

Return to the City to Claim It: Temporalities and Locations of Feminist Refusal¹

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rpub.90727>

Recibido: 28 de julio de 2023 / Aceptado: 07 de diciembre de 2023

Abstract. One of the main contributions of *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* is its connection of everyday action and prefigurative practices with an explicit commitment to structural change. But how such change happens, and what kind of relations it implies between “the city” (as the existing political community) and feminist heterotopias of refusal, remains unclear. Reading Honig’s work as a prefigurative theory, I argue that it links moments of doing-otherwise with moments of institutional politics, sparking questions about the conditions of a successful return to the city. I then develop these conditions through a case study of the feminist activism of *Women on Waves* and argue that feminist refusal can lead to political transformation if it durably connects practices inside and outside the city.

Keywords: Bonnie Honig; Refusal; Prefiguration; Political Change; Women on Waves

[ES] Volver a la ciudad para reclamarla: temporalidades y ubicaciones del rechazo feminista

Resumen. Uno de los principales aportes de *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* es la conexión que traza entre la acción cotidiana y las prácticas prefigurativas por una parte, con el compromiso explícito con el cambio estructural. Pero sigue sin estar claro cómo se produce dicho cambio y qué tipo de relaciones implica entre “la ciudad” (como comunidad política existente) y las heterotopías feministas del rechazo. Al leer la obra de Honig como una teoría prefigurativa, sostengo que vincula momentos de “hacer-de-otra-manera” con momentos de política institucional, suscitando preguntas sobre las condiciones de un retorno exitoso a la ciudad. A continuación, desarrollo estas condiciones a través de un estudio de caso del activismo feminista de *Women on Waves*; y sostengo que el rechazo feminista puede conducir a la transformación política si conecta de forma duradera las prácticas dentro y fuera de la ciudad.

Palabras clave: Bonnie Honig; rechazo; prefiguración; cambio político; “Women on Waves”

Sumario. 1. Connecting moments of refusal. Prefiguring structural change. 2. Connecting sites of refusal. Conditions for change with *Women on Waves*. Bibliography.

Cómo citar: Koekoek, C. (2024). Return to the city to claim it: temporalities and locations of feminist refusal. *Res Publica. Revista de Historia de las Ideas Políticas*, 27(1), 23-29.

Bonnie Honig opens her *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* with a plea for understanding actors of refusal in relation to broader *movements* of refusal. She reflects how Bartleby and Antigone, those “great canonical refusers with their “I prefer not to” and “Enough! Give me glory,” are not the solitary heroes they are

often taken to be, but instead contributors to a shared politics of refusal.² I understand this motivation to connect individual instances of struggle with a shared political movement (or “arc”) of refusal as what makes *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* a powerful political theory. Connecting different *sites* and

¹ Thanks to Suzanne van der Beek, in conversation with whom I first started thinking about moving in and out of the city as a form of relational refusal politics. We used Honig’s *Feminist Theory of Refusal* to analyse the politics of queer feminist bookshop Savannah Bay in Utrecht in our article “Between Refusal and Refuge: Queer Feminist Bookstore *Savannah Bay*” (forthcoming in *Feminist Encounters*). Thank you also to the editors of this special issue, Viktoria Huegel and Luke Edmeads, for inviting me to contribute; and to Sophie van Balen, for her comments on a previous version of this text.

² B. Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2021, p.xi.

moments of refusal brings together an agonistic focus on contestation and doing otherwise with the material conditions needed for agonistic politics, and re-orientes feminists towards the importance of structural political transformation. However, Honig's theory simultaneously raises questions about what is needed for such structural political transformation, that it – based as it is on a tragedy written 2500 years ago – cannot fully answer. I therefore expand on it through a case study of a contemporary practice of feminist refusal.

It is important to understand different moments and sites of refusal as politically connected because this allows us to recognise the political potential of actors, moments and locations that might otherwise be glossed over as uneventful, apolitical, or ineffective. This is also part of what makes Honig's theory distinctively feminist. What counts as 'sufficiently political' is a famously gendered question, where what happens in everyday, or private spaces – Eva von Redecker calls them the "interstitial" – is rarely afforded the same political importance as public action, or is even seen as a priori anti-political.³ Simultaneously, "the public sphere" remains less accessible and hostile to everyone who falls outside the norm of the bourgeois white men frequenting the western-European coffee houses described by Jürgen Habermas.⁴ *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* brings together a concern for what happens in private spaces of refuge with the demand to return and engage in public action-in-concert, without centring one over the other.

Honig's book combines attention to the political importance of everyday action and prefigurative practices with an explicit commitment to structural change. But how exactly such change happens, and what kind of relations it implies between the existing political community and feminist heterotopias of refusal, falls outside of the scope of the book. Beyond the appeal to move back to the city (the political community) and engage in the messy work of changing the archive, the institution, or the dominant norms, the *Bacchae* (even in its feminist retelling) offers little cues as to when this return might be successful and actually leads to political transformation. In this text I therefore take up the question: how can these plural practices, taking place in different spaces and times and sometimes simultaneously, be aligned with each other so that they can lead to institutional change?⁵ In what follows, I first read Honig's work as a prefigurative theory, arguing that it links *moments* of doing-otherwise with moments of institutional politics. Secondly, I develop

what conditions for a successful return to the city might look like through a case study of the feminist activism of *Women on Waves*; and argue that feminist refusal can lead to political transformation if it durably connects *sites* of refusal inside and outside the city.

1. Connecting moments of refusal. Prefiguring structural change

A Feminist Theory of Refusal offers a reinterpretation of Euripides' play *The Bacchae*. The tragedy recounts the arrival of the god of wine and theatre, Dionysus, to the city of Thebes, prompting the women of the city to leave their hearths and homes and go to the mountain Cithaeron to partake in Dionysian festivities– dancing, drinking, feasting, and resting. When the King of Thebes, Pentheus (implored by Dionysus) goes to see what is going on outside the city walls, the women kill him, brutally, as if he was an intrusive beast (a mountain lion, they call him).⁶ The Bacchantes, headed by Pentheus' mother Agave, then return to the city, king's head in hand, and call for a feast, whereupon they are exiled. Whilst the play has been interpreted as a tale about madness and religion (either defending or critiquing the Dionysian cult), as well as a play thematising "the ritual aspects of tragedy itself,"⁷ Honig proposes to take seriously the women's actions as political acts of refusal. In her reading, instead of following Dionysus' orders, the protagonists of the play make a conscious decision to refuse their given positions; live otherwise; and finally go back to the city to claim it.

Following the movement of the Bacchantes in Euripides' tragedy, Honig proposes that the *Bacchae* presents us with an "exemplary arc of refusal." She traces three moments and associated concepts of refusal: inoperativity (1), when the women of Thebes lay down their looms and households and decide to leave the city; inclination (2), when they live a lazy, heterotopic life outside the city on Cithaeron; and fabulation (3), when they return to the city and call to celebrate and remember their actions. Although the book follows the chronological structure of the play, it seems that the three refusal concepts need not necessarily follow each other in a linear way: in her conclusion, Honig briefly indicates that the arc "is not teleological but phenomenological."⁸ Refusal, as Honig envisions it, is a practice of world-building that includes the distinct experiences of putting down work; doing otherwise; and changing the norm. Yet how exactly these experiences follow or depend on each other (beyond the chronological buildup of the play) is left open.⁹ Interpreting *A Feminist Theory of*

³ Feminist scholarship on Hannah Arendt's distinction of the social and the political, including previous work by Honig, highlights this point. Bonnie Honig, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. Von Redecker uses these "interstitial" moments and locations to develop a theory of structural change. E. von Redecker, *Praxis and Revolution: A Theory of Social Transformation*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2021.

⁴ J. Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1989; N. Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26, 1990, pp. 56–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>.

⁵ E. von Redecker uses the notions of "alignment" and "anchoring" to develop the relation between praxes and revolution.

⁶ Woodford thematises and criticises the violence of this act and argues that rather than the "risk of agonism" that Honig understands it to be, feminist refusal instead needs to "effect a rupture with our everyday affective flows" and defuse this violent orientation. Clare Woodford, "Refusing Post-Truth with Butler and Honig," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 49, no. 2, 2023, pp. 218–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537221147845>.

⁷ H. P. Foley, "The Bacchae," in *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 206.

⁸ B. Honig, 2021, *op cit.*, p. 103

⁹ In her focus on returning to the city, Honig cites Bernice Johnson Reagon several times, who similarly argues that feminists and civil rights activists must practice the hard work of coalition politics and "feel that this is our world. And that

Refusal as a prefigurative theory, I argue, allows us to explore how feminist refusal politics includes different *moments* of refusal.

1.1 A Feminist Theory of Refusal as a theory of prefiguration

Given the buildup of the book and the play, it might seem obvious to point that *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* creates a temporal link between different moments of refusal. Yet focusing on the relations between different moments of refusal has important benefits for political theory. It allows for a plurality of political strategies to exist next to each other, inviting reflection on how these strategies can strengthen (or weaken) each other. It softens the distinction between incremental, institutional change and radical alternatives, seeing them instead as moments of refusal where each moment “depends on and postulates the others.”¹⁰ For political thought about the relation between refusal/doing otherwise and political transformation, this has two parallel consequences: for institutionally-oriented thinkers it shows the political potential even of moments of refuge (as practices preparing for institutional struggle); and for those who are prefiguratively-inclined, Honig emphasises the importance of linking moments of doing otherwise to the muddy work of political transformation.

Honig emphasises that refusal is not just suspending activity, but requires finding new, collective forms of use and action. In her focus on taking seriously the doing-otherwise of the Bacchantes when they live their life outside of the city, Honig’s theory can be understood as a prefigurative theory. Yet because of the arc’s aim at returning to the city, her theory defuses the often-heard critique that prefigurative politics cannot lead to durable (institutional) change.

Prefiguration, in the words of Matthijs van de Sande, “is the attempt of activists or revolutionaries to embody, within their own organizational structures and procedures, the kind of radical change that they aspire to bring about on a much grander scale in the future.”¹¹ Prefigurative theory emerged specifically around the “movement of the squares,”¹²

centres everyday experiences of experimental, on-the-ground, horizontal movement politics, and often uses empirical and ethnographic methods.¹³ Like prefigurative thought, Honig is attentive to the alternative practices of the Bacchantes on Cithaeron. In this lazy life of milk and honey, the women develop an inclination towards sisterhood rather than maternity; mutuality and care rather than hierarchy.¹⁴ It seems that for Honig, this sororal inclination prefigures – is in accordance with – their eventual claim to the city.¹⁵

Critics of prefiguration take issue with the prioritisation of the here-and-now in such horizontal, often anti-hierarchical and leaderless protests. From a perspective that centres institutions and civil society as the context for politics, prefiguration’s “refusal to engage with the established institutions of practical life,” as John Ehrenberg formulates it, is unintelligible and anti-political. Like it or not, he writes, “existing institutions provide the only context for meaningful political action.”¹⁶ His position illustrates a tension signalled by Emily Brissette:

In the dominant theoretical model(s), social movements are rationalized and disenchant-ed (...) The compelling, magnetic dimensions of movements – vision, hope, inspiration, courage, community, the momentary instantiation of freedom – are boxed out. If they refuse to go quietly, if they persist in making themselves visible and known; if they camp out on the lawns of power, insistently within the frame, then they are often disparaged as irrelevant, childish outbursts – not the sober and serious work of change.¹⁷

Prefigurative politics is already a politics of refusal in its rejection of the primacy of institutional politics.¹⁸

we are here to stay.” Reagon emphasises more than Honig that such a return is not a one-off, but a continuous back and forth between movement politics and the home – “and then you go back and coalesce some more.” “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. B. Smith, New York, Kitchen Table-Women of Color Press, 1983, pp. 359-365.

¹⁰ B. Honig, 2021, *op cit.*, p.xiii.

¹¹ M. van de Sande, “Prefiguration,” in *Critical Terms in Futures Studies*, ed. H. Paul, 2019, p. 227, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28987-4>.

¹² Occupying, among other places Zuccotti Park (New York); Tahrir Square (Cairo); Syntagma square (Athens); Gezi Park (Istanbul); Plaça de Catalunya (Barcelona). A recent wave of European student protests under the heading ‘End Fossil: Occupy!’ (including at my own university) build explicitly upon these movements. M. van de Sande, *Prefigurative Democracy Protest, Social Movements and the Political Institution of Society*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, p. 2; F. Passeport and R. Icaza Garza, “Learning from OccupyEUR: Disruption as Political Engagement,” *Erasmus Magazine*, June 19, 2023, <https://www.erasmusmagazine.nl/en/2023/06/19/learning-from-occupyeur-disruption-as-political-engagement>; D. Gayle, “Students Occupy Schools and Universities across Europe in Climate Protest,” *The*

Guardian, May 5, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/may/05/students-occupy-schools-universities-europe-climate-protest>.

¹³ M. van de Sande, “The Prefigurative Politics of Tahrir Square – An Alternative Perspective on the 2011 Revolutions,” *Res Publica* 19, no. 3, 2013, pp. 223–239, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-013-9215-9>; M. Maeckelbergh, “The Prefigurative Turn: The Time and Place of Social Movement Practice,” in *Social Sciences for an Other Politics: Women Theorizing Without Parachutes*, ed. A. C. Dinerstein, 2017, pp. 121–34, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-47776-3>; J. Serrano Zamora and L. Herzog, “A Realist Epistemic Utopia? Epistemic Practices in a Climate Camp,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 53, no. 1, 2022, pp. 38–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12438>.

¹⁴ Honig discusses the alternative life of the Bacchantes around her commentary of Adriana Cavarero’s concept of inclination, critiquing Cavarero’s focus on maternal care and non-violence. B. Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2021; Woodford, “Refusing Post-Truth with Butler and Honig.”

¹⁵ M. van de Sande, *Prefigurative Democracy Protest, Social Movements and the Political Institution of Society*, p. 10.

¹⁶ J. Ehrenberg, “What Can We Learn from Occupy’s Failure?” *Palgrave Communications* 3, no. 1, 2017, p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.62>.

¹⁷ E. Brissette, “The Prefigurative Is Political: On Politics Beyond ‘The State,’” in *Social Sciences for an Other Politics: Women Theorizing Without Parachutes*, ed. A. C. Dinerstein, 2017, p. 112, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-47776-3>.

¹⁸ In his new book on Prefigurative Democracy, Matthijs van de Sande sees this refusal as one of four key characteristics of prefigurative protest movements. He develops a radical-democratic theory of prefiguration; linking it not just to political protest movements but also to a broader theory of democracy. In this paper I will leave this broader aim aside

Yet as a form of radical politics, this collective action in the here and now remains oriented at structural change (in and of the future). If this is not a matter of incremental change through existing institutions (as institutionally-oriented theorists would have it), but instead of living out an alternative future right now, what does prefiguration's relation with transformation look like?

Prefigurative protest movements, van de Sande argues, are experimental and open repertoires that are future-oriented yet remain spontaneous. They leave open the potential for many different futures to emerge.¹⁹ Similarly, in *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, it is not exactly clear what would change if the Bacchantes were to "claim" the city, although Honig indicates that "the effect would be a repartitioning of the sensible."²⁰ Yet the arc's orientation is clear: the Bacchantes ought not to stay on Cithaeron, but move back to the city, and engage in "the sober and serious work of change," however it might be understood. Their time outside of 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."²¹

With Honig's clear aim to return to the city in mind, we can counter institutionally inclined critics of prefiguration by pointing to the importance of preparation for (potential) institutional struggle.²² Simultaneously, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* does not limit politics to institutions; and does not gloss over the importance of collective modes of living otherwise, of reconfiguring the everyday as can happen during an occupation, protest, or festival. The arc of refusal therefore has the potential to bring together prefigurative and institutional approaches.²³ It thereby helps shift the question from "but is it politics?" to a more productive challenge: borrowing von Redecker's formulation, "the focus is then not on whether prefigurative politics is "right or wrong," but on the structural conditions needed for its success."²⁴

2. Connecting sites of refusal. Conditions for change with *Women on Waves*

Aside from connecting temporalities of feminist refusal, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* also links different sites of refusal in and outside of the city. I suggest we need to complicate the relationship between these locations of refusal to understand when the arc of refusal might be successful. Rather than simply moving away to prepare and then coming back to claim the city, a successful politics of refusal requires a continuous back and forth, building relations between inside and outside. As Honig acknowledges, returning to the city is difficult political work. But her book does not offer many clues on how such work is done in practice – perhaps because it focuses primarily on cultural manifestations like plays, books, and films. I therefore supplement her cultural focus with an analysis of the contemporary practice of feminist activism *Women on Waves*.

As we have seen in the previous section, Honig emphasises that feminists have "an obligation to return because we are all depending on each other."²⁵ Feminists cannot retreat into refuges but should instead concern themselves with changing the norm. But the Bacchantes' return to the city remains unsuccessful: they are returned to the "patriarchal fold" and ultimately exiled. Honig interprets this as a tragedy for the city, not just for the Bacchantes. The city, she concludes, was unprepared to receive them. To impress "ourselves into the full arc of the bacchantes' refusal," feminists might in turn need to commit themselves to "ready the city."²⁶

But what could (and does) such readying look like? Is it indeed ever the case that a society is ready for radical change? *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* leaves this point largely implicit – perhaps because Honig situates the return to the city in the context of fabulation and archiving work. Here, the city takes on a double metaphorical role that Honig borrows from Arendt: the polis/archive is like "the space of action which had arisen from their deeds and sufferings" made permanent.²⁷ The city simultaneously signifies political community; the context and conditions for political action; and the result or remembrance of such actions. Radical archiving practices are one way of "claiming the city": like Saidiya Hartman's fabulation (which forms the basis for Honig's discussion), they simultaneously relate to the exclusions

–developing Honig's Feminist Theory of Refusal into a conception of democracy requires more space than this paper allows. M. van de Sande, *Prefigurative Democracy Protest, Social Movements and the Political Institution of Society*, p. 4.

¹⁹ van de Sande lines out four possible relations between prefigurative practices and futurity; but argues it is the open and experimental repertoire that best corresponds with prefigurative protest movements.

²⁰ B. Honig, 2021, *op cit.*, p. 93.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

²² Recent work in social movement studies also points to the establishment of commons, infrastructures or counter-spaces enabling social action as a direct and durable effect following the movement of the squares. V. Asara and G. Kallis, "The Prefigurative Politics of Social Movements and Their Processual Production of Space: The Case of the Indignados Movement," *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 41, no. 1, 2023, pp. 56–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23996544221115279>; A. Varvarousis, V. Asara, and B. Akbulut, "Commons: A Social Outcome of the Movement of the Squares," *Social Movement Studies* 20, no. 3, 2021, pp. 292–311, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2020.1793753>.

²³ Prefigurative thinkers might counter that this reduces prefiguration to a mere phase while still prioritising subsequent institutional strategies. But this would mean to reduce the arc of refusal to a teleological movement. In the next section I hope to show how refusal politics requires a continuous back and forth between different locations and strategies.

²⁴ E. von Redecker, *op cit.*, p. 20.

²⁵ B. Honig, 2021, *op cit.*, p. 104; Cf. S. Seitz, "Affirmative Refusals: Reclaiming Political Imagination with Bonnie Honig and Lola Olufemi," *Genealogy+Critique* 8, no. 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.16995/gc.9942>. In the demand to return, Honig echoes Reagon who similarly argues that feminists must practice the hard work of coalition politics, departing from and aiming at the sensation for (Black and all) feminists to "feel that this is our world. And that we are here to stay." Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," p. 365.

²⁶ B. Honig, 2021, *op cit.*, p. 94; C. Woodford, *op cit.*, p. 224.

²⁷ There's a remarkable similarity here with the allegory *The Book of the City of Ladies*, published by Christine de Pisan in 1405 at the medieval French court: her city of ladies is a book, constituted of the stories of the famous of history. B. Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, p. 91, p. 93; H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, ed. M. Canovan, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 98; C. de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*, ed. S. Bourgault and R. Kingston, trans. I. Hardy, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2018.

that led to the constitution of the archive and provide ways to imagine and enable alternative histories and futures.²⁸ Reclaiming and transforming archives through fabulation, imagination and collecting otherwise is doubtlessly an important part of a feminist politics of refusal; but for structural political change, the archive as a metaphor is not enough.

How *do* we get from a marginal – fugitive, inclined, heterotopic – state of being outside the city towards rebuilding the city with “feminist bricks”?²⁹ How can we make meaningful relations between what happens outside and what goes on inside – strengthening each other in the contestatory practice of “confronting political structures of inequality”?³⁰ Although Honig’s commitment towards structural change is loud and clear within this book; it is much less clear how it might take place, and what kind of relations it implies between ‘the city’ as the existing political community, and feminist heterotopias of refusal.³¹

2.1 Within and without: Women on Waves

The work of the feminist reproductive rights organisation *Women on Waves* may shed some light on *how* such linkages between the city as it is, and feminist heterotopias outside, can occur and lead to political change.³² *Women on Waves* was established in 1999 as a direct-action organisation to prevent unsafe abortions and provide access to reproductive health-care especially in contexts where abortion is illegal.³³ With a mobile clinic on a boat, the organisation provides access to abortion in international waters faring under the Dutch flag (and thereby following the Dutch abortion law, where abortion has been legalised – if it is carried out under certain conditions – since 1981).³⁴ Founded by Dutch physician Rebecca Gomperts, two sister organisations have since been established: *Women on Web* (2005) and *Aid Access* (2018) that

offer online consultation and deliver self-administer abortion pills (mifepristone and misoprostol) at home in the first trimester of pregnancy.

In a recent interview Gomperts describes how at the start of the project, critics claimed that it was impossible to combine direct action with advocacy as this project aimed to do. Although starting from the pragmatic idea that the boat “was just a really good solution, we’ll just fare to countries where abortion is illegal, and then we can really help women,”³⁵ it quickly turned out to be an effective tool to raise awareness, too. In the ‘pilot project’ where the boat was invited to Ireland in 2001, the event became front page news. Even though the organisation did not in the end provide abortions on the boat, the call lines were flooded by people seeking information and aid.³⁶ The boat also became a meeting space for artists, activists, lawyers, and doctors, who in their time on the boat established organisations to fight for abortion rights continuing after the boat had left. In its combination of advocacy and creating conditions for doing otherwise, while linking international and local struggles, *Women on Waves* connects plural refusal strategies to effect political change.

Gomperts emphasises that *Women on Waves* only sets off upon invitation of local activist organisations with which they can collaborate. It thereby links existing struggle *inside* the city with alternative action *outside* of the city: not by first going outside and then back again, but by creating simultaneous and durable relations between inside and outside that legitimise and strengthen each other.³⁷ Establishing the boat as a (temporary) heterotopia would not be possible without connections with a related refusal struggle on the inside. Acknowledging the interconnection between different sites and strategies of struggle allows for valuing also those forms of activism that cannot afford a complete break with the city (perhaps subverting it from the inside),³⁸ but which might function as conditions of possibility for activism outside.

While related to local activist action, the boat also functions as a heterotopia that literally observes different laws, providing a space for something that would otherwise not be (safely) possible. It responds to a concrete need and creates space for it – outside the city. Simultaneously, this raises awareness *inside* the city. The boat’s presence makes visible how big the demand for abortion is.³⁹ It thereby raises visibility for something that was previously suppressed or taboo, but that now becomes a context a country needs to relate to. While the boat is the

²⁸ For radical archiving practices, see: S. Noorani, “Advocating for Networked Architectural Archives: Learning from Feminist Spatial Practice,” in *Women in Architecture*, vol. 1, Documents and Histories, Rotterdam, Nai010 Publishers, 2023, pp.146–57; C. Frank, “Sister Outsider and Audre Lorde in the Netherlands: On Transnational Queer Feminisms and Archival Methodological Practices,” *Feminist Review* 121, no. 1, 2019, pp. 9–23; S. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2019.

²⁹ S. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017, p. 16.

³⁰ C. Woodford, *op cit.*, p. 224.

³¹ For a detailed analysis of the relationship between (everyday) practices and structural transformation, see E. von Redecker, *Praxis and Revolution: A Theory of Social Transformation*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2021

³² For the connection between this case and Honig’s book I thank the editorial team of the podcast *Stille Geluiden* who interviewed me in the summer of 2022 resulting in two podcast episodes published in May 2023. Max Wassink, Tom van Dijken, and Eddie Adelmund, “Feminisme En de Vreugde van Verzet (Feminism and the Joys of Resistance),” *Stille Geluiden // Silent Sounds*, May 15, 2023, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/5ikEr6Y1fdQzPYI31qXFNs>.

³³ Although they refer to ‘women’, these organisations are explicitly committed to facilitate easy action to end pregnancies for anyone who needs it, regardless of gender.

³⁴ Although abortion has been legalised, it remains part of the Dutch criminal code. For an account of the first *Women on Waves* actions see R. Gomperts, “Women on Waves: Where Next for the Abortion Boat?,” *Reproductive Health Matters* 10, no. 19, 2002, pp. 180–83, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080\(02\)00004-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080(02)00004-6).

³⁵ Citations from the interview are translated and transcribed by the author. “Nooit Meer Slapen: Rebecca Gomperts,” interview, *Nooit meer slapen* (vpro, March 9, 2022), https://www.vpro.nl/nooitmeerslapen/speel~PREPR_VPRO_16763763~nooit-meer-slapen-rebecca-gomperts~.html.

³⁶ R. Gomperts, “Women on Waves.” For a discussion of the geography of abortion and abortion mobility see Sydney Calkin, Cordelia Freeman, and Francesca Moore, “The Geography of Abortion: Discourse, Spatiality and Mobility,” *Progress in Human Geography* 46, no. 6, 2022, pp. 1413–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325221128885>.

³⁷ Thanks to Viktoria Huegel for first helping me grasp the importance of relating practices inside and out of the city.

³⁸ For a discussion of how different refusal strategies are dependent on privilege, see C. Woodford, *op cit.*, p. 224.

³⁹ R. Gomperts, “Woman on Waves. Where Next for the Abortion Boat?,” *Reproductive Health Matters*, 10, no. 19, January 2002

most mediagenic example, the digital care provided by Women on Web/Aid Access functions similarly: combining direct action to healthcare (in this case self-managed abortions) with making this need visible as a reality that needs to be publicly related to. Gomperts describes this as a multimodal strategy:

I think you need to go down all roads. It's not... Sometimes it's quiet, sometimes it's with science, we've published lots of scientific papers on telemedical abortion, which is now generally accepted by the federal drug agency in the US, New Zealand, France. (...) Sending medicines just through the post, but through an online consultation, an internet consultation, we started that 17 years ago, and it was quiet at first. (...) And then we started publishing about it and it became loud. And that again has catalysed a lot of change. So I think it's not one or the other.⁴⁰

Structural institutional, cultural or political change tends to take longer than the temporary presence of the abortion boat – which is why it is important that Women on Waves helps create infrastructures for durable change beyond the boat's departure. In her discussion of the boat's first voyage to Ireland, Gomperts describes how it functioned as a meeting place for local doctors, lawyers, and artists. Following workshops on the boat, participants set up "Doctors for Choice" and "Lawyers for Choice." These organisations in turn became important voices in the campaign to repeal Ireland's Eighth Amendment (that virtually banned abortion) and were instrumental for catalysing the change that eventually led to the 2018 referendum where abortion (in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy) was legalised.⁴¹ The boat (outside the city) thereby offered concrete conditions for the establishment of activist infrastructures that would endure (inside the city) after the boat had left. These infrastructures, "arrangements of practice that are coordinated with one another or oriented towards one another,"⁴² continue the connection of activists and people seeking care on the boat and enable the slow work of institutional change.

Women on Waves elucidates the interdependence of different locations on the arc of refusal – moving inside and outside the city and back again. This case thereby pushes Honig's *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* towards the conditions needed for a successful return to the city. The three phases of leaving the city, practicing otherwise, and claiming the city through contestation are not separate, subsequent moments, but instead movements that relate different sites and logics to effect structural change.

Feminist bacchants, whether they move to a boat or a mountain, can help ready the city by creating meaningful connections with struggles happening inside the city walls; by literally creating space for practices impossible or illegalised inside and thereby drawing attention to the existence and importance of these practices; and by creating concrete conditions for establishing coalitions that can take on the 'sober and serious' work of political change.

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⁴⁰ R. Gomperts, "Nooit Meer Slapen: Rebecca Gomperts", 39:00.

⁴¹ Sadie Bergen, "'The Kind of Doctor Who Doesn't Believe Doctor Knows Best': Doctors for Choice and the Medical Voice in Irish Abortion Politics, 2002–2018," *Social Science & Medicine*, 297, 2022, 114817, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.114817>; A. Carnegie and R. Roth, "From the Grassroots to the Oireachtas: Abortion Law Reform in the Republic of Ireland," *Health and Human Rights Journal*, 21, no. 2, 2019, pp. 109–20.

⁴² This is von Redecker's description of institutions –softening the distinction between activation and creating (counter-)institutions. E. von Redecker, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

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