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“Failing splendidly” and the price of success: Feminist struggle between revolution and reformation[1]

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Abstract. With Euripides’s *Bacchae* Honig, in *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021), chooses a story that easily can be read as an “errant path”: the story of a group of “honey-mad” women who, driven by a Dionysian force, slaughter their own kin and are eventually put back into place by fatherly reprimand. Against that, Honig retells the story of the women of Cithaeron as what W.E.B. Du Bois called a “splendid failure” - “a possibility first nurtured outside the city is extinguished, but memory remains” (p. 5). In the three moments that I look at in the following, we find an affirmative politics and a politics of celebration that Honig herself follows in her writing: she lays new foundations upon which future democratic struggle can build. The narrative of “failure,” even in the “splendid form” that Honig employs, however, misses an important aspect of the story: namely the violence and forms of domination that held back the city. Honig reproaches Arendt for not being attuned to the archive’s logic of closure that prevents the seeds of the women’s struggle to flourish in the city. But is Honig? Recognizing the conditions that have led to the bacchant’s failure might push us to think about the work of reformation, or rather transformation, as part of a revolutionary feminist struggle.

Keywords: Bonnie Honig; Refusal; Failure; Carnival; Political Change; Revolution

[ES] “Fracasar espléndidamente” y el precio del éxito: La lucha feminista entre revolución y reforma

Resumen. Con las Bacantes de Eurípides, Honig, en A Feminist Theory of Refusal (2021), elige una historia que fácilmente puede leerse como un “camino errante”: la historia de un grupo de mujeres “locas por la miel” que, impulsadas por una fuerza dionisíaca, masacran a sus propios parientes y finalmente son puestas de nuevo en su sitio por una reprimenda paternal. Frente a esto, Honig vuelve a contar la historia de las mujeres de Cithaeron como lo que W.E.B. Du Bois denominó un “espléndido fracaso”: “una posibilidad que primero se alimentó fuera de la ciudad se extingue, pero el recuerdo permanece” (p. 5). En los tres momentos que examino a continuación, encontramos una política afirmativa y una política de celebración que la propia Honig sigue en sus escritos: sienta nuevas bases sobre las que puede construirse la futura lucha democrática. Sin embargo, la narrativa del “fracaso”, incluso en la “forma espléndida” que emplea Honig, pasa por alto un aspecto importante de la historia: a saber, la violencia y las formas de dominación que frenaron a la ciudad. Honig reprocha a Arendt no estar atenta a la lógica de cierre del archivo que impide que las semillas de la lucha de las mujeres florezcan en la ciudad. Pero, ¿lo está Honig? Reconocer las condiciones que han llevado al fracaso del bacante podría empujarnos a pensar en la labor de reforma, o más bien de transformación, como parte de una lucha feminista revolucionaria.

Palabras clave: Bonnie Honig; rechazo; fracas; carnival; cambio politico; revolución

Sumario. 1. Failure # 1: “a mirage of change”. 2. Failure # 2: to kill a king, or two. 3. Failure # 3: returning to the city/the archive. Bibliography.

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> "… in a certain sense a failure, but a splendid failure. It did not fail where it was expected to fail"
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> – W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*

A Feminist Theory of Refusal continues Bonnie Honig's commitment to finding democratic contestation in the in-between: in the coming together with others in our plurality and everyday actions that, one day, are banal, but the next, change how we understand the world around us. She celebrates the story of the women of Cithaeron as part of an archive of democratic struggle that shall "embolden [us] for the ruptures, the discomforting pleasure and uncertainties, of democratic political action."[2] Honig writes in a time when in so many places of the world people have come together to resist structures of violence exemplified by the falling of statues that symbolize the persistence of its racist and colonial fabrics. In her book, she highlights the toppling of Robert E. Lee in Richmond, Virginia, because, as she writes, the monument was actually left in place, but with the graffiti and the screening on top of it, Lee no longer is a hero, but instead he has become a screen: "In the protesters' layering of statuary and illumination, they relegate the men some want revered into sad irrelevance."[3] The question that this imagery brings forth, however, is the question that also haunts her celebration of the bacchants struggle in the book, namely, what happens when the lights go off and the rain has washed away the marks of the protest?

With Euripides's *Bacchae* Honig chooses a story that easily can be read as an "errant path": the story of a group of "honey-mad" women who, driven by a Dionysian force, slaughter their own kin and are eventually put back into place by fatherly reprimand. Against that, Honig retells the story of the women of Cithaeron as what W.E.B. Du Bois calls a "splendid failure" - "a possibility first nurtured outside the city is extinguished, but memory remains."[4] In the three moments that I look at in the following we find an affirmative politics of celebration that Honig herself pursues in her writing: in retelling the story of the women of Cithaeron, she lays new foundations upon which future democratic struggle can build. The women's refusal no longer is rendered unimaginable. It comes to haunt the very present that denies its possibility; it becomes a real possibility; it seeds a future. The narrative of "failure," even in the "splendid form" that Honig employs, however, risks obscuring the revolutionary potential of the women's actions. By giving in to the language of success and failure we hand the power to judge our actions to our opponent; we leave it to the gaze of the city to determine the meaning of the bacchants' experiences. Honig reproaches Hannah Arendt for not being attuned to the archive's logic of closure that prevents the seeds of the women's struggle to flourish in the city. But is Honig?

1. Failure # 1: "a mirage of change"

Honig describes Cithaeron, the heterotopia to which the women repair after their escape from the patriarchal order in the city of Thebes, as a scene of celebration. Having left Thebes, the women have also left behind their roles as mothers, as care takers and home makers, and instead enjoy the freedom from their responsibilities. On Cithaeron, the women rest; they sleep; they breast feed wild animals; they refuse to be used for the reproduction of an ordered life – in short, as Honig puts it "they party like it's 405 B.C."[5] The women, one might say, tend to a carnivalesque form of life which, in Mikhail Bakhtin's words, "is subject only to its own laws, that is the laws of its own freedom."[6] Indeed, the Carnival as we know it from many Roman Catholic societies might well originate in the *Bacchanalia*, popular festivities with frivolous and often violent initiations of all members of society, celebrated in the name of Bacchus (or *Dionysus*), that for Livy portrays a conspiracy by a cult of people against stately order. And a "great part of them are women, and they are the source of this mischief; then there are men very like the women, debauched and debauchers, fanatical, with senses dulled by wakefulness, wine, noise and shouts at night."[7] The heterotopia on Cithaeron allows the women to transgress together the norms by which they were governed in Thebes and instead to institute, at least temporarily, a new political order. Yet, the allegory to Roman Catholic forms of Carnival also allows us to see the risk of heterotopian experiences like the ones the women have on Cithaeron, namely that they remain temporary or, even worse, that their revolutionary potential becomes swallowed by and into the order of the city.

The festivities of Carnival signify the temporary triumph of the devil over life (following Augustinian doctrines as found in *De civitate Dei*). In the *civitas diaboli*, the state of the devil, people no longer adhere to the constraints of Christian morality, but instead give themselves to the lusts of their flesh; in the time of the festivities the people indulge, they are slothful, they sin. While some enjoy the freedom from their political responsibilities, others take the opportunity to leave the shadows of their domestic life to come to take charge: the women and the slaves rise and are left to rule (for example, on "Weiberfastnacht" in Germany), and the rifts between the people and the poor are painted over for the day. The women of Thebes, too, leave their proper place in the darkness of the home and step out on Cithaeron to become their own masters. The Church indeed tolerates, even encourages, the temporary siege of life by the devil and the pursuit of sin by its people. The festivities of Carnival serve people as a break from the everyday and allow them to enjoy life outside their allocated place in, and their use for, society. More so, however, it provides them with the experience that the triumph of the devil, like humans themselves, is always only transient. With Ash Wednesday all celebratory practices must end for the (inevitable) restitution of the righteous order of God. The celebrations of the bacchants, too, end with ashes as they fail in their endeavor to bring their new practices to life when they return to the city.[8] Does this mean that the festivities on Cithaeron were nothing more than a temporary break and thus, just like Carnival, offer nothing more than *a mirage of change*? Terry Eagleton emphasises the ambiguous nature of such carnivalesque experiences:

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[2] B. Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 4.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 104f.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 5.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 7

[6] M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009, p. 7.

[7] Titus Livius (Livy), *The History of Rome. Book XXXIX*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1936, p. 15. The historical origin of European Carnival remains obscure and the narrative that it originates in the Roman Bacchanalia is only one amongst many theories. For a recent overview of the debates and special focus on the Bacchanalia see M. Harris, "Claiming Pagan Origins for Carnival: Bacchanalia, Saturnalia, and Kalends." *European Medieval Drama*, 10, January 2006, pp. 57–107.

> Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art.[9]

Like pauses and moments of silence which are constitutive parts for the totality of a poem or musical composition, ritualized and "licensed" forms of transgression like the festivities of Carnival risk losing their antagonistic character. Instead, they come to serve the legitimacy of the very order they mimic to infringe upon.

Still for Bakhtin, Carnival, with its parodies, its laughter, its temporary inversion of hegemonic power structures, bears revolutionary potential for it allows people to experience that the existing order is only relative: "in rendering existing power structures alien and arbitrary, it releases the potential for a golden age…'"[10] Certainly, the women of Cithaeron, too, bear witness to the fact that the authority of the king is not absolute – in Honig's words: "… Everything is opened to agonistic contestation, if the king can be wrong."[11] The concern remains, however, that gestures of the grotesque ultimately subordinate to the very phenomenon they attempt to critique. And similarly, the question remains whether the bacchants' struggle holds meaning beyond the mere refusal of the city. Honig argues that the celebrations on Cithaeron are more than a ventilation, because in configuring and practicing a different world in which human affairs can flourish in new ways the women prepare for their return to the city. Here, Honig clearly leans against the purification of acts of refusal to their aesthetic effect (as found in Agamben's notion of inoperativity and in "the Bartleby left"). Honig describes that when the women re-*purpose* their breasts, they not only "ironize familiar patriarchal practices that force women into domesticity,"[12] but they rework "the anthropological machine": they reconfigure the ways in which they live and relate to each other with sororal care and "a new horizontality."[13] The women ground their own normativities.

Hence pushing further Honig's framing of refusal, the significance of the heterotopian experience does not lie in its refusal of the old order but instead in its affirmative quality; it provides a common experience and sororal bond between the women. When the women lay down their domestic tasks in Thebes, they refuse the city, but when they repurpose their bodies, when they dance and sing together, they build a world. We can see here the shift of address that Frantz Fanon (2001) speaks of in his analysis of the development of national consciousness under colonial rule. It is the shift that denotes the moment in which the cultural activities of the colonized people gain political significance that goes beyond resistance. Then, he writes, the work of the colonized is no longer produced in the address to the oppressor – "whether with the intention of charming him or of denouncing him"[14] – mourning an authentic past prior to the colonial invasion. Instead, the gaze shifts toward the future and it is the people themselves who come to be the addressee:

> […] When those who have been colonized renew the purpose and dynamism of the craftsmen, of dancing and music and of literature and the oral tradition, they also rebuild their perceptions. The world comes to lose its accursed character.[15]

The cultural activities of the people, which are no longer subordinated to (as the negation of) the colonial register come to hold the creative potential that is required for revolutionary change. "Dancing, singing," and "ceremonies" can signify a coming change when making "an appeal." With a growing vigour, festivities and celebrations become "imbued with a power that not merely invocates, but that assembles people."[16] Looking at the celebrations on Cithaeron from this perspective, we really understand the "transformative experience" of the bacchants' dance.[17] The women's actions mark an affirmative politics that refuses the struggle on the terms of the old order and instead authorizes a new way of being together, of acting in concert (quite literally): the celebrations are political insofar as they mark the constitution of the women's collective sovereignty.[18] And the consciousness of their collective power, I argue, comes to life for the first and last time in what is perceived as the fall of the bacchants: when they become violent, and Agave ends up killing her own son.

2. Failure # 2: to kill a king, or two.

The order of Cithaeron comes into contact with the old order of Thebes for the first time while the women are resting from their festivities. The King of Thebes, Pentheus, attempts to enter the festivities.

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[8] In Catholic and Protestant tradition, receiving the ash crucifix on Ash Wednesday shall remind one of one's own transience, calling for remorse and for the return to one's proper place. It symbolizes μετάνοια (*metanoia):* a change of heart/perspective (*Sinnesänderung*); similar to what Agave experienced in the encounter with her father.

[9] T. Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, London, Verso Editions, 1981, p. 148.

[10] *Ibidem*, p.145f.

[11] B. Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, *op. cit.,* p. 84.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 23.

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 25. Honig is clear that the feminist inoperativity she defends is "willing to risk implication in means and ends on behalf of equality, power and transformation." *Ibidem*, p. 15.

[14] F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, London, New York, Penguin Books, 2001, p. 193.

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 193.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 193.

[17] B. Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, *op. cit.,* p. 30.

[18] See also B. Honig, "Charged: Debt, Power, and the Politics of the Flesh in Shakespeare's Merchant, Melville's Moby-Dick, and Eric Santner's The Weight of All Flesh", in *The Weight of All Flesh: On the Subject-Matter of Political Economy*, edited by E. L. Santner and et.al., pp. 131–82, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016, specifically pp. 157-159.

Just as Carnival is tolerated as enabling the ultimate restitution of the proper order, the king approaches Cithaeron not with the intention to oppress the celebrations; instead, he wants to participate in them. His desire to see and to be one of the celebrants is stoked by Dionysus, who dresses up the king as a woman. Pentheus moves and adjusts his costume, clearly excited about his appropriation of a feminine identity and about the prospect of taking part (and taking over?) the space of festivity. The scene that unfolds is often portrayed as the result of mania: driven by a Dionysian force and drunk on their sororal conviviality, the "honey-mad" women pull down Pentheus from his hideout in a tree and tear him apart; Agave herself rips off the head of her son, proudly presenting him to the others. However, what we have to remember is that this moment marks the antagonist encounter of two orders. Pentheus is not just a curious onlooker: he wears the crown of Thebes and thus re-*presents* its political order. His entering of the space, therefore, is not innocent; it is an intrusion, violent in the way a sovereign's efforts to claim space for his city are. (Here, the colonial gesture involves bringing a heterotopia *into* the walls of Thebes). This would not be possible without the annihilation of the world that the women have built on Cithaeron. Now, one can and must debate the violence that happens in the scene as many have done.[19] But after all, Agave's son is the king, and regicide and filicide are one and the same act: "could she have ended the former's tyranny without also ending the life of the latter...?"[20] Indeed, as Honig demonstrates, the bacchants have committed regicide long before it comes to Pentheus' death; they "only commit murderous violence against him when he forces their hand."[21] It is an age-old story: women are threatened and attacked, but once they react, they are declared to be mad, hysterical, savages; *bitches be crazy*, right? In defence of their political sovereignty the women succumb to the terms of the old order; and in these terms, one might say, the women succeed. The women have learned "to police their own boundaries, *outside* the city"[22] (emphasis my own) – and *against* it.

The women descend from Cithaeron invigorated and determined to demand their glory, ready to transform the city according to their heterotopian experiences on Cithaeron. However, when Agave faces the city for the second time in the form of her father Cadmus, who has taken over the role as king after the death of Pentheus, the momentum comes to a halt. It is here, back in the city and "among the men of the polis," that "the *Bacchae* lose their way."[23] Cadmus directs Agave's sight to recognize that her triumph over the king has cost the life of a beloved one; she had killed her own son. "With a series of questions to his daughter, Cadmus carefully shifts Agave from a proud revolutionary woman to a mourning mother."[24] Agave gives in to the paternal reprimand and the women's venture to change the political order of the city appears to end without success. King Pentheus might have been defeated, yet the symbolic body of the king, the rule of patriarchy, evidently retained its power. Hannah Arendt tells us about the frustration that comes with the unpredictable character of political action, and which has brought generations of philosophers, scientists, and political activists to seek ways to control the outcome of their doing. The reality is, however, that our actions might fail us, that the momentum does not take up or that the order which we are leaning against remains untouched by our struggle.

Let us take a moment to look at the scene more closely. The momentum is not actually "lost" at all; it is not ended by an unpredictable turn of events: it is brought to a halt by Cadmus. He "*displaces* the women's regicide"[25] (emphasis my own). Now, it might seem that the displacement takes place through Agave's own inspection. All Cadmus does, on this interpretation, is to pose "a series of questions" that let Agave see for herself the significance of her actions: she had killed her own son. He does not force her, he does not argue with her; he merely appeals to his daughter's sensibility, to her being reason-*able*. This reason, however, is the reason of the city, through which Cadmus rationalizes his own patriarchal order. As Honig puts it, "Agave is repatriated to patriarchy."[26] This act of "repatriation" is not free of coercion. Cadmus calls upon Agave as Pentheus's mother. This she no doubt is, but in that moment, he reduces her to that role, interpellating her into the patriarchal order of the city: he "interpellates her into a world as he knows it and wants it to be. He does not extend himself to her. Instead, "he reformats the situation to suit himself."[27] In his world, the death of Pentheus cannot hold the symbolic power of a regicide but must be reduced to a filicide. In rendering Agave intelligible to the political order as a mourning mother, Cadmus eradicates her experiences on Cithaeron and strips her of her political subjectivity.[28]

Honig refuses the absolutism in Cadmus's logic and instead holds up the antagonism between the logic of the city, in which Pentheus' death signifies a filicide conducted by mad-women, and the logic of the women's resistance for which his death was a sacrifice made to defend the foundations for a different world that they have laid on Cithaeron. It was the radical climax of a story of the regicide that had already begun when the women laid down work in Thebes and left the city, and their king, that no longer (and maybe never) was theirs. But did the women really fail? Honig argues that failure might be part of the heroine's story, but what she risks neglecting with that is the violence it took for the women to fail. In fact, is the violence not proof that the bacchants very successfully challenged the foundations of the order of Thebes, that they questioned its necessity? The king at the very least struggles "to sooth and seal" the ruptures in the logic of the old city.

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[19] Clare Woodford responds to this scene arguing that feminist politics must not repeat the violence of the patriarchal order if the aim is to bring forth a different paradigm. C. Woodford, "Refusing Post-Truth with Butler and Honig", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 49 (2), 2023, p. 225.

[20] B. Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, *op. cit.,* p. 11.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 11.

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 8.

[23] *Ibidem*, p. 96.

[24] *Ibidem*, p. 78.

[25] *Ibidem*, p. 81.

[26] *Ibidem*, p. 80.

[27] *Ibidem*, p. 79.

[28] Here of course, I have in mind Butler's reading of interpellaation in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) that addresses the paradoxical coincidence of constituting and subordinating the subject in the moment of interpellation.

3. Failure # 3: returning to the city/the archive.

> *Fugitivity will not be its satisfaction. Fabulation will be its fuel.*[29]

Was it a mistake for the women to return? To answer that, it is worth thinking about the moment the women's struggle came to a halt. When thinking back to the scene in the previous paragraph, it is when Agave is isolated from the other bacchants, when she is alone in the face of patriarchy, that she gives in to the authority of Cadmus. Agave's own sense of reality – the collective experience of their creative power, the world that they had built and shared with the other bacchants – fails her because there is no one else to confirm it for her. The reality of the world is guaranteed by the corroboration by others, by its appearance to others. Back in the city, alone, there was no one else to sustain Agave's reality with her.[30] This allows us to understand better why for Honig "the return to the city [...] is fundamental to a feminist theory of refusal" and why it is necessary "to transform the city."[31] But my reading here also adds a "how" – if we are to do so, we must do so collectively.

With Arendt, Honig understands the city, as the archive, to be central for how we move within the world. Arendt tends to the city because, she believes, it is here where stories are held and we need others – we need to be among others, living in a city where stories are told and guarded – to recognize and remember our deeds, for them to become meaningful. The city-as-archive provides our actions with meaning by making sure they do not disperse and instead become part of the world that holds us together. However, the archive not only comprises the collection of different stories, gives them meaning and an order, it also polices those stories, decides whose stories count towards the narrative, and whose do not fit and remain tucked away in its shadow as a singular document (or without any documentation at all). This is the limitation that Honig finds in Arendt: "Attuned to how the city holds the archive, however, Arendt does not look into how the archive holds (back) the city."[32] Honig reminds us that when Saidiya Hartman's wayward women do not return to the city it is because the city is not ready for them (and maybe never will be): "Attending to the unreadiness of the city calls attention to the importance to refusal of rehearsal and prefiguration. And good timing matters, too."[33] This gesture is significant as it shifts the accountability regarding the success of resistance from the women, the actors, onto the addressee. Again, however, it questions the narrative of failure and success that Honig draws on. The women do not fail: the bacchants collectively have created a new world, Hartman's wayward women love, resist, and create something beautiful in the darkest conditions. If anything, it is the city that fails the women (the bacchants, the wayward, a woman every 30 hours).

The return of the women to the city, therefore, is not important because it would allow them to remember their deeds in the city-as-archive, because then, they could have stayed on Cithaeron to build together a new archive. Returning to the city means not only claiming justice for women, but also opening the city toward the plurality of demands. It is not merely a struggle *for* the archive – and thus a return –, but it is a struggle *against* it. This might mean that it is the reformation, or rather transformation, of existing hegemonic structures, in which the revolutionary potential to create a new future lies. It is led by the recognition for those that come after them: daughters and sisters, and all those who are invited by Honig into sorority. Honig thus pushes back against purity in what she calls the "fugitive" understandings of politics, maybe also to respond to a critique that is raised against her own approach.

> Why bother with Euripides? Because to leave the archive where it is and build elsewhere is to be pressed into fugitivity's path. Leaving the archive alone, we abet its reproduction of the same.[34]

When Honig commits the bacchants to returning to the city, she does so with the intention of making it ready for a different story, a different archive. And this is the very task that she sets for herself because the reality is that we need to hold our truths. In Hartman's fabulation Honig finds a method to transform the archive: by contesting the line drawn between archive, as historical documentation, and literature, as imaginative, it contests its borders. Fabulation is agonistic: it refuses "the habits and assumptions of the archive."[35] By reading the *Bacchae* in a different way that de-pathologizes the women and celebrates their concerted actions, Honig intends to break with the "game of broken telephone" – the archive's reproduction of patriarchal narratives.

The imagery of the toppling of Robert E. Lee in Richmond, Virginia, that Honig is fascinated by is a dangerous one for the exact reason that relegating the man "into sad irrelevance" risks neglecting that at the end of the day the statue is still there. She herself does not do that when she picks up the archive to transform it. She takes part in the reiteration of Euripides's story and thus an authoritative story, not to repeat it, but to push it, distort it, to displace its focus – anything to not just leave it to repeat itself. For this reason, it is the toppling of Edward Colston, thrown into Bristol's harbour, rather than the temporary illumination of Robert E. Leem, that provides us with an imagery of Honig's project. When the statue was retrieved from the water, it had been transformed by the waves: sea changes of history, and thus irreversibly marked by the protest. Hence, this statue to colonial violence has become part of a history of protest and civil contestation that, today, is itself part of the archive, remembered, and celebrated in the city's museum.

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[29] B. Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

[30] "If the truths we live by are self- evident, why do we have to hold them? Don't they hold us? Yes, but we have to hold them, too, or they may give way." B. Honig, *Shell-Shocked: Feminist Criticism after Trump*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2021, p. 24

[31] B. Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 1

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 73.

[33] *Ibidem*, p. 94.

[34] *Ibidem*, p. 100.

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 103.

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