



## A Method in the Madness: After *AFTR*, in Grateful Reply

We work in the dark. We do what we can. We give what we have. . . . The rest is the madness of art.

— Henry James, *The Middle Years*

In *The Sovereignty of Quiet* (2012), Kevin Quashie conjures a radical commitment to Black interiority, which he finds in Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and others. “Quiet” is made possible by refusing to be propelled by the ceaseless rhythms of racial injustice into perpetual action and reaction. Subtitled *Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, the book solicits a refusal to refuse in the expected ways: a refusal of the roles of prophet, martyr, conscience, resistor, scapegoat, or salve to which people of color are often assigned in mainstream American politics and culture. In his subsequent book, *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being* (2021), Quashie continues to advocate for quiet for Black life, positioned not in the withdrawalism of a singular, fortified “I,” but in relationality: “one comes into being through open relation,” he says,<sup>1</sup> and he models that in his own writing with careful, close, loving readings of the thinkers, authors, and poets he assembles into the archive of quiet/aliveness.<sup>2</sup>

I hear in Quashie’s work a challenge to my own in political theory. My position, called agonism, is committed to contestation for the sake of those remaindered by particular political settlements (or partitions of the sensible, as Jacques Rancière would say). From an agonistic perspective, which is oriented by equality,

1. Quashie 2021: 21.

2. By relational scholarship I mean scholarship that is generative, world-building, and free from austerity-thinking. I think here of hooks 1994 and Liboiron 2021 alongside Quashie’s work. I argue for the relationality of agonism in Honig forthcoming.

the commitment to quiet appears possibly quietist. And yet, thinking with Quashie, I have come to understand quiet as its own kind of action. It refuses the often totalizing, oppressive politics of racial, sexual, and propertied enclosure. It takes a break from engaging the violence of the police order. It stops the endless whirl of critique, not out of acceptance of the unacceptable, but as a refusal to give up even more. In its break, Quashie wagers, highly choreographed bodies might learn new steps, or no steps. All that striving, acting, protesting, objecting can hinder quiet and fix us in place rather than freeing people for study, contemplation, being. Agonism tends toward becoming more than being, so it does not prioritize quiet's powers; but we may see something like quiet in what I call "care for the agon," which brings adversaries together to tend to the infrastructural conditions of struggle.<sup>3</sup>

*A Feminist Theory of Refusal* takes seriously Quashie's quiet while still taking its bearings from agonism's commitment to contestation.

In the book, I think with Euripides' *Bacchae*. I read the *Bacchae* as a drama of refusal, noting its regicide, which takes place well before Pentheus is killed. I focus on three refusals in the play (the jailbreak out of Thebes to Cithaeron and time spent there, the killing and then reassembly of Pentheus for burial, and the effort to claim the city in celebration of the bacchantes), reading each with a refusal concept: inoperativity, inclination, and fabulation. This allows me to generate three refusal readings of the play where others have seen only pathology, madness, or drunkenness. But in what I hope is a contributive move, methodologically speaking, I invite the *Bacchae* to return the favor and help us rethink the concepts. Thus, I would describe my approach as finding method in the madness.

Let me review the concepts in a bit more detail and then turn to my critics.

1) Inoperativity. A kind of quiet, drawn from Giorgio Agamben, inoperativity involves work refusal or the suspension of activity. It is an apt concept for the women's break from prison in Thebes and their abandonment of the city for workless leisure on Cithaeron. But mere suspension is not enough to ground refusal, I argue, nor to account for what happens next in the *Bacchae*. Fortunately, the *Bacchae* offers another dimension of the inoperative, pairing the suspensive with the intensive. I find evidence of it in the play's depiction of food and drink on Cithaeron. The easily available water is raw, which springs forth from the earth with no work involved. This metaphorizes inoperativity as suspension. Wine and honey are also freely available, but they are processed, not through work but through natural processes like fermentation, which metaphorize inoperativity as intensification.

Moving from the inoperativity reading of the *Bacchae* to two *Bacchae* readings of inoperativity, and drawing on Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) and Veronica Gago's *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (2020), I argue that inoperativity as

3. On care for the agon, see Honig 1993 and 2019.

refusal postulates not only Agambenian suspension, but also intensification. The result is an *agonistic* inoperativity, enmeshed in, not pure or apart from, what it opposes. And I find support for this position in the 2015 film, *The Fits* (a contemporary *Bacchae*).

Like the *Bacchae*, *The Fits*—a film about young Black girlhood—explores the fraught line between madness and transcendence, ritual and gesture, and dramatizes its ambivalence about how/whether to show what should not be seen by outsiders. As I read the film, it renders inoperative the Penthean gaze (the desire to look at what should not be seen) in two ways. First, the gaze is turned back on the spectators who assume it is theirs when, as Rizvana Bradley points out, the protagonist, Toni, stares steadily at us, in the opening scene.<sup>4</sup> And second, the Penthean gaze is broken by focusing our attention on the camera, which also looks at what should not be seen, and on its misogynist and racist history of surveillance, marginalization, and normalization. Where the bacchants attack, tear apart, and disassemble those who intrude on them (suggesting we need a Performative Theory of (Dis)Assembly, we might say), *The Fits* responds to the camera's intrusions by reworking the camera, and turning it from a device of betrayal into a device of "quiet." In one scene, the light that is its medium is turned back on the camera so that the film's protagonist, Toni, is not illuminated but rather obscured from view in a moment of rapture (Fig. 1).

This is an inoperativity of intensification, applied to the instrument that promises to write with light. It is not a mere suspension since it does not put out the light but intensifies it, using it against the spectacle that depends on it. It fits with what Ava Shirazi calls a "feminist reclaiming of gestures and an identification of both visceral and visual forms of dissent" (above, p.17).

My critical engagement with inoperativity in *AFTR* works with Agamben's "Notes on Gesture," which develops a reading of the inoperative in the work of the men of nineteenth-century motion studies, Charcot, Tourette, and others, who studied fits, tics, gait, and gesture at the Salpêtrière clinic.<sup>5</sup> Following Agamben's lead and engaging his sources, however, I neglected to note the camera/work of their American counterpart, Thomas Eakins. I now see Toni, the mesmerizing protagonist of *The Fits* whose gaze supplants all others, as refusing the forces that allowed someone to take pictures in Eakins' studio of a very young Black girl whose image (she is posed unclothed on a couch) haunts the pages of Hartman's *Wayward Lives* (2020).<sup>6</sup>

2) Inclination. Drawn from Adriana Cavarero, inclination is the ethical refusal of verticality, which is the postural expression of atomistic individualism.<sup>7</sup> Instead, inclination offers a choreography of mutuality and care that resonates with Sara Ahmed's account of orientation in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006). But, where

4. Bradley 2018: 15.

5. Agamben 2000 [1992].

6. I discuss this in more detail in Honig 2022.

7. Cavarero 2016.



Fig. 1: Toni, (un)captured by the light (*The Fits*)

Cavarero sees a maternal relationality that is pacifist, I see care mixed with violence. For Cavarero, maternal violence is a possible expression of the relationality of the mother, but her focus on Leonardo's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, which is her Bacchae, I argue in *AFTR*, puts the violence in the future and outside the two-mothered family unit of that painting. (I would now put her Bacchae in the company of Helen Morales' great find by Kehinde Wiley: *After John Raphael Smith's "A Bacchante (after Sir Joshua Reynolds)"*).

In *Inclination: A Critique of Rectitude*, Cavarero notes that the mother may be pitched undecidably between care and violence, in the moment before action. But in her earlier book, *Horrorism*, as Jack Halberstam notes in *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, Cavarero is more explicit: "offering the mother as an obvious example of a figure who can either care for the child or destroy it, Cavarero proposes that care and harm are nestled within the same social function."<sup>8</sup> What Cavarero affiliates with horrorism, and with Greek tragedies like *Medea*, Halberstam sees as a characteristic of mothering as such. He finds it in the wonderful children's book, *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). Maurice Sendak's Max has, Halberstam says, "his own magic trick and rather than be stilled by the wild things, he tames them by returning the gaze: 'staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once.'"<sup>9</sup> So, too, Toni in *The Fits* stares at us, positioning us as wild things who might be tamed by an unblinking look.

Since Cavarero in *Inclinations* affiliates inclination with the pacific posture of the mother caring for the child and sees this relationality as poignantly portrayed in Leonardo's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, this chapter of *AFTR* offers a

8. Halberstam 2020: 132.

9. Halberstam 2020: 133.

Bacchae reading of the painting which is both pacifist and violent (but not necessarily, therefore, horror), and argues for sorority as a preferred quasi-kinship figure for inclination. The myth of Procne, which I argue is also a Bacchae, facilitates this reading, in which sorority is a carrier of care and violence, an agonistic relationality pitched on a more egalitarian plane than maternity.

3) Fabulation: I find in Saidiya Hartman's depathologizing fabulations of the early twentieth-century American Black women she calls "wayward" a valuable partner in thinking about Euripides' bacchantes as political actors. Fabulation is Hartman's term for the commitment to draw on received archives and stories without submitting to or reproducing their violations and hierarchies; hence: "depathologizing." She undoes the anti-Black judgments of the archive. Although the *Bacchae* is a work of fiction, a drama and not an archival record, as it were (though all fiction records something real), I treat the *Bacchae* as part of such a record, part of a received archive of warning against refusal that pathologizes its female-coded carriers.

Reading the *Bacchae* with Hartman, I argue that the bacchantes are (in her sense) wayward, though they are often dismissed as drunk or debauched. (In the book, I resist the either-or of action or drunkenness by noting the Dionysian nature of Arendt's account of political action, detailed below). Hartman's "method of refusal" invites a fabulation reading of the *Bacchae*, which highlights the *Bacchae's* *other agon*, not the famous one between Pentheus and Dionysus but the one between Cadmus and Agave. The latter is an agon of fabulation, a struggle over how the story of the women's actions will be told in the city. Was Cithaeron a revolutionary adventure whose regicide opens the city to transformation? Or an insane romp that ended tragically with filicide, leaving a mother so profoundly undone that her mourning should be a caution to all? I see Cadmus' scene with his daughter as an effort to interpellate Agave into the latter reading, which is depoliticizing, and back into the social roles she abandoned: daughter, wife, mother, but, notably, not sister. In turn, a Bacchae reading of fabulation highlights the seldom-noted choruses in Hartman's *Wayward Lives*. There are three, just like the *Bacchae's* three Theban choruses on Cithaeron (each of Cadmus' daughters leads one), and Hartman's three choruses uncannily map, I argue, onto the three concepts of refusal traced in *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*: the reformatory riot in Bedford Hills, New York (inoperative), the dance chorus in Harlem which offers a new choreography of mutuality (inclination), and the chorus of a possible future which sings the mourning songs in exile (fabulation). I argue in *AFTR* that in the *Bacchae* these form an "arc," an arc of refusal that moves from inoperativity's prison break to Cithaeron, to new body movements, inclined to one another, rehearsed outside the city, to fabulation, the agonistic effort to contest the city's archive, to occupy it, and to replace it with another.<sup>10</sup>

10. Why talk of an arc of refusal at all? It is the arc of the play (and so we are asked to think with it) and a trait of my various Bacchaes, as well. I note in *AFTR* that the arc of refusal is also the hysteric's arc, depathologized and depicted as transcendence in *The Fits*, where it inaugurates community not confinement: a community of "quiet."

But wait: that third chorus in Hartman, the one that fabulates, corresponds to *exile* in Hartman and not to the return to the city that I see as the third point on the *Bacchae*'s arc of refusal. Pairing Hartman and the *Bacchae*, seeing her *Wayward Lives* as a *Bacchae*, thus highlights the possibility that the play's exile of the sisters is possibly a fourth refusal, one that could be put into conversation with various theorizations of diaspora, fugitivity, or deterritorialization as refusal. I did not explore this option in *AFTR* because the exile is announced by Dionysus in the play as punishment, which makes it difficult to argue that exile was part of the bacchants' refusal. I did note, however, that since the bacchants wanted to leave the polis it was hard to treat their exile as only a punishment and not also as a granting of the bacchants' deepest wish. (Be careful what you wish for!) I might have considered exile as a fourth refusal, had I had access to Jack Halberstam's *Wild Things*, which came out when *AFTR* was in press. I might have used his account of the disordering powers of desire to make the case.<sup>11</sup> But Halberstam embraces the wild, while I theorize refusal as commitment to it. *AFTR* proposes thinking, politically, about how the city might be reimagined were it to be occupied. Refusal here is not destitency.

In *AFTR*, the term "city" connotes a space as well as, in more parable form, a frame or history. This is, of course, a conflation, intended to capture the simultaneously material and symbolic powers of the term. Halberstam seems to suggest that anything short of abandoning the city is politically inadequate. But what I am drawn to in the *Bacchae* is precisely this difficulty and its dramatization: the longing for a city in spite of its refusal to take us on our terms; the longing for a form of life freed of the city that will not let us go.<sup>12</sup>

One does not have to be Freud to believe that we can take ourselves out of the city more readily than we can take the city out of us. Decolonization, fugitivity, withdrawalism, separatism are just four of the approaches in political theory that wrestle with how to respond to this all too human condition thematized in the Hebrew Bible's depiction of a forty-year-long journey to a land that is right next door. Why forty years? the rabbis ask. One answer is that this is how long it takes for a generation that was enslaved or Egyptianized to die off, or to be purged, so that the "Promised" land can be founded in freedom. But, as Jacques Derrida points out, traces of the past do not die out with the desert generation. Memory, trauma, and habituation are intergenerational and it takes generations of affective-ethico-political work to undo them.<sup>13</sup> José Muñoz calls such efforts

11. I am grateful to Mario Telò for suggesting the relevance of Halberstam's *Wild Things* to my reading of the *Bacchae* in *AFTR*.

12. "In a world of use that demands hyper-doing, refusal may well find its expression in aestheticism, purism, or passivity; but the risk is that embracing these as refusal ends up dismissing as merely instrumental or teleological all actual, active efforts to refuse." Instead, we need to think with the *Bacchae* of an "inoperativity that abandons the city, or suspends the everyday," which "is a move in the feminist arc of refusal, not its destination" (Honig 2022: 15).

13. Read this way, the Exodus story is an awful one of generational sacrifice, a theme traced by Michael Walzer from the Hebrew Bible through the French Revolution to modern socialism, noting

“disidentification,”<sup>14</sup> which is another refusal concept, a cousin, we might say, to inoperativity. Is it a coincidence that both Muñoz and Agamben focus on dance and its powers to undo existing arrangements? Likely not, though I note that Agamben discusses the spectator’s experience of dance while I, with Muñoz, focus on that of the dancer.<sup>15</sup>

Disidentification is a way to read the time/space of the desert in the Exodus story as a desert of transformation, where food is enjoyed without the labor of its production. Here the empty desert mirrors and reverses the plenitude of Cithaeron, where wine and honey appear like manna. *AFTR* treats Cithaeron as a time/space of disidentification, where the work is begun but interrupted. The bacchants’ short refuge is not enduring enough to undo fully the traumas of the city, nor the further trauma of being human, thematized by the bacchants’ communing with animals, as Victoria Wohl has argued.<sup>16</sup>

The *Bacchae* testifies to the political and psychological difficulties of disidentificatory exit. The play is haunted by a missing fourth sister, Semele, daughter of Cadmus and mother of Dionysus. Semele is the foreigner *in* kinship. She may also be a wild thing. Inexplicably pregnant with a fatherless child, Semele, a glitch in the reproductive machinery’s patriarchal kinship conventions, highlights an ineradicable alienness at home. It is she who lets us know that Thebes is a city that, like all cities, is not one. She figures Thebes’ internal difference or alienness as does her surviving offspring, Dionysus, *both native and* stranger to Thebes. Dionysus wants to claim the city, too; his insistence on that may be a lasting gift to theorists of refusal. We may see him as grasping for recognition, which he is, but we may also see how, in so doing, he refuses the city’s effort to enclose itself in the false homogeneity of a smoothly functioning hierarchy.

Semele is missing because she was, I argue in the book, a victim of sorricide, which makes Ino, Autonoe, and Agave very “bad aunties” (to borrow Vanessa Stovall’s term) indeed.<sup>17</sup> This reminds me of Sara Ahmed’s own “bad aunties,”

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Hayim Greenberg’s 1941 objection to it in “Socialism Re-examined.” Greenberg says (in italics) “*there are no transitional generations in history.*” No generation should be treated “as fertilizer on the fields of future history” (Walzer 2021, quoting Greenberg 2016: 191).

14. Muñoz 1999.

15. I do not discuss Muñoz in *AFTR*, but with these suggestions I mean to open a line of comparison that might fit well with the book’s larger argument.

16. Wohl 2005. I differ from Wohl in noting the pacific leisure of the bacchants, their quiet, and not only their whirling activity, and also in noting that the moments of frenetic activity are mostly in response to illicit viewing, hence not self-chosen or prioritized, arguably. Wohl emphasizes the post-humanist, post-structural commitments of the play, against Charles Segal’s reading. Insofar as humanism has been a carrier of racism and misogyny, overcoming it may be necessary for equality or, perhaps, more agonistically, it can be radicalized, such that the question posed by the band The Killers, quoted in *AFTR*—“Are we human or are we dancer?”—must be answered with a “yes.” Thanks to Dan-el Padilla Peralta for reminding me of this quotation in *AFTR*. In this context, it may be useful to return to consider my proposal of an “agonistic humanism” in Honig 2013.

17. When Semele claimed she was pregnant by Zeus, her sisters did not believe her and set a test for her that was certain to be fatal. They dared her to call Zeus to come to her, he does, and she dies.

who set feminist ideas loose from East to West, from Pakistan to Australia, rather than the other way, which Western feminism assumes to be the only way.<sup>18</sup> East to West is the directionality in the *Bacchae* too. Luigi Battezzato says the Theban bacchantes are egged on by the chorus from the east, the Asiatic chorus. I think it is tempting to ally Semele, the fourth sister, with the Asiatic, fourth chorus and the fourth refusal (exile). Such a move might seem to support Battezzato's calls to foreground the Asian chorus. But it is important to note that Battezzato does not treat the Asian chorus as a fourth. He contrasts two choruses, Theban versus Asiatic. But the move from four to two deprives Thebes of its internal plurality (represented by the three choruses of bacchantes, each led by one of Cadmus' daughters) and *grants* to Thebes the unity of identity that Cadmus and Pentheus want to claim for it, falsely.<sup>19</sup> Hence (this in response to Helen Morales' question) my effort to decenter Pentheus/Dionysus in my reading of the play—not to “ignore Dionysus and his power,” as Morales says, but to decenter and observe what readings are made possible when we do not allow the driving agency to be his and his alone. This is more in keeping with a word she uses later, discussing my “fading” Dionysus. With Dionysus still at the center of everything, and unfaded, Battezzato can binarize (polis versus bacchantes) what I want to pluralize—not just two but four choruses altogether, which highlights how, when Agave returns to Thebes, she calls first to the fourth chorus and only afterwards to the city's leaders.

Battezzato argues that the Asiatic chorus has a radicality that the Theban bacchantes do not.<sup>20</sup> The Asian bacchantes, he says, “are the opposite of the women of Thebes, who refused to follow Dionysus. He ‘forced’ them to worship him (34 ἡνάγκασ’) and ‘drove them [= the women of Thebes] away from their homes in madness’ (36 ἐξέμηνα δωμάτων)” (above, p.5). But Dionysus is boasting when he credits to his own powers the actions of the Theban women. He may claim the credit but, contra Butler, whom Morales cites on this point, I do not believe the women are necessarily his puppets. The text is not entirely supportive of that reading since, as I argue in the book, it is made clear that Dionysus cannot force people to do things they do not desire. He can only, as Tiresias teaches, uninhibit them, and free them to do what they do desire.

Further contrasting the two choruses, Battezzato notes that “The migrant Bacchae explicitly take up the anti-patriarchal, revolutionary agenda that the Theban Bacchae unwillingly enact. Dionysus does not use the language of

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Like all amputated family members, Semele haunts those who remain. She appears in my book's *agonistic* sorority, which is violent and loving. She also appears in the play, through the demands of the orphaned Dionysus for justice. He is an agent of rectification for the sororal crime in which Cadmus, too, is implicated.

18. Ahmed 2006.

19. Murnaghan (2006: 100) refers to the Theban women as a “shadow chorus.”

20. In so doing, he may partake of the xenophilia that is invariably partnered with, since it mirrors, the xenophobia it disavows and means to counter. I make the case for their mutual imbrication in Honig 2001.



coercion when he describes the adherence of the Asian Bacchae to his cult (21–22).” The Asian Bacchae urge the Theban Bacchae to kill the king (977–1007) and praise the regicide (1153–64), he says. The Asian bacchantes, he adds, “give voice to this repressed desire” (above, p.13). But why, I wonder, should we discount the doing in favor of the saying? Arguably, moreover, it is in the doing, not the saying, that ambivalence, regret, and self-doubt crop up. Distinguishing between doing and saying can help explain the difference between the Asian and Theban choruses, without resorting to claims about the Theban women’s weakness or unclarity.

Still, there *is* something of an enthusiasm gap between the Theban and Asian bacchantes, and Battezzato attributes it to a foreignness that binarizes and to a domesticity that domesticates. “Only the perspective of the migrants can illuminate what is happening in the polis,” he says (above, p.13), splitting the liminalities of the play that make some, like Semele and Dionysus, both insiders and outsiders. The idea that outsiders might have a superior perspective, a claim I pursued in an earlier book (Honig 2001), is plausible and the suggestion that those who are insiders might be compromised also makes sense. Having a polis-option in your pocket might well moderate your refusal. If you have access to a palace too, as Agave does, your position might be even more vexed or complicit. Battezzato rightly calls attention to the more radical egalitarianism of the Asian Bacchae who “even imagine a new community, a heterotopia where they can worship freely and differences of social status are erased: a place where Dionysus ‘gives the same pleasure, the pleasure of wine that erases pain, to the rich and the social inferior’ (421–23)” (above, p.10). Such ideals can inspire imperfect efforts to make change. But is it their foreignness to Thebes that is responsible for the Asian chorus’s egalitarian politics, by contrast with the merely “anti-authoritarian” posture (still “caught in the ruses of patriarchy,” as Thomas Elsaesser says in a different context) of the Theban women?<sup>21</sup>

There may be another explanation. I note in *AFTR* that the Theban bacchantes are *interrupted* in their experiments of inoperativity and inclination, that they lose the agon of fabulation in part because they are, as a consequence, unready for the city, as is the city for them. Might it be their untimeliness rather than their nativity that is their undoing?<sup>22</sup> Recall the above mentioned comparison of Cithaeron and the Exodus desert as two space/times of disidentification: the interruption of disidentification matters. It may come from the city that is left behind, which (personified by the spying Pentheus) hunts down its dissenters; or interruption may express the ongoing power of the city inside those who leave it.

21. Elsaesser draws the distinction in his account of the 1970s German protest movement (Elsaesser 1999: 279), part of his reading of Fassbinder’s *Antigonizing* refusal, which I discuss in Honig 2013: 74.

22. Or both? Interruption may well be a feature of tragedy; it is certainly central in the *Antigone*, as I argue in Honig 2013. In Euripides’ play, I argue in *AFTR*, the Theban bacchantes are interrupted by Pentheus, and then return to the city too soon.

By contrast with the Theban women, the Asian bacchantes do not return to their cities. That is because their task is to induce populations of other places to convert, as Battezzato points out. If we call them migrants, as Battezzato does, or call them exiles, an option I have here toyed with, then we miss the power politics of their conversion-quest, which is a crusade. If we, instead, refuse to binarize and hierarchically order the choruses into Asiatic or Theban, then we can pluralize them, as Hartman does when she conjures three choruses of wayward women, not just one. Plural choruses restore to Thebes its plurality (the *three* Theban choruses plus the missing fourth of Semele), and open an *array* of a-polis possibilities. In Hartman, these are riot, dance, *and* exile, all three treated as worthy refusals.

A point seemingly in favor of Battezzato's reading of the Theban bacchantes as insufficiently radical is that they seem not to know what they have done while the Asian bacchantes, allied with Dionysus, are fully cognizant. This is typically tragic, of course, and we expect a denouement where the Theban bacchantes come to realize what they have done unwittingly. But is it really unwitting? They think they have killed a lion, which is an iconic kingly animal, and a cub, too, suggesting a king who is, like Pentheus, (too) young; so surely they know something, as Battezzato concedes. Agave will lament it; but what exactly is lamented?

I argue in the book that what Agave laments is the filicide, not the regicide; or, better, since they are inextricably intertwined, what she laments is their co-implication. When she is confronted finally with the fact that in killing the king she has also slaughtered the son, she confronts her ensnarement in the double bind of patriarchy, which makes it impossible to kill the king without killing the son.<sup>23</sup> On this reading, the Theban bacchantes are still enmeshed in Thebes (with their fathers, sons, and husbands) and Thebes in them (they are still daughters, mothers, wives). To me, the Asian chorus is less instructive precisely *because* it is less compromised.

In any case, and more to the point, doing things unknowingly or unintentionally, and perhaps even coming to regret them, asking for forgiveness, and so on, are all traits of political action, not signs of unclarity of commitment. Indeed, for Hannah Arendt, the consequences of political action outpace any intentions we may have. Here I differ from Helen Morales, who claims that, for me, it is important that the bacchantes be in control of their actions and that we need to depathologize them to take them seriously as subjects, as agents. I am thankful for Morales' objection because it presses me to clarify that to depathologize is not to undo the madness but rather to destigmatize it. This matters because, for me, as for Arendt, political action *is* madness. As Arendt describes action in concert, it is a Dionysian experience, involving self-forgetting and vibrant, vital anti-instrumentalism.<sup>24</sup> Thus, it is not the case that "getting rid of the women's madness is essential," for me. On the contrary, I agree with Morales: it *is* important to depathologize the bacchantes, but

23. I discuss the "double bind," a term I take from Sara Ahmed, in the Introduction to *AFTR*.

24. In Honig 1993, I give a Nietzschean reading of Arendt that undoubtedly carries or tracks his Dionysianism into her work. In *AFTR*, I note her Dionysian identification of revolution with drunkenness, in passing, in Arendt 1963.

precisely *on behalf of* what Morales says she wants to call for: to reimagine madness and put it back into a feminist theory of refusal. I am quite taken by Morales' own introduction to the conversation of a Nonnus-inspired distinction between being out of one's mind and being "other-minded," as well as grateful for her further pluralization of the Bacchae archive. And so I would now put it as follows, thanks to her: a reimagined madness is the ek-static form of Arendt's political action, which, it is worth noting, postulates all three concepts of refusal: Arendtian action is characterized by (i) inoperativity as suspension (of labor and work), and as intensification (rejecting all purposiveness, action intensifies the a-telic); (ii) inclination, since it is always action in concert, never solitary; and (iii) fabulation, because, though Arendt insists that action is as such non-violent, she knows it will often go awry and cannot be pure, and thus fabulation is essential to its perpetuity and effectivity.

It is important that, like Arendtian action as such, each of the bacchants' refusals can be read variously. Take for example, one scene of inoperativity in the *Bacchae*, when the women reportedly lie down in the daytime in a field outside Thebes. Their prone bodies on the ground may be "quiet," in Kevin Quashie's sense, or they may be exhausted from frenzy. In the play, a shepherd sides with the first reading; Pentheus, who emphasizes the frenzy, could have sided with the second. Ava Shirazi in her reply to *AFTR* proposes still more possibilities, noting that in *Trojan Women* "the horizontal impasse of [Hecuba's] body refuses business as usual." It is "Hecuba whose static and stationary gestures seem to stand in direct contrast to the erratic and fluid movements of the Bacchae" (above, p.17). The contrast is productive, as we shall see, but it is also overstated, in my view, since the Theban bacchants are only erratic and fluid in defense of their boundaries. They rise up in response to men who spy on them and plan attacks. Otherwise, the Theban women too lie prone, though not in mourning but in delight. Perhaps it matters then that Hecuba has no boundaries to defend, and therefore no reasons left to move. (Though in the play named for her, it is not so.)

But how should we read Hecuba's body, in its proneness? Shirazi asks. For some, it is a disappointment: "The *Trojan Women* is a play about captivity, wherein, for a critic interested in reading tragedy via Aristotle, not much happens."<sup>25</sup> Shirazi notes that Schlegel found "the accumulation of helpless suffering" (in *Trojan Women*) wearisome, objecting that Hecuba was solely a lamenter. But, Shirazi argues, "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) as a sort of helpless suffering,

25. This idea of not much happening resonates with a key line in Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope*, in which the Crow Chief, Plenty Coups, says that after the buffalo went away (they were diverted, taken, and killed) "nothing happened" (Lear 2006: 2). As Lear points out, Plenty Coups led a full life to old age. What can it mean to say that "nothing happened" during that time? Happening requires meaning-making structures and activities, Lear responds, and these had to be regenerated after settler colonial conquest of native lands and the decimation of native tribes.

meant to evoke pity.” Contra Schlegel and others who approach the play with Aristotelian plot-expectations, Shirazi explains, much happens here: “captivity and the expositions on the conditions of enslavement that fill the drama are themselves enough ‘plot,’” she says (above, p.18).

What is so interesting in Shirazi’s presentation of *Trojan Women* is that Hecuba’s proneness is not just mourning or defeat, but a *refusal* to move and act in conformity with Schlegel’s and others’ Aristotelian expectations. Hecuba refuses to play her assigned tragic part: “her performance questions the possibility of any action, movement, music, or dance that one would expect from a Greek tragedy” (above, p.19). Where the Schlegels of the world see only failure, Shirazi sees refusal, and what was merely privative (an absence of action) is now loud (Hecuba’s protest against her condition).

That refusal is not just the suspension of bodily movement but also the intensification of emotion, Shirazi argues, in keeping with the recovery of inoperativity called for in *AFTR*. She is assisted by recent work by indigenous theorists of refusal, like Glen Coulthard, who may be more like Hecuba than Agave in that they are themselves also radically (not temporarily) a-polis and they, too, intensify emotionality as refusal. They argue for the politicality of emotions often dismissed in political theory as private or irrational. Rather than suspend anger or resentment, they intensify them *into* a politics. Thus, as Shirazi notes, what theorists of indigenous refusal offer to and share with a feminist theory of refusal is the idea of “emotional intensity as integral to and even *as* refusal” (above, p.19).

I wonder whether Shirazi’s reading of Hecuba can be restated in genre terms. I noted, in *Antigone, Interrupted*, Elisabeth Craik’s claim that, of the tragedians, Euripides tended most to melodrama, shifting the focus from conflict to suffering (arguably in so doing recalling Aeschylus’ *Persians*, taking tragedy back to its roots).<sup>26</sup> The distinction between tragedies of conflict and suffering becomes a genre distinction between tragedy and melodrama, I argued, highlighting Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s contribution to the anthology film *Germany in Autumn*. He contested the emplotment of the day’s events (West Germany’s war against terrorism in the 1970s) as a tragedy of (generational) conflict by staging his contributions as melodrama, and centering its costs via deep corporeal suffering that he also queered. I now wonder: can we see Fassbinder as breaking what he saw as the tragic hold of Antigone on the German imagination by himself becoming Hecuba? He ends his contribution to the film prone, sobbing, motionless, wordless (albeit held in the arms of his battered lover).

The question is: does the genre shift here, or is it bent? I take Shirazi’s reading of Hecuba to suggest the latter.

A subversive slippage between the genres is what I hear in W. E. B. Du Bois’s remark in *Black Reconstruction* that Reconstruction’s betrayal, which ennobled no

26. Honig 2013: 92–93.

one, was a “tragedy that beggared the Greek.”<sup>27</sup> Thinking with Shirazi, I wonder if we might say that Hecuba begs the Greek when she repays the violence of the Greeks by tearing down their noble genre from the inside, as they have torn down her city from the inside. I want to propose here (as in *Antigone, Interrupted*) an agon of genres, in which the tragedy of conflict is the genre of the city and the tragedy of suffering, or melodrama, is its refusal, an enactment of its costs and suffering. From this angle, Hecuba unseats the noble tragic by way of the ignobly melodramatic, a body genre: the genre of queer *collapse*. In Fassbinder, melodrama responds to and refuses states’ ubiquitization of fear and their economies of virility. This is how Hecuba’s body speaks in and to the city of her captivity.

Here Vanessa Stovall’s critique of the idea that refusal involves returning to the city is on my mind. In *AFTR*, I suggest that the *Bacchae*’s three refusals form an arc, each leading or relating to the next, such that the insufficiency of any one of them, alone, is part of the point. The arc calls attention to how fabulation without inoperativity’s disidentification and without inclination’s corporeal rehabilitations cannot succeed. One of the attractions, to me, of the *Bacchae* as a drama of refusal is that it rather uniquely raises the possibility of reading the women’s return to the city not as a fateful misstep in a tragic road to foreordained doom, but as itself part of an arc of refusal that seeks not only to escape the city (exit: to Cithaeron) nor just to broadcast objections to it (voice: Agave’s reason-giving address when she returns to Thebes, head in hand) but to transform it (loyalty). (*Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* is the name of an influential 1970 book in political science by Albert O. Hirschman.) The return to the city fails in Euripides’ play, but the effort is important because a practice of refusal that abandons the city without transforming it leaves in place a city in control of the material and symbolic resources it needs to vanquish its rivals. And why wouldn’t it do so? Experiments in living and the stories told about them are necessary to vivify people’s imagination of alternatives. But if we treat such fugitive experiments as *culminations* of refusal rather than as *steps* in a larger arc, the city stays as it is and is positioned in power to win over such dissenters.

Not all arcs of refusal will find the return to the city well-suited to their aims. The white supremacist structures of the US seem impervious to egalitarian transformation and make martyrs of those who fight for something better or just cross paths with them. Moreover, this aspect of the arc of refusal is ill-suited, in particular, to indigenous resistance to the settler colonial state which “keeps falsely claiming jurisdiction and title over you and your land” (as I say in *AFTR*, quoted here by Shirazi on p.19). But Hecuba here may not differ as much from the bacchantes as Shirazi suggests when she notes that, for Hecuba, “there is no refuge, no escape, no Cithaeron.” (Notably, “no escape” is a defining feature of melodrama, which explores the retreat to the interior pressed on one by the ever-diminishing room

27. Du Bois 1998 [1935]: 727.

for worldly maneuver.) Even the a-polis Hecuba does return to the city, or tries to: “Hecuba tries to run into the flames of burning Troy as though refuge might be found in its ruins,” Shirazi says (above, p.23).

I want to move to close by recalling a suggestion, made at the end of the book, that inoperativity, inclination, and fabulation (all in their recovered forms) may form a repertoire and not just an arc. The figure of an arc might suggest progress, which is one reason to insist on it (it helps record the insufficiencies of each of the different concepts of refusal), but also a reason to move past it (lest we are pulled into progress-thinking). Moreover, arc is a more static term than repertoire, which implies reiteration, conjugation, and alteration. One way to describe the aspiration of *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* is to say that what the *Bacchae* presents as arc, we may reiterate as repertoire. In an arc, fabulation comes last, but we may need it to inspirit inoperativity and inclination. At the same time, if all we do is put fabulation first, it will be ungrounded in experience. Repertoire is a way to address these limitations.

Repertoire, also a musical term, might be a way to enter into dis/harmony with Stovall’s call to center musicality in the play and in its receptions, in particular a “queer musicality shared between Sappho and Euripides.”<sup>28</sup> This imaginative pairing sets up Stovall’s later claim that the work of Saidiya Hartman belongs primarily to a musical/mythical history: “Hartman’s fabulation is a part of a much larger hypha-e of Black female and non-binary creatives who deal with different mythological dressings that enfold them.” Stovall sketches out the affinities that are sounded by a more musical or sonic approach. This is in keeping with Stovall’s view of the *Bacchae* (following Joshua Billings) as historically contesting via myth (or, for Stovall, music) the newly ascendant power of logos or philosophy.<sup>29</sup> From such a perspective, I can see how an effort to think philosophically or theoretically and not musically with the *Bacchae* (and with Hartman!) might seem to betray its spirit. And yet, in political theory, that binary between logos and mythos, even where mythos triumphs, can stand in the way of efforts to *think with* the cultural materials—film, literature, music, and drama—that inspirit and constrain political life. I take Hartman to model this work. When she returns to the archives and dissents from them, she risks a return to the city that has so far not fully paid off. How could it? The city is what it is. But the efforts of Hartman and others have paid off: some of the city’s neighborhoods are more diverse in their outlooks and more audacious in their possibilities than they were twenty-five years ago.

28. This move also ends up centering the agon between Pentheus and Dionysus, whom I compare to a stage director and whom Stovall wittily refers to as “hairdresser,” in their riff on weaving, threads, and hair. *AFTR* works hard to decenter that agon, however, on behalf of the one between Agave and Cadmus.

29. A binary that is powerfully contested by Jill Frank in her rereading of Plato (Frank 2018). On the connections between music and violence in tragedy and ritual, see Perceau and Wersinger Taylor 2012, esp. 7–9.

In conclusion, I want to thank Catherine Conybeare for dreaming up this exchange and my critics for taking time to engage the book and bring their own commitments to it in relational critique, elaboration, and parallel play. I could only take up some of their challenges and threads, and with all that is left unsaid I hope is heard my appreciation for their own projects and visions.

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