss is nonetheless paired with the choral song so as to "effect a dissonance," as Weiss puts it, central to the play's production of meaning.[22] This somatic and sonic clash[23] (Hecuba's stillness paired with choral dance; Hecuba's expressions of musical loss and the accompanying song) creates an intense aesthetics of suffering grounded in a refusal to perform as usual.[24] Moreover, instead of her body as actor propelling plot forward (leading us to reversals and recognitions), her horizontality is the plane around and through which all acting bodies move—from the gods who open the play and the Greek messenger Talthybius to Cassandra, Helen, Andromache and the chorus of Trojan women. To quote Honig on Fanon, "the muscles of the colonized are always tensed,"[25] and when read through a feminist theory of refusal, her body is not (à la Agamben) suspensive (an aesthetic spectacle through which spectators apprehend embodied suffering); rather it is (à la Honig) *intensive*, "exert[ing] a gravitational pull on the community assembled before her."[26]

Hecuba is not a bacchant (unlike Cassandra, who in this drama plays the bacchant par excellence, a crazed maenad who sings her own *hymenaios*, celebrating a forced marriage that results in the murder of a patriarch).[27] Yet the *Bacchae*, when mobilized as a theoretical model of refusal, presses us to imagine how Hecuba's body is nonetheless engaged in an antagonistic practice. In conjunction with horizontality, we can also turn to Honig's deployment of Cavarero's refusal concept "inclination," which "refuses the traditionally privileged upright posture and ethics of moral rectitude."[28] "Inclination" is perhaps best instantiated in the *Trojan Women* by Andromache, who enters the stage on a cart with her son Astyanax in her hands, both of whom are framed by Trojan spoils. We can easily imagine her pose as a somber

21. See Eur. *Tro*. 105–121. On "the motif of lost *choreia*" and the "paradox of performed absence" in this play see Weiss 2017: 106–108.

22. Weiss 2017: 101.

23. Moreover, if we imagine Hecuba's verbal refusal to dance and the potential of her body in some form of choric (even if horizontal) movement, we arrive at what Butler 2017: 184 identifies as the "unmasterable arbitrariness [that] characterizes the relation between what the body does and what the person says, suggesting that language and body go their own way."

24. As Wohl 2015: 43 notes, Hecuba's "unremitting woe is presented in self-consciously aestheticizing terms," which, for Wohl, create an epic effect where Hecuba, as well as the other characters and the chorus of the play, imagine and perform epic heroization through song. "Euripides," she says, "deploys all the resources of tragic language to sing this Iliad of suffering."

25. Honig 2021: 40n.97.

26. Honig 2021: 42.

27. See Rehm 1994: 128–35 on the productive "confusions of marriage and death that inform each of the major dramatic encounters" (128). In the spirit of Bacchic revelry, Cassandra "celebrates her wedding precisely *because* it leads to death." On Cassandra's *hymenaios* see also Weiss 2017: 113–16. See also Eur. *Tro*. 170, where Hecuba describes Cassandra as ἐκβακχεύουσαν.

28. Honig 2021: 46.

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mirroring of Mary in da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, whom Cavarero reads as an enigmatic woman whose posture of inclination should not be mistaken for subservience. Later in the play, Hecuba also takes this pose when Talthybius brings back the murdered Astyanax for her to bury on behalf of Andromache. While we could read both women's inclined bodies as maternal postures in Cavarerian terms (one the mother, the other the grandmother), Hecuba's leaning body also registers the way in which she is useful to others, in particular to Andromache, reflecting perhaps what Honig sees as the sororal significance of inclination.[29] Yet one could argue that, nonetheless, both Andromache and Hecuba enact gestures of maternal mourning that can more easily be read as the Greeks (via Talthybius) "interpolating" the women back into the patriarchal fold,[30] much as Cadmus turns Agave from an "ecstatic revolutionary leader, [a] proud sister, . . . into a static mourning mother."[31] Yet Honig reminds us that even in the classical world

> the figure of the mourning mother is assumed to be radical, not conservative, a danger to the city and not a vehicle of its restoration. . . . women's laments are seen as dangerous because they unsettle the state's capacity to arm itself by drafting young men, mothers' sons, to put their lives on the line in battle. But . . . those dangerous mourning mothers are . . . comforting . . . because . . . at least they are *mothers*, and not maenads. This is why Cadmus maternalizes Agave. It works.[32]

Hecuba perverts even this logic of the patriarchy. In Euripides' (now fragmentary) version of the story (*Alexander*),[33] Hecuba first exposes her son Alexander to death because she dreams that he will be the destruction of Troy. But after a series of events, typical of tragedy, she learns that her lost son, whom she has mourned for many years, is in fact alive. She then decides to save him, and thus fulfills the prophecy that he will be the destruction of Troy. In failing to kill her son the second time, Hecuba destroys her city.[34] She brings about the destruction of the patriarchy through the very tenderness of motherhood that Cadmus wants to reimpose on Agave at the end of the *Bacchae*. Moreover, as we pause on Hecuba's inclined body holding Astyanax, holding the violence of the Greeks in her hands, we might ask whether she too, like the Bacchae, refuses Cavarero's (maternal) pacifism—whether she is "enigmatically caring but not subservient," and whether, as

29. As Honig 2021: 102 notes, "Inclination corrects for any (over-)rejection of use because it is a register in which we seek to make ourselves useful to others. . . . this refusal concept [inclination] has to be recovered, too, shifted from maternalism to sorority, which is the more egalitarian kin relation, and from being on the cusp of pacifism *or* violence to being in the dirt, practicing a kind of care and power that seek peace but risk implication in violence, too."

30. Honig 2021: 79–80.

31. Honig 2021: 81.

32. Honig 2021: 83.

33. It is believed that the *Trojan Women* was part of the same trilogy as *Alexander* (the third tragedy being Palamedes). On the dramatic effect of the three dramas performed in sequence see Dunn 1996: 111–14.

34. On the reconstruction of *Alexander* and Hecuba's failure, see Shapiro and Burian 2009: 8.

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Honig asks of Leonardo's Mary, "[she too could] bring down a king."[35] Readers of Euripides will recall that Hecuba (in the eponymous play) does in fact bring down a king when she murders Polymestor, the ruler of Thrace.

Thus the violence that her mourning posture recalls is twofold, enacting both the crushing weight of captivity forced upon her *and* the violence that she reclaims in her role as a grieving mother. Her horizontality and her inclination, moreover, are, to paraphrase Honig, an answer to the verticality that patriarchy enacts.[36] As Carrie Noland describes in her work on *Agency and Embodiment*, gesture is a means through which the body measures space, and when corporeal movement takes center stage, it becomes "essential to understanding how human beings are embodied within—and impress themselves on—their worlds";[37] in other words, gestures are "organized forms of kinesis through which subjects navigate and alter their world,"[38] and which simultaneously apply pressure and alter the way in which we orient ourselves around them. Whether lying, sitting, or inclined on the theatrical floor, Hecuba's body puts stress on the vertical nature of our gaze, which always wants to look up but which becomes disoriented as it attempts to decipher the planes that she occupies.

At the end of the play, Hecuba's movements apply further pressure to the verticality she has refused throughout. In her final acts of mourning, she is not merely a spectator to Troy falling behind her. Rather, both the visual and verbal references to Hecuba and the chorus' postures create the impression that it is the force of their mourning bodies—rather than the violence of the Greeks alone—that pulls the city down. As Hecuba "sinks to the ground" to "beat the earth with both hands" (Eur. *Tro.* 1305–1307),[39] the chorus "[follow her and kneel] to earth, calling" upon the dead (1305–1310). "Did you sense that? did you hear it?" (1325). With Troy hidden from sight by the dust and ash (1320–21), the women call us to feel and sense the towers crashing (1326); to witness how their collective knocking, their fists beating down on the land, exerts the strongest "gravitational pull" yet[40] as they "split the earth open, to swallow the city whole."[41]

Throughout this piece, I have deployed *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* as a form of literary criticism. Put differently, I have thought about its politics as a recuperative mode of reading that works around and against the archive, and, in the brief case study of the *Trojan Women*, a mode of reading that attempts to recover and intensify the resistance and refusal of captive bodies, bodies on the brink of extinction. By reading Hecuba's postures of mourning as forms of refusal and dissent, I have

35. Honig 2021: 49.
36. Honig 2021: 56 and 70.
37. Noland 2009: 2.
38. Noland 2009: 4.
39. These turns of phrase are from Kovacs' translation, which beautifully captures the effect of γεραιά γ᾽ *ἐς πέδον* μέλεα / *τιθε*ῖσα καὶ χερσὶ γαῖ-/αν κτυποῦσα δισσαῖς (emphasis mine).
40. Honig 2021: 8 and 77.
41. Eur. *Tro.* 1327–28; see Shapiro and Burian's translation.

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emphasized, via Honig, the ways in which her horizontality is not a passive reflector of pathos but a corporeal schema that confronts the verticality of patriarchy.

But as a brief and final note, we should recall that *Hecuba and the Trojan Women are not bacchants*. Thus, they cannot enact the "arc of refusal" that Honig necessitates. Held in captivity and dispossessed of a city, they do not have the Bacchic gait that moves them towards refuge and return (and it is important to note that Honig does not claim to account for the positionality that the Trojan women instantiate). Thus, here, my reading confronts an impasse, and one may wonder whether without at least a heterotopia, a sort of Cithaeron, the Trojan Women can ever really rehearse and perform postures of refusal. After all, as Honig points out, "Inclination . . . cannot survive verticality's hegemony without seeking out occasionally fugitivity's refuge."[42]

When the Trojan Women take strides, they do so towards captivity.[43] As their trembling limbs march them forward to the ships (1327–30) and away from their city, Hecuba tries to run into the flames of burning Troy as though refuge might be found in its ruins (1282–83). However, throughout the play, Hecuba has already imagined her body on board the ship,[44] where she no longer moves but is moved by the vessels of life, sailing with the tide of fate (103–104). In her imaginings of the ships, Hecuba further questions the futile postures of verticality: the sailors positioning themselves at each end of the ship during the storm, sailors whose bodies must eventually surrender to and be overwhelmed by the cascading waves of fate—an image that recalls both literally and metaphorically the fate awaiting the Greeks.[45] Moreover, the verbal visualizations of the ships that occupy much of the play and that in fact are the imagined setting of the prologue[46] run contrary to the body's relation and connectivity to the ground explored via Hecuba throughout. Indeed, at the start of the drama, we are called to imagine the Trojan Women as sounds *sans* bodies haunting the Scamander (28–29), further emphasizing that when movement happens, there is neither a return to the city nor to the body as it once stood.

42. Honig 2021: 127.

43. The tension between their movement and their lack of freedom is captured by Hecuba's call to her aged feet to "scarcely hasten" or "hasten with pain" (ὦ γεραιὲ πούς, ἐπίσπευσον μόλις, 1275).

44. As Wohl 2015: 43 notes: "Hecuba rocks back and forth in grief like a ship (116–19); the Trojan Horse is compared to a great wooden ship come to harbor in the city (539–41); Andromache's heaving chest is described as 'the oaring of the breast' (570); at the end of the play, Troy is set ablaze by 'hands sweeping like oars, burning with torches' (1257–58), even as the Trojan women, in their parting lines, prepare to step onto the literal ships that will bear them to slavery (1331–32)." See also Eur. *Tro.* 103–104, 683–93, and the prologue of the play.

45. Eur. *Tro.* 686–93. Thus perhaps here she also imagines the futility of *nostos*, not only her own return but even that desired by her captors.

46. The play begins with the imagery of the sea, not only through Poseidon himself opening the dialogue but also with his references to the women aboard the ships and to the fate awaiting the Greeks. As Dunn 1996: 102 argues, "*Trojan Women* begins at the end and remains stuck there." On the "premature curtain" of the prologue, see Dunn 1996: 106–108.

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Although the Trojan women do not have a Cithaeron on which to seek refuge (and they have no city to which they can return), perhaps we can read the setting of the play, the open space outside the walls of captured Troy, as a sort of heterotopia: a space stuck in between two cities that renders its inhabitants cityless/*a-polis*. Here, the women can temporarily practice and perform refusal, and we, attuned to and aware of the significance of formations and intensification of feminine bodies (via Honig), can recover the significance of their gestures: their attempts to claim for themselves (albeit momentarily) a new plane that their captors cannot traverse but that the Greeks must move around and confront as they prepare *their* return to the city.

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