

Feminist Arrivals: The Arc of Refusal and the Right to (Leave) the City¹

Mareike Gebhardt

Institute of Political Science, Muenster University ✉ 

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rpub.90695>

Recibido: 26 de julio de 2023 / Aceptado: 21 de diciembre de 2023

Abstract. The paper discusses the three stations of an arc of refusal elaborated in Bonnie Honig's recent book *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021). Asking why a feminist refusal needs to return to the city, the paper claims a right to leave the city without returning. The critique reads Honig's recent book in the light of former publications, especially Honig's *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* from 1993. It shows how a thinking of the ambivalence between settlement and unsettlement shapes Honig's works throughout the years which we also find in the recent book on feminist refusal – a refusal that unsettles the city's infrastructures, beliefs, ideas, and figurations of settlement and security. With and against Honig's theory of refusal, I argue that refusal provides a feminist tool to question the privileges of settlement. However, refusals and refusers do not need to return to the city to qualify as feminist.

Keywords: Bonnie Honig; Refusal; Un/settlement; Feminism; Political Theory; Subjectification; the Bacchae

[ES] Llegadas feministas: El arco del rechazo y el derecho a (abandonar) la ciudad

Resumen. El documento analiza las tres estaciones de un arco de rechazo elaborado en el reciente libro de Bonnie Honig *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021). Preguntándose por qué un rechazo feminista necesita volver a la ciudad, el artículo reivindica el derecho a dejar la ciudad sin volver. La crítica lee el reciente libro de Honig a la luz de publicaciones anteriores, especialmente de Honig's *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* de 1993. Muestra cómo un pensamiento de la ambivalencia entre el asentamiento y el desasentamiento da forma a las obras de Honig a lo largo de los años, que también encontramos en el reciente libro sobre el rechazo feminista – un rechazo que desestabiliza las infraestructuras, creencias, ideas y figuras de asentamiento y seguridad de la ciudad. Con y contra la teoría del rechazo de Honig, sostengo que el rechazo proporciona una herramienta feminista para cuestionar los privilegios del asentamiento. Sin embargo, las personas que se niegan y las que se niegan no necesitan volver a la ciudad para ser consideradas feministas.

Palabras clave: Bonnie Honig; rechazo; no/acuerdo; feminism; teoría política; subjetivación; las Bacantes

Sumario. 1. An Un/Settling Reading of A Feminist Theory of Refusal. 2. Three Three Three is the Number of the Beast I: Thinkers, Concepts, and Stages of Refusal. 3. Three Three Three is the Number of the Beast II: Epistemologies, Subjectification, and Political Theories of Refusal. 4. (Not) The End, but Not So New a Beginning. Bibliography.

Cómo citar: Gebhardt, M. (2024). Feminist Arrivals: The Arc of Refusal and the Right to (Leave) the City. *Res Publica. Revista de Historia de las Ideas Políticas*, 27(1), 37-43.

¹ Acknowledgments: I want to thank Viktoria Huegel and Luke Edmeads for their brilliant job as editors of this special issue and their collegial support throughout the publication process. I also thank Nina Arndt and Isabel Vehrkamp for their help regarding the literature review and proofreading. Lastly, I want to thank Samira Akbarian, Bonnie Honig, Viktoria Huegel, Ieva Motuzaitė, and Liesbeth Schoonheim for a beautiful evening in Berlin in January 2023, where we started our conversation on feminist refusals. The author declares no competing interests. No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript. The author declares she has no financial interests. Non-financial interests: none.

In Bonnie Honig's *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, the ancient city of Thebes signifies everything that is wrong with the city. We find misogyny, heteronormative forces, and andro- and anthropocentrism deeply engrained in the city's infrastructures. We witness moral righteousness resonating with masculinist ideals of verticality. Ignorant and power-hungry men – or in Thebes's case, a man, the king – rule the city. From the beginning of the book until its end, we learn that feminism always entails a "regicidal project".² In Honig's *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, we learn about a group of regicidal women – the Bacchae, a sort of ancient anarchy-feminist collective – who become the center stage for her critical reading of "the city." At the story's unhappy ending, Honig³ insists that the Bacchae must return to the city because it "is fundamental to a feminist theory of refusal that aims to transform the city, not abandon it." Honig argues that feminist refusals care for the city, seeking to end the oppressive patriarchal infrastructures by transforming it for the better. The angry women, the deviant queers, and the "wild animals" must return to the city to fulfill their refusal's "destination".⁴

In the following, I challenge Honig's agonistic understanding of the need to return to the city. Instead, I introduce a deconstructive reading of fleeing the city and propose a right to leave the city as arrival, not return. I show how a deconstructive reading of feminist refusal shifts the perspective from the consequences of a necessary return to the traces feminist refusals leave in the city's infrastructures. The feminist refusals echo through walls and enclosures. The feminist heterotopia beyond the city does not sever its ties to it radically, but it also does not need to return "for good." Instead, it reverberates in the city's hermeticism. Therefore, a feminist refusal, read from the perspective of deconstruction, not agonism, does not need to return to the city. Instead, feminist refusals, with Jacques Derrida, "would no longer be *revenants*, but [...] *arrivants*".⁵

Besides following a deconstructive method, I elaborate my critique through the ambivalence between settlement and unsettlement – a trope and argument that follows Honig's works from her early *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* until her recent book *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*. Refusal, I argue, is a deconstructive practice that renders political institutions – like "the city" – more democratic by unsettling those (infra-)structures, beliefs, ideas, and figurations of settlement that oppose (radical) change, while they seem to provide orientation and security. Along the lines of Honig's argument, I show refusal works as a feminist tool to question the privileges of settlement.

An Un/Settling Reading of A Feminist Theory of Refusal

The city is a settlement. It is the result of people settling down, drawing a line, defining (territorial) borders,

erecting social boundaries, establishing moral limitations, building urban infrastructures, electing a government, buying a house with a white picket fence, a dog, and a station wagon in the driveway, raise a family – in sum: lead a "proper" life. All those things, the Bacchae first do, and then, they don't. They stop. Go on strike. They refuse to be good wives, mothers, and daughters. Traditional readings of Euripides' play suggest that the Bacchae have gone mad, seduced by Dionysus, the "god of forgetting".⁶ In these readings, women are victims, not political actors. Their refusal is pathologized and depoliticized. It is explained through the seduction by a foreign god, a higher power – like a sickness, forgetting befell the "poor" women, and they forgot how to be "proper." Honig's reading de-pathologizes the Bacchae's refusal and renders it the beginning of a feminist "arc of refusal"⁷: a fugitive act of emancipation and, therefore, the start of a political subjectification that grasps and struggles for a more democratic way of life.

The Bacchae's political refusal unsettles the city. Nothing works appropriately when the women do not behave properly anymore. How the refusal of the Bacchae unsettles the city's foundations gives a glimpse of how women's care work sustains the city's inner workings and how their putatively private lives impact the public realm. The refusal of the Bacchae shakes the city. It questions its neatly arranged and gendered division of care, labor, and politics to the bone. The Bacchae, therefore, must be mad, the city laments. Everything else would give power to those angry women. They can topple kings and kingdoms just by stopping what they are supposed to do. Their political agency thus is dangerous. It can only be contained by pathologizing it. It seems the only "sane" explanation that prevents the city from unsettling and falling into dismay and chaos is that women who refuse their traditional roles and duties cannot be anything else but mad, poisoned by "foreign" ideas. At these intersections, sexism, misogyny, and xenophobia, represented in racism and nationalism, align.

Because the tropes of the city and of settlement both tell stories of political community-building, I read Honig's new book in the light of her first book, which celebrated its 30th anniversary 2023. Among the many concepts introduced and scrutinized in *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, the agonistic motion between settlement and unsettlement keeps appearing throughout the book.⁸ However, to show how settlement and unsettlement not only fight agonistically for precedence and hegemony but are historically, socially, politically, and culturally intertwined, I will refer to un/settlement in the following.

In *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, the agonistic difference between settlement and unsettlement is deeply connected to the dualism of *virtue* and *virtù* Honig introduces in her book from 1993. Settlement and unsettlement appear with each chapter and its dedicated thinkers: It occurs with the *virtù* theorists, Friedrich Nietzsche and Hannah Arendt. They challenge the properly ordered public space

² B. Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, London, Harvard University Press, 2021, p. 4.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁵ J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 220 (italics in original).

⁶ B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. x.

⁸ B. Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993.

and propose more or less radical emancipation from its tyranny. Accordingly, the *virtú* theories of Nietzsche and Arendt can be read as unsettling theories: political theories of unsettlement. However, Arendt glorifies the ancient city where democratic heroes – no heroines in sight – emerge and community-based values of freedom and equality thrive. She rarely sheds light on the *politics* of care and how the private sphere sustains the ancient city's political glory. Nietzsche, contrastingly, is too concerned with constant unsettlement to understand that democratic communities also need to come to rest: have a break from the exhausting work of unsettlement.

The division of settlement and unsettlement recurs with the *virtue* theorists: Immanuel Kant, John Rawls, and Michael Sandel seek to transform the complicated relationship between unsettlement and settlement into a neat, clear-cut, and stable difference of the good, the settled order of the public at one side and the messy and thus unsettling dynamics of politics on the other. Hence, the *virtue* theorists depoliticize the public space to settle for the city's good order.

Throughout Honig's first book, tropes, motifs, and notions of settlement and unsettlement reappear with each chapter and thinker. Moreover, the agonistic movement between settlement and unsettlement becomes an analytical-argumentative tool to unearth the ambiguities, contradictions, and complexities within and between the canonical works of Nietzsche, Arendt, Kant, Rawls, and Sandel: Celebrations of vitality and plurality confront fantasies of fixity, stability, and security. We reencounter this confrontation in *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, where the Bacchae "party like it's 405 B.C."⁹ – at that point, Nietzsche's preference for the messiness of Dionysian politics over Apollonian rationality and sanity does not strike as a coincidence.

When the Bacchae went on strike and followed the Dionysian path, Thebes experienced governmental turmoil, political intrigue, and societal instability. The Bacchae are blamed for the city's unsettlement. It is not the corrupt government and the masculinist power-play that ruins the city but the women's strike that not only challenges the good city but destabilizes its foundations to the very core. Their refusal radically undermines the gendered separation between the invisibilized and unpaid work women, enslaved people, and animals do in the "private" sphere and the prestigious political work of men visible to all and glorified by many. The proper order of the city counts on the oppressive enclosure of women, the enslaved, and the dispossessed. Their refusal becomes, thus, dangerous to the very foundations on which the city once settled.

When the Bacchae stop their work and leave the city, they build a heterotopia on the mountain of Cithaeron, where the boundaries between genders and species become increasingly blurred. Women, enslaved people, and animals merge to create an anarcho-feminist collective of care built on mutual respect, not exploitation. Freed from the necessities of the household, the Bacchae rid themselves of all conventions that the city forced upon them. The city,

however, reacts harshly. The Bacchae are pathologized, their acts of freedom misinterpreted as madness – the age-old story of women gone wild as soon as they refuse to cohere to patriarchal standards of decency. However, Honig's agonistic account neglects that the consequences of the Bacchae's refusal are deeply felt in the city. Even after the Bacchae left, their refusal did not leave the city unchanged. The changes they make on Cithaeron arrive as echoes from a (not so) distant "nowhere of utopia"¹⁰ in the city of Thebes.

To sum up, in the insecurity of the unsettling turbulences and the disorientation by cracks in the daily routine, Honig shows in *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* – as she already did in *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* – how politics relates to emancipation: How the desire for freedom sparks a "refusal of all that kept her fixed in place".¹¹ The Bacchae left their fixed place. Their refusal shows that settlement does not provide the infrastructure for more democratic politics. The Bacchae's "revolution in a minor key"¹² tells us how unsettlement is the spatio-temporal mode in which political practices become (more) democratic. However, the movements between settlement and unsettlement cannot be entangled, as is the case in Honig's works. Instead, they intertwine and re-shape each other constantly: Un/Settlement moves societies and cities and makes the space of the political appear beyond the police(d) orders of the city. Un/Settlement is a refusal "to be governed".¹³ However, it is not *in* the agon between settlement and unsettlement that the "policed enclosures"¹⁴ of the city spark *democratic politics*. Rather, within the messily entangled in-between of un/settlement, *democratizing refusals* arrive.

Three Three Three is the Number of the Beast I: Thinkers, Concepts, and Stages of Refusal

When we re-read *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* through the lens of Honig's recent book, we realize that the number three plays a central role in Honig's thinking. In *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, we find three thinkers of settlement (Kant, Rawls, and Sandel) and three of unsettlement: Nietzsche, Arendt, and Honig. Her notion of displacement, which already appears in the book's title, echoes through the agonistic movement between settlement and unsettlement. Displacement, as a concept in agonistic democratic theories, denotes an ambivalence bound to democracy that we find in different theorizations of democracy from a post-structuralist, post-foundationalist, and deconstructive perspective: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theorization of the struggles between hegemony and counter-hegemony,¹⁵ Jacques Rancière's differen-

⁹ B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁰ S. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, New York, Norton & Company, 2019, p. xiii.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 59.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. xv.

¹⁴ B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁵ E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London-New York,

tiation between “police” and “politics”,¹⁶ or Judith Butler’s “right to appear”.¹⁷ Honig’s democratizing agonism works, accordingly, through displacement. However, in Honig’s reading, the displacement is moved by two agonistic forces: settlement and unsettlement. In *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Honig reiterates displacement as an arc of refusal driven by these two forces.

The refusal happens, according to Honig, in three stages. We witness the first refusal when the Bacchae stop to do ‘their’ work. Second, the refusal continues when they flee the city but changes when they establish their utopian community beyond the city’s confinements. The third stage in Honig’s arc of refusal is the Bacchae’s return to the city. In her recent book, she connects each stage to a pair of thinkers who Honig reads, agonistically, with and against each other. Three stages, three pairs of thinkers. The first stage signifies “inoperativity,” or the suspension of work, where Honig engages with Giorgio Agamben’s concept of refusal. When the Bacchae refuse their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and daughters, they suspend their care work in the household and become, in the words of Agamben, inoperative: they refuse to serve the purpose the city tasked them with. What Honig does not emphasize enough is that the Bacchae are led by three (again, three!) princesses, Agave, Ino, and Autonoe, daughters of the old king Cadmus. Even though they are affected by the patriarchal order of the city, they also experience privileges that come with the position they were born in. Honig homogenizes the Bacchae into a feminist collective of equals while the three princesses take center stage in her reading. Consequently, the other/ed members of the Bacchae fade into a background where we do not know who they are.

Honig’s arc of refusal continues with “inclination.” By discussing Adriana Cavarero’s inclined refusal, Honig shows how alternative forms of care are practiced at the second refusal stage. The care work of inclination does not repeat the asymmetrical care relations we know from the city. Instead of patriarchy’s vertical orders, with Cavarero, we experience an equal practice of care: the inclined care of maternity. However, the maternal inclination of Agave towards her son, Pentheus, turns into blatant violence: Agave leads the assault on Pentheus, whom the Bacchae kill. Pentheus’ call for his mother’s care remains unheard. As a leader of the Bacchae, Agave becomes a (big) sister. She is not a mother anymore. Feminism, Honig concludes, is not only regicidal but also filicidal.¹⁸

With the third refusal stage, we return with Honig and the Bacchae to the city, where they tell their story about the heterotopia they created at Cithaeron. With and against Saidiya Hartman’s critical “fabulation,” Honig discusses the meaning-making abilities of storytelling. In telling the story of emancipation and freedom when returning to the city, the

Bacchae or other fugitive subjects keep the memory of unsettlement alive. Stories prove that another lifestyle, freer, equal, and more caring, is possible. At this point in the arc of refusal, Honig believes in the healing powers of storytelling and its ability to transform the city into a more equal, democratic, and caring place of settlement. Again, settlement and unsettlement appear as separate agonistic forces that regularly, almost chronologically, alternate in their eternal struggle for democratic politics.

In *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, we find three stages of refusal, three concepts of refusal by three thinkers confronted with three reiterations of refusal. Honig scrutinizes Agamben’s, Cavarero’s, and Hartman’s refusal concepts by reading them through the lenses of Butler, Sara Ahmed, and Arendt. Butler’s refusing plurality of bodies in the streets¹⁹ complements Agamben’s lonely suspension of work as refusal. With Butler, Honig highlights the collective dimension of feminist refusal. She emphasizes that we are not alone in our refusal – only the assembly of the many gains political momentum to challenge patriarchy. The Bacchae are many; they disassemble in the streets – their bodies become disassembled when they merge across species – and they are radical and queered. Referring to Ahmed’s “queer phenomenology,” Honig disorients Cavarero’s maternal and loving care work of inclination towards “sororal agonism, not pacifist maternity”.²⁰ The Bacchae operate, in Honig’s eyes, as a queer_feminist collective of sisters (not *cis*-ters), not mothers. They prioritize sorority over maternity.

The Bacchae return to the city with the third pair, and Honig returns to Arendt. With Arendt, Honig forces Hartman’s fugitive refusal to return to the city. While Hartman²¹ shows how gendered and racialized “wayward lives” are entangled in the city’s complex histories and violent landscapes, Honig separates the utopian lives on the mountain of Cithaeron from those we lead in the city. She argues that feminist refusal must “rehearse”²² their utopia, prepare it for its return, and then, like revenants, transport it to the city: The “bacchants’ time outside the city appears not as ventilation but as preparation: a re-formation of the body and steeling of the mind to one day alter the everyday, not just rejoin it.”²³ However, rejoining the city is possible beyond the mere return to it. The alternative, more equal and freer, lives led at Cithaeron arrive at the city in waves of wild stories told and fabulated about the Bacchae. Even without returning, their upheavals, unsettlements, and refusal already altered the city. However, for Honig, the Bacchae cannot stay at Cithaeron to tell their stories and fabulate about freedom. Instead, they must return to the city, confront it with their stories, and remake it according to their conditions. They need to simulate the androcentric power play once more. Honig believes the powers of storytelling will support them in doing so. However, the stories and critical fabulations already echo through the city’s narrative textures when we think about unsettlement

Verso, 1985.

¹⁶ J. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

¹⁷ J. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 2015.

¹⁸ B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

¹⁹ J. Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

²⁰ B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

²¹ S. Hartman, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

²² B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

not as a separate agonistic force with the struggle for democracy but as *différance*: of shifting and deferring meanings that trace back the stories of oppression and fugitive emancipation, and the little stories in-between: Those little stories that we might not have heard about but that still change(d) the city.

Three Three Three is the Number of the Beast II: Epistemologies, Subjectification, and Political Theories of Refusal

When we look at the figures of refusal that we encounter throughout Honig's works since the early 1990s and who we all meet once more in her recent book, *Bartleby, Antigone, and Agave* represent Honig's own arc of refusal which builds up a dramaturgy that gains more and more "feminist swerve":²⁴ *Bartleby* might be read as an anti-capitalist figure of refusal because he stops being productive, ceases to be an essential asset to his employer, and, finally, prefers not to be part of capitalist society. However, his andro-centric refusal is a luxury, a choice, a privilege. Even if we read *Bartleby's* refusal as anti-capitalist, his non-action is lonely, depoliticizing, and, in a way, arrogant. *Antigone*, contrastingly, is part of a tradition of feminist thought that celebrates her audacity to deny the king's direct order not to mourn her dead brother. *Antigone's* "agonistic mourning" becomes an act of resistance that challenges patriarchy but remains bound to kinship and familial ties.²⁵ Her refusal is neither fillicidal, fratricidal, nor regicidal. *Antigone* represents a woman left behind by the killings and misdeeds done by her male kin. Thus, *Antigone* mourns both otherwise and properly: While she becomes a 'bad' niece, she remains a 'good' sister.

When we zoom out of these figures of refusal, as Honig does in her recent book, and shift our attention towards the three theoretical approaches of un/settlement – epistemology, subjectification, and political theory –, we see how Honig circles around them from *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics to A Feminist Theory of Refusal*. In *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Honig describes the unsettling dimension of storytelling. Counter-narratives agonistically undermine the powers of social normalization and academic canonization, Honig argues in both books. Criticizing both Hartman's and Arendt's approaches to political storytelling, Honig insists that "fabulation coincides with the women's return to the city, which means fabulation's refusal is not a new beginning [as in Arendt, MG] or a fugitive practice [as in Hartman, MG]. It is an *entry* into a contest over meaning, a bid for the posterity that might make a past episode into the start of a feminist future."²⁶ The agonistic division between un/settlement and settlement serves as an epistemological tool that helps us understand how knowledges about settlement and un/settlement are generated, circulated, and stored. But it is more complicated when we emphasize how un/settlements are entangled: Instead of fighting for the hegemony

of meaning, settlement is always contaminated by the stories and fabulations of un/settlement. Resistant practices of un/settlement haunt the infrastructures of settlement like ghosts.

Due to Honig's agonistic separation of un/settlement from settlement, the refusal must always return to the city. But why? Why believe that the stories of those pathologized and demonized who refuse to follow the city's code of conduct will be heard throughout the city's policed spaces? Why not reverse the storyline and emphasize how the refusal, as distant as it might be, reverberates throughout the city's chronicles and chronologies? The refusal arrives at the city because it never left it. The refusal acts and the subjects of refusal, even when not present in the city, do not leave it fully, never for good. Thus, they must not return to it. Instead of hoping that the return of the refusers might change the city, their refusal already changed it. That is the hope that refusal politics promise us. That our refusal will not have been in vain, even when the city harshly neglects our refusal, discredits us as insane, dismisses us as mad, displaces us beyond the realm of the political, or kills us. We will have refused, and our refusal will have changed the city. No matter if we return, our refusal matters.

In her book on *Fugitive Feminism*, Akwugo Emejulu²⁷ teaches us that "hope is a speculative, joyful politics" enacted through "politics of refusal." Refusal as hope can thrive in the most improbable, improper places: It can make a (not so) new beginning. We cannot forget about the past in a Dionysian fashion just because we are somewhere else, at some place – even if this place provides a space for us where we do not believe the fables of the masters but where we listen to the stories of the enslaved, the pathologized, and the demonized. The past will always be part of the presence and the futures we envision. Even though this motif echoes in Honig's feminist oeuvre when she reads *Antigone* or *Agave* against the grain of classical readings and traditional storytelling, her contra-archival reading of Euripides's canonical (!) *Bacchae* refuses to know about the privilege of being heard by the city. Why should we risk being killed by the city upon return when our past and present refusals have already changed the city's political infrastructures and social fabrics? Why return when we can live with the knowledge that we did that, that no one can take this from us? Why not stay in the fugitive space we created when the echo of its existence alters the city? The bacchant's bodily return to the city exposes them to another insult and injury. They are transformed into snakes, into something sneaky, slick, and evil – a fate all 'mad' women face(d).

Furthermore, shifting the analytical lens from an agonistic division of settlement and un/settlement to a deconstructive deferral, the intricate entanglements of un/settlement provide us with a queer feminist theory of *subjectification*. It deconstructs fantasies of unity, homogeneity, and stability traditionally constituting the andro-centric narrative of autonomous individuals that live in peace and harmony with each other under conditions of a contract or communitarian consensus, as the *virtue* theories of Kant, Rawls, and Sandel suggest. Instead, the un/settled subjects that are the

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

²⁵ A. Athanasiou, *Agonistic Mourning: Political Dissidence and the Women in Black*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474420143.001.0001>.

²⁶ B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit.*, p. xiv, my italics.

²⁷ A. Emejulu, *Fugitive Feminism*, London, Silver Press, 2022, p. 76.

protagonists of Honig's feminist refusal are never fully themselves, never finished, but always a little at odds with themselves: a little off and incoherent – queer. Honig cannot stress this enough. When the boundaries between genders and species blur at Cithaeron, we witness, in the words of Ahmed, a “queer disorientation.” The bacchantes do not decide for one side, that of gender or species, that of settlement or unsettlement. Throughout the play, they, instead, appear as queering the “conventional categories of sex/gender and human/animal”.²⁸ The feminist refusers “who are women in the city [...] are not always women outside of it”.²⁹ From the Bacchae's queerness, Honig learns that the “subject of a feminist theory of refusal need not be women as such, but those shaped by feminist theory and practice”.³⁰ The queer subjects of refusal deconstruct the gendered (human) order of unsettlement and settlement to gender-species fluidity.

Besides an emerging theory of subjectification, we also find a *political theory* of un/settlement re-shaping when re-reading *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* through the lens of Honig's book on feminist refusal. Un/settlement echoes through a political theory that deconstructs the nightmarish decency of a stable, secured, and closed-off community such as the city (of Thebes). Like other feminist political theories, Honig dissects settlement ideas as imaginations of a secure home. But she neatly separates the logic of settlement from the one of unsettlement. Even if Honig eloquently shows how “settlement” not only refers to a sanctuary where we come to rest and relax from the burdens of the public space, she forces feminist refusers to return to the narrow walls and minds of settlement. She, therefore, neglects how the refusal keeps arriving at the settlement's doorsteps, sometimes in brutal waves, sometimes in slow and soft motion. Feminist refusals might thus have a destination – the unsettlement of the city, Honig argues in *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* – but it does not need to return. It arrives. It keeps coming. It remains to come. Understood as a Derridean “to come,” feminist refusal does make the city more democratic, but it does not establish or institutionalize a democratic arrangement where settlement and unsettlement take turns.

Honig criticizes the apoliticality of settlement because it implies coming to terms with something, reaching an agreement, and eventually ending the argument – maybe for good, as by royal decree. With a settlement, the agon dies. Politics vanish into consensus, and the disagreements on which politics thrive come to a halt. With Honig's agonism, we understand how settlement is fraught with fantasies, envisioning a home where all is good and decent because we are where we are supposed to be, finally settled down. The settlement, Honig convincingly shows, too neatly rhymes with the good order of the state, the nation, the law, and the family: all “remainders” gone, no “tragedies,” she concludes in *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*.

Taking her critique seriously, we do not only need to acknowledge that generations of othered populations, the “marginalized, the forgotten, the feminized”

– as Honig calls them in *A Theory of Feminist Refusals* – painfully know the dangers of settlement and the tragedies of the city. We also understand the many pleasures of unsettling, joyfully transgressing boundaries or leaving the city on a celebratory note. We feel that we do not need to return but keep arriving.

(Not) The End, but Not So New a Beginning

The city is a powerful place. It is a gruesome and terrible place, full of horrors. Honig shows us how the city is fraught with (stories of) oppression, discrimination, and violence. Still, she wants us to return. Why? In Arendt's romanticized thoughts on the ancient cities, she depicts the city as a glorious place where freedom and democracy thrive. Arendt imagines a space where we meet in plurality, freed from the daily burdens of a banal existence in the household. Generations of feminist thinkers have laid their fingers, made of flesh, muscle, and blood, in the wound of Arendt's bodiless political theory. They showed how the freedom of those visible in public is bought at a high price – the enslavement of populations and the oppression of their othered bodies, from cattle to enslaved people and women. In *A Theory of Feminist Refusal*, Honig returns to her “feminist interpretation of Hannah Arendt” that she started in the early 1990s.³¹ She arrives at a queered understanding of refusal. With that, she takes us through a three-staged arc of refusal to show how patriarchy pathologized and demonized feminist refusals throughout the centuries. Honig's reading of the Bacchae provides a different story of feminist refusal. She turns the tragedy of women gone mad and the story of queers who are not listened to into the “tragedy of the city” whose listening and learning capacities are so limited. Its stories are monotonous, boring, and dull.

The city's tragedy is its failure to understand the emancipatory potential of feminist refusals and their stories. The city does not want to be emancipated or transformed. It does not want alternative fabulations. It does not wish to be unsettled or disturbed by a bunch of oppressed, ‘repressed’ women who do not know their proper place. It wants to stay as it is, stubborn. It resorts to cruel, devastating, and deadly measures to keep everyone in their place. It does not want to be changed. That is the city's tragedy. And it is Honig's tragedy as well when she insists on returning. Honig denies a right to leave the city, riding us off the possibility of never returning to the nightmarish decency of home. In that denial, Honig's agonism neglects that their refusal keeps arriving in the city even if the Bacchae had not returned.

Bibliography

- Athanasiou, A., *Agonistic Mourning: Political Dissidence and the Women in Black*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474420143.001.0001>.
 Emejulu, A., *Fugitive Feminism*, London, Silver Press, 2022.

²⁸ B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

³¹ B. Honig, *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

- Butler, J., *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Derrida, J., *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, London, Routledge, 1994.
- Hartman, S., *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, New York, Norton & Company, 2019.
- Honig, B., *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993.
- , *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.
- , *Antigone, Interrupted*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, DOI: 10.1017/CBO9781139583084.
- Laclau, E. and Mouffe C., *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London-New York, Verso, 1985.
- Rancière, J., *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.