

Archives of Refusal

Bonnie Honig
Brown University ✉ 

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rpub.95396>

Recibido: 15 de enero de 2024 / Aceptado: 07 de marzo de 2024

Cómo citar: Honig, B. (2024). "Archives of Refusal". *Res Publica. Revista de Historia de las Ideas Políticas*, 27(1), 63-66.

If "Refusal" was a themed section in a bookstore, a lot of bookcases would be needed. The books, dramas, and film scripts gathered there would include Sophocles' *Antigone*, Melville's "Bartleby," Shaw's *St. Joan*, Brecht's *Galileo*, and Chaplin's *Modern Times*, alongside biographies of Muhammad Ali, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Louis Riel, John Brown, Anton Schmidt, Sophie Scholl, and Sylvia Rivera, as well as histories of movements for equality and justice, many demonstrating through their own practices what neighborliness, solidarity, or coalition might look like in a less hierarchical world. Political theory would be there, too, since many who theorize politics tend to be writing to refuse something in their moment, hoping to (re)imagine a world otherwise.

A Feminist Theory of Refusal nominates Euripides' *Bacchae* for membership in the archive of refusal. Refusal is often dramatized as a singular hero rising up against an unjust system. When not heroized, those engaged in a politics of refusal are often pathologized. *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* resists both tendencies. It asks what would happen to some of our theorizations of refusal if they were tested by the bacchantes rather than by the literary and historical heroes more usually associated with refusal? Like many refusals in our own time, the *Bacchae* is conventionally read not as a tale of dissidence but as a warning about what might happen if things get out of control, or if they are held too tightly in control. The women at the center of the play's action tend to be treated by commentators as if they are mad, the instruments of the hypnotic wine-god, Dionysus, rather than as willing adopters of Dionysus, drawn for their own reasons to the disordering he offers, enlisting him not for nihilistic or vengeful purposes, but for their own emancipation and experimentation.

A close reading of the play finds not only a vengeful, manipulative god, but also women who freely cross the line from human to animal in his name. Chanting *Eta Bakkae*, the bacchantes reformat themselves into a human/posthuman collective. Drawing on the power of the chant to bring people together, emboldened to act in concert, they break with

convention or oppression and risk living otherwise. The bacchantes, as I read them, experiment with non-normative relationalities, defend themselves from attack, and then return to the city. Where others have seen madness or mesmerism, I see what is arguably a kind of political action. Perhaps this new reading is made possible by Benjamin's "historical index," a welcome framing offered by Gisela Catanzaro's essay. What happens next is all too familiar. Seemingly expecting to be welcomed back to the city they fled, the bacchantes are unprepared to resist the city's techniques of (re)absorption, and the play's commentators, too, seem to miss the political powers at work. Seeing the refusal as madness, critics and political theorists (Peter Euben is one) see the city as a humanizing force, an agent of sanity's return. But if the bacchantes are refusing, then the city's humanization is a (re)segregation that is underwritten by the threat of exile. The three sisters who lead the bacchantes are exiled from the city. Some classicists imagine them holding hands as they depart.

The work of the book is to enlist Euripides' *Bacchae* as a companion text to examine three concepts of refusal – inoperativity, inclination, and fabulation – while modelling a way to rethink these concepts and move beyond them. All three are refusals – of the hegemony of use, of rectilinearity as the privileged plane of ethics, and of the official stories that drive and limit our politics. The concepts name efforts to refuse dominant indignities and to promote in their place audacious equalities of leisure, caring postures of relationality, and the stories that inspire them.

Each chapter reads the *Bacchae* through the lens of one of these concepts but also enlists the *Bacchae*, as a refusal text, to test the concept in question – rereading, reconsidering, and amending each concept in turn. Refusal readings of the *Bacchae* are followed in each chapter by what I call "Bacchae readings" of refusal: new readings of inoperativity, inclination, and fabulation are produced in dialogue not just with Euripides but also with other "Bacchaes," including the fabulous

2015 film, *The Fits*, the ancient myth of Procne, the women's strike in 21st century Argentina (in the slow food section of chapter 1), two or three paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, and many more. These texts and materials generate "Bacchae readings" of the concepts, put pressure on them, and help transform them. Three sisters, three concepts and, in each chapter, three readings: Liesbeth Schoonheim is surely right to note a pattern and I am pleased it is a source of "intellectual joy." I also appreciate Schoonheim's treatment of Ursula Le Guin's carrier bag metaphor as a figure for the archive in political theory: "The use of a carrier bag presupposes that today's task will return tomorrow: to carry food home and store it only makes sense when you presume that you need it in the future." This fits with efforts I support to shift political theory's attention from the event to the quotidian and from the craving for settlement to the never-endingness of political contestation.

Whatever else it is, the quotidian is the domain of use and so perhaps this is the place to say in response to German Primera that my concern regarding Agamben is not that he "favours the suspension of use as such, and that therefore, his notion of inoperativity leads to inaction and passivity." (I resist "leads to," since I do not understand theory to lead in such a way.) I understand that others have made this claim: "the Italian philosopher's formulation of *inoperosità*, has been frequently misconstrued, and at times outright dismissed, as indicating simple inactivity, as a form of passivity and utter absence of all labour, likened to an absolute Batallean negativity." And I do express a concern about a possible passivity; but my fundamental criticism of Agamben is that his mode of theorizing is purist (102). He seeks an inoperative use "devoid of the means-ends rationality," while I am committed, for better or worse, to what still calls to be addressed instrumentally and to a politics that risks implication in what it wants to refuse. Hence my turn after inoperativity to inclination, "in which we seek to make ourselves useful to others" (102). Making ourselves useful to others is, in a way, what I refer to figuratively as the return to the city, and it is probably one of the commitments that is most disputed by the contributors to the conversation staged here.

Primera also says I privilege the "extreme example [of *Bartleby*] alone," or that I take "the failure of this particular example to elucidate Agamben's own theorisation of inoperativity as a failure of Agamben's account of inoperativity in itself." I offer my own preferred reading of *Bartleby* in place of Agamben's (in mine there are more signs of emergent, concerted action). But my engagement with Agamben turns on different sources: Agamben's mention of dance as inoperativity in *Nudities*, some of his earlier mentions of the glorious body, and his take on motion studies in "Notes on Gesture." (The latter includes discussion of Tourette's 19th century study of walking, which prepares the way for the move to inclination as, in part, involving a politics of gait.) Dance, for Agamben, is an example of inoperativity, but Agamben writes about it, I note, from the perspective of the spectator and not from the experience of the dancer. This seems to me to signal a remove *in* the theory, an insulation of a kind from what a more agonistic and feminist version

of inoperativity might offer. Perhaps it is because of the emphasis, perhaps shared by Primera, on ontology rather than phenomenology or politics.

In any case, it is in response to the example of dance that I turn to *The Fits*, a film in which the experience of dance, at its most inoperative, blinds the spectator so that they cannot watch a young girl, transcendent, released from gravity's pull. The magic of her experience is protected, not by being veiled but by being overexposed, the lighting turned from the scene to the viewer, who is blinded. It is as if the bacchantes had found a way to prevent Pentheus from ascending to his voyeuristic perch in the tree. In this film that momentarily refuses to be seen, I find a recovered inoperativity and a citational invitation: to attend to the American history of anti-black violence and to the refusal of some refusal practices to be reduced to anti-racist politics in response. If Primera's claim is that Agamben would agree with this reading, great! My remaining reservation would be that no such examples appear in Agamben's archive, however. The archive on which Agamben draws tends not to implicate the raced and gendered inequalities that I think should be the focus of a recovered inoperativity. Perhaps it is because such inequalities return us to the city and seem to sink us back into use in its impurity.

It is important to me, in the context of a book about the theory and politics of refusal, that in the project's encounters between concepts and materials, the materials talk back, as it were. What begin as objects of conceptual analysis become agents of conceptual reconsideration, partners in crime to the project of dissensual thinking. Given the gendered history of the literary example in philosophy, which treats the literary as mere ornament and the example only as an aid to conceptual critique, there is a kind of refusal in treating literature and cinema as partners in thinking. One welcome effect of this approach is it broadens the archive of refusal. It turns out there are Bacchaes everywhere. Catherine Koekoek's great example of *Women on Waves* is surely one, especially given the wonderful details of their work, shared in her essay, and given the ship is one of Foucault's own examples of a heterotopia. There is a politics to their work as they act in concert, using their position of outside agitation to connect with locals, and providing care services to those in need from the protected, perhaps fugitive distance of international waters. In my reading of Adriana Cavarero's refusal concept, inclination, I argue that care and violence are complicated. But recovering inclination as an agonistic sororal concept owes much to Cavarero's recognition of the need for care as part of a politics of refusal.

Luke Edmeads claims that, "in developing the link between care and murder" as part of my account of inclination as an agonistic practice or trait, "Honig suggests the murder might be necessary." I want to make perfectly clear that I am opposed to political violence and do not think that murder might be "necessary," as such. But it may be necessary in the *Bacchae*, because there the violence serves to dramatize what is at stake in the bacchantes' politics of refusal. I read the killing of Pentheus as both filicide and regicide (there is in the play a contest over what it will be), and I note how the scene of the violence offers a dramatization of the losses incurred

even in the context of desired political change. For Agave, Pentheus' mother, regicide is not possible without filicide, because her son is the king. But metaphorically, this is true for everyone. To kill the king, as it were, is to throw everything into question, including established kin relations and structures. It is not to legitimate "violence as necessary tool to overthrow oppression."

Agave comes to mourn the filicide, belatedly (belatedness is the temporality of tragedy). There is something terribly painful about this fictional mother's inability to hear the cries of her son in the moment, as she and the others tear his body apart in a frenzy. But there is also something instructive here: considered on a smaller scale or a lesser register, this is almost a definition of mothering, or part of it. Often without realizing it, even well-meaning mothers wound their children, even as they care for them. It is inescapable. Moreover, no mother is always and only a mother. Other roles and identities take a person out of their mother-role. Sometimes these identities are sister or revolutionary. In the midst of such situations, a son might call to his mother to return to being his mother. His calls may fall on deaf ears and, in the case of a grown son, a good thing too, we may want to say. Not because we delight in the pain of the son, but because the role of the mother cannot be forever or always to protect the son from pain, even at cost to herself. Viktoria Huegel calls attention to the later scene between father and daughter, discussed in detail in Chapter 3, in which the father pursues his own ends through his offspring. He is never similarly chastised for it. Huegel says that "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." This is the "absolutism in Creon's logic." It is the absolutism of the father – the structural kinship position in patriarchy.

For Castillo, the worry is not that the mother might slip her role to become, for example, a sister; it is that in my book, at the end, the sister becomes a brother. Chapter 3, on Arendt and Hartman, ends with a discussion of Muhammad Ali and Castillo suggests I might "displace Arendt from ... a politics of sisterly rejection, to put in her place Muhammad Ali, an African-American boxer considered in the history of the sport as the greatest boxer of all time." But we need both. The shift to Ali is a way to talk about how the arc of refusal I trace in the *Bacchae* is also a repertoire, a point I pursue in greater detail in the Appendix by way of a reading of Ali as a kind of Dionysian figure of inoperativity, inclination, and fabulation.

I am indebted to Castillo for the beautiful reflections on Chile's ongoing and still contested memorialization of its own 9/11, a partner in this collection to Catanzaro's analysis of refusal's politics in Argentina, which has been radically altered or newly challenged, I imagine, by recent events, since the time of her essay's original writing. As I was writing *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, I was inspired by the politics of refusal in both these countries and crushed to contemplate what they endured since the early 1970's. I was reading and thinking in the company of Naomi Klein, Víctor Jara, Patricio Guzmán, Pablo Larraín, Diana Taylor, and Veronica Gago, and I was oriented by the work of Diego Rossello, a former student and

now a colleague in political theory in Chile. I visited Santiago in 2019. I gave lectures on the *Bacchae* and the *Antigone* (bringing coal to Newcastle, surely), and spent several unforgettable hours at the Museum of Memory.

Catanzaro asks "what is lost when struggles for emancipation and equality are conceived in terms of a refusal? And also, what is the accumulated historical process that has allowed this to happen?" She has in mind all the lost political ground of the late 20th century and the awful political violence responsible for it, which is also on Castillo's mind. Catanzaro wants an account of revolution in relation to refusal and vice versa. I want to theorize a refusal that will turn out to have been revolutionary when it gains traction, which may occur minutes or decades after its exercise. The movement "Not One Less" could turn out to be that. My claim in the book, in any case, is that refusal is not a politics but that it is a necessary part of any politics. Catanzaro may be right to warn against its ambitions to take over everything.

Mareike Gebhardt, too, worries about the conflation of refusal and politics and especially resists the idea that "refusals and refusers" must "return to the city to qualify as feminist." My claim is not that they must return in some normative sense; it is that if we don't, we leave the city free to come for us. We limit the impact of our politics and we abandon those left behind. The risk, of course, is we lose. Not wanting the city, not wanting to leave the city, not wanting to return to the city, contributors to this forum differ in our politics. Perhaps the most ardent support for the return to the city comes from Koekoek and Sergei Seitz. For Koekoek, the wonder of the work of Women on Waves are the project's partnerships with some of those in the cities from which the ship must necessarily keep its distance. And Seitz finds via Foucault, "from Socrates and the cynics across Christian ethics up to modern revolutionary consciousness," a "Revolutionary militancy" embrac[ing] the "true life as an other life, as a life of combat, for a changed world."

Huegel calls attention to the limitations of some kinds of combat. She responds to one particular example from the book: the repurposing of a Virginia monument of Robert E. Lee, the Confederate general of the American Civil War. In the wake of the police murder of George Floyd in May, 2020, protesters demanded that such statues, scattered all over the South, be taken down. But some protesters, like those in Richmond, Virginia, also put monuments to new use. Protesters projected images onto the statue, covered it with graffiti, posed in front of it, and played basketball in its vicinity. (Some of the amazing images and an approving account of their legacy can be found here: <https://www.readingthepictures.org/2020/06/refacing-robert-e-lee-monument/>). In response to my claim that "In the protesters' layering of statuary and illumination, they relegate the men some want revered into sad irrelevance," Huegel asks, but "what happens when the lights go off and the rain has washed away the marks of the protest?" She prefers "the toppling of Edward Colston, thrown into Bristol's harbour, rather than the temporary illumination of Robert E. Lee." The rainwater said to wash away the marks of protest becomes the "sea change" of ocean water," in Huegel's account: "When

the [Colston] statue was retrieved from the water, it had been transformed by the waves.” The Lee statue was also removed, albeit a few months later, and by the state, not by the protestors (it was much larger than Bristol’s Colston!), but the protests surely were effective. What strikes me, here, also, in connection with my earlier work on the power of public things to gather people together, is how in the months before it came down, while its fate was litigated in the courts, the hated statue became for a while a site of shared play and joy by those who opposed it.

Huegel stresses the role of the water in degrading the Colston statue after it was toppled. And there is something very Bacchae-like about enlisting nature’s powers for this purpose. And yet I admit I am more moved by the actions in concert in both settings, the toppling of Colston by the crowd, which ended with a satisfying splash and cheers as he hit the water, and the joyous play and popular protest that sprang up around the Lee statue and lasted for days not

minutes. These are Arendtian actions in concert that involve self-forgetting, which is its own kind of madness, perhaps, but not the pathologized kind. Such actions in concert introduce new, natal possibilities into an unjust world we refuse to give up on while also refusing to cede to a moment’s victors the right to tell the stories that will shape our futures. If nature’s forces sometimes partner with us in this, that is all to the good.

In this archive of refusal, whose essays are informed by a wide variety of viewpoints, assembled by Huegel and Edmeads who serve as editors as well as contributors, and whom I thank for their care and labor, there are disagreements about politics, refusal, feminism, culture, structure, and agency. Such differences provide the pressure that leads to new thinking and they broaden the archive of refusal. That bookstore will need to build more bookcases.

END