The Act as Feminine: Antigone Between Lacan and Butler

By Allison Hugill

From Hegel to Lacan, countless interpretations of the classical figure of Antigone, heroine of Sophocles’ tragic drama by the same name and ill-fated daughter of Oedipus, are to be found across the history of philosophy and psychoanalysis. Sophocles’ Antigone raises timeless questions about law, kinship, community, gender and the state. Recently, working from the canonical interpretations of Hegel and Lacan, Judith Butler and Slavoj Zizek have proposed their own readings of the Athenian tragedy. Following Lacan, Zizek heralds Antigone’s act as the real ethical act, the death-driven ‘act as feminine.’ Butler, on the other hand, takes explicit aim at this Lacanian reading in order to reassert her own theoretical agenda, going back to the main argument of her major work Gender Trouble: she proposes a study of Antigone as parodic figure who performs subversive reversals by speaking in the voice of Creon, and of the state, in order to performatively question social normativity. Returning to Lacan in his Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, where he most explicitly deals with the story of Antigone, and combining this with his later writings on feminine jouissance in his Seminar XX, this paper will propose a reading, contra-Butler, of Antigone’s act as anti-foundational, as an act of pure means or désœuvrement (unworking).¹ This reading is implicitly supported by Lacan’s discussion

¹ Maurice Blanchot coined the term ‘désœuvrement’ (rendered in English by his translators as ‘unworking’). A similar notion is evoked by Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of ‘inoperativity’ and in Walter Benjamin’s theory of ‘means without end’ (Mittel ohne Zweck) or ‘pure means’ (reines Mittel). Overall, these thinkers affirm the ‘unworking’ of the work (of art, community or politics) as a radical break with conventional means-ends logic. They affirm a pure potentiality insofar as it never antecedently proposes any determinate or universally communicable aim. In his Critique of Violence, Benjamin developed his theory of pure means (reines Mittel) as a radically anti-utopian, non-instrumental, anti-teleological and anarchistic mode of acting, exemplified by his distinction between the political and the proletarian general strike (following Georges Sorel). The latter embodies the idea of pure means and allows the actors to exit
of Antigone’s act as ‘beautiful’ in the Kantian sense and meditations on the ethical act’s relation to notions of community/communism arising from the work of both Zizek and Joan Copjec. Nevertheless, I will engage extensively with Butler’s discussion in *Antigone’s Claim* and I will do so in part by way of the artwork that was chosen to adorn the book’s cover, Ana Mendieta’s *Untitled* (1976) from her *Silueta* series. In a Butlerian vein, Mendieta parodied the monumental, masculine ‘earth works’ of Robert Smithson in order to speak of female exclusion from the discourse of art. Primarily using the female form and materials from nature, and borrowing freely from indigenous feminine rituals of her native Cuba, Mendieta sought to perform a feminist critique of the exclusion of women of diverse backgrounds from the art world and early feminism. While certain of Mendieta’s biographical details superficially mirror those of Antigone – in particular, her status as ‘exilic’ figure who fled her homeland at a young age and her later suicide – I will show that her art, insofar as it can be read as performative parody, much like Butler’s reading of Antigone’s parody of Creon, fails to account for the destructive radicality of the ‘act as feminine’ as it arises in Lacan. In both Butler and Mendieta, the parody assumes a certain affirmation of the order (an obedience, however ‘promiscuous’) that it seeks to subvert. While this has undoubtedly had certain radical effects in the context of gender performativity, I will question its efficacy as a broader political gesture. A Lacanian reading of Antigone’s act as ‘radical passivity’ – a term which will be developed in detail below – might, by contrast, provide a model of one of the few political subjectivities that resists re-inscription in the instrumental logic of late capitalist...

Before I embark on this ambitious project, it will be necessary to briefly revisit the specifics of Sophocles’ tragic drama *Antigone*. As is well known, *Antigone* is the story of one of Oedipus’ daughters and, as a result, explores the direct consequences of Oedipus’ founding incestuous relationship with his mother, Jocasta. At the beginning of the play, Antigone’s two brothers – leading opposite warring sides in the Theban civil war – are killed by one another. The new king of Thebes, Creon, decides to honour Eteocles with a proper burial and to leave the second brother, Polyneices, on the battlefield uncovered, to be consumed by vultures. The principal drama centres around Antigone’s insistence that her brother Polyneices be given a proper burial, and her unremorseful defiance of Creon’s edict against doing so. Ultimately, after an initial daring attempt, Antigone is caught in the act of burying Polyneices and is herself condemned to be buried alive. In the tomb where she is sentenced to await death, Antigone hangs herself. Creon’s son, Haemon, also hangs himself in the tomb out of love and pity for Antigone. Throughout the scholarship on *Antigone*, many commentators have dwelt on a few specific details of the play: Antigone’s obsessive insistence on her unconditional demand, the conflict between state and family, or divine, law, and certain gender issues raised by Antigone’s defiance of Creon.²

² Many scholars have also speculated as to why Antigone had to cover the body a second time, providing evidence that the initial scattering of earth on Polyneices’ body would have been sufficient for his soul to proceed to the underworld. This incongruity supports a Lacanian reading, as it will be unfolded below, by further emphasizing the death-driven insistence of Antigone’s act, even beyond its ostensible purpose; it can in this way be read as an act of pure means.
In the final chapter of her book *Antigone’s Claim*, Judith Butler additionally makes use of another play by Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*. This play was written a decade after *Antigone*, but presents its prehistory. It recounts the exile of Oedipus from Thebes to Colonus, where he and his daughters are given shelter by Theseus in a land governed by Athens. Antigone leads her blind father to Colonus, where they are later joined by her sister Ismene. Meanwhile, Polyneices is banished from Thebes by his brother Eteocles and finds Oedipus at Colonus. Oedipus does not want to speak to him, as Polyneices was the one who cast him out in the first place. When Antigone finally persuades Oedipus to talk to Polyneices, he is told that Polyneices has been unjustly exiled by his brother Eteocles and is preparing to attack Thebes, which is under his brother’s rule. This conflict is a result of Oedipus’ curse upon his sons that they will “die by each other’s hands.” Both sons have heard from an oracle that the result of the conflict will depend upon which city it is that their father is buried in. Butler extracts several things from this story, but importantly she notes that in the play both Polyneices and Oedipus have made demands upon Antigone: the former demands a proper burial and the latter demands eternal loyalty. Butler points this out in order to show how the curses leveled by Oedipus against his sons (to “die by each other’s hands”) and his daughter (“to love no one more than him”) can be read as ambiguous insofar as the web of kinship relations in which they are caught has been rendered incoherent by Oedipus’ foundational incestuous act. Butler argues – somewhat problematically, considering the repeated use of the *proper name* in the text- that Antigone’s use of the word ‘brother’ does not denote any singularity, but is an interchangeable signifier for Eteocles, Polyneices and Oedipus himself. She then asks the question: what would elevate the one’s demand over the other,
since both [Oedipus and Polyneices] occupy the same role as brother?\(^3\) In this way, she proposes to re-read the entire drama of \textit{Antigone} as one of ‘kinship trouble,’ that allows Antigone to obey the curse ‘promiscuously.’

The driving force of \textit{Antigone’s Claim} concerns Butler’s criticism of Lacanian psychoanalysis. While she does engage directly with Lacan’s interpretation of \textit{Antigone} in his seventh seminar, her main argument is much more broad. Butler performs a critique of structuralism and posits Lacan’s notion of the symbolic as making transcendental Lévi-Straussian structures of kinship. Butler maintains that her critique of the structuralist account does not entail an abolishment of the notion of kinship in its entirety. Rather, she would propose an idea of kinship “understood as a socially alterable set of arrangements that has no cross-cultural structural features that might be fully extracted from its social operations…[organizing] the reproduction of material life.”\(^4\)

Many readers of Lacan have criticized Butler’s main point of contention in \textit{Antigone’s Claim}, that Lacan’s definition of a symbolic order \textit{qua} transcendental does not account for the alterability of the social \textit{qua} normative. In fact, Butler’s misunderstanding of some key Lacanian tenets leads her to posit this riff with her own theory, that might otherwise be considerably less pronounced. Lacan himself has emphasized the “non-existent” character of many of his key concepts – the phallus, the symbolic father, etc. Butler’s insistence that symbolic structures are ultimately just individual as well as collective fantasies is thus not incompatible with Lacanian psychoanalysis; Lacan’s

\(^4\) Ibid., 72
crucial contribution to psychoanalysis was the idea that “non-existent, fantasmatic elements play a necessary, constitutive role in the forging and sustenance of human experiential reality, and that these (unconscious) fantasies, although variable, resist unrestricted modification at the behest of the subjected subject.”5 As we will see, Butler posits a multiplicity of alterable kinship positions in her reading of Antigone in contrast to the singular universality of being that is accorded to Polyneices in Lacan’s seminar. For Lacan, however, the grounds on which Antigone insists on her brother’s singularity do not rely on any particular content, she is merely attaching herself to his very being as ineffaceable and thus her action is not one of defending or founding any kinship norm but is one of radical, death-driven indeterminability.

It will be important to further pursue these key elements of Lacan’s text in order to better understand Butler’s commentary. For the moment, however, suffice it to say that Butler’s fascinating contribution to the scholarship on Antigone is her consideration of what psychoanalysis would look like if it took Antigone as its point of departure, rather than Oedipus. While she acknowledges that the story is in many ways decidedly post-Oedipal, for her Antigone represents a challenge to the structure of kinship and gender that is instituted by the incest taboo. She represents someone who should be socially ‘dead’ or excluded from the life of society, yet she speaks in the language of that society and demands recognition within it. Though the ostensible outcome prescribed by the incest taboo is a heterosexual nuclear family, Butler argues that Antigone fails to produce this closure for the Oedipal drama. The fact that Antigone willingly dies instead of

marrying Haemon and bearing his children serves to de-institute heterosexuality. Her act of naming the tomb her ‘bridal chamber’ is a verbal destruction of the institution of marriage. In a strange twist, the incest taboo ends up foreclosing a love that is not incestuous. Butler argues that this could be a plausible point of departure for a new psychoanalytic theory with Antigone as its foundation. Again, Butler’s suggestion that Antigone subverts the intended closure of the incest taboo does not directly contradict Lacan’s own position. Lacan concludes his lecture “Antigone between two deaths” with the explicit remark that Antigone’s final sacrifice “perpetuates, eternalizes, immortalizes [the family] Atè.” In sustaining and carrying forth the ruinous hubris of her father/brother Oedipus, she is not here, in Lacan’s explanation, satisfying the demands of the incest taboo either. Moreover, Lacan does indeed take Antigone as the basis for an ethics of psychoanalysis. In her book Imagine There’s No Woman, Joan Copjec suggests that “the ethical act is in itself feminine in Lacan’s terms. It is woman who is guardian of the not-all of being.” As a result, she proposes that the latter phrase can be read “as a way of marking a trail that leads from the ethics seminar, in which Antigone is described as ‘the guardian of criminal being,’ to Encore, where Lacan defines being as not-all.” Therefore I will argue, with Copjec, that there is a clear thread linking Lacan’s ethics to the notion of feminine jouissance, and that both concepts can be seen to converge in the act of Antigone. In what follows, I will attempt to elucidate this link by showing in what way Lacan’s positing of Antigone as exemplary of Kantian beauty in his Ethics can be directly related to his later formulation of ‘feminine jouissance’ in Encore.

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7 Joan Copjec, Imagine There’s No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002., 6
Lacan: Antigone as Exemplary of the Beautiful and Feminine jouissance

Lacan insists throughout his lectures on Antigone that the tragic heroine should be taken as exemplary of the beautiful, in the Kantian sense. Ultimately, Lacan defers to another presenter to talk about this connection explicitly. That text, by a Mr. Kaufman, is omitted from the English publication of Seminar VII, so it is only possible to guess in what sense this repeated reference is meant. In my own reading, and as I hope to demonstrate below, Lacan’s invocation of the Kantian beautiful in relation to Antigone perfectly illustrates the way in which her act can be read as one of ‘pure means’ or désœuvrement.

In her discussion of Lacan’s Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Butler remarks that he “refers Antigone to the notion of the beautiful, suggesting that the beautiful is not always compatible with the desire for the good, suggesting as well that it lures and fascinates us because of its enigmatic character…This is, then [,,] a conflict internal to and constitutive of the operation of desire and, in particular, ethical desire.”8 Butler’s treatment of this complex problematic – the relation of the beautiful to death and desire in Lacan – would gain nuance if the concept of the beautiful from which Lacan is working, namely as it appears in Kant’s Critique of Judgement, were further elaborated.

Echoing Kant’s own definition of the beautiful, Lacan frames it in terms of the pure ‘there is’ (il y a); that which is beautiful “communicate[s] a sign of understanding that is situated precisely at equal distance from the power of the imagination and

8 Butler, Antigone’s Claim, 46-47
that of the signifier." Similarly, Kant’s crucial insight in the *Critique of Judgement* is to radicalize any exclamation that a thing is beautiful, by pointing to the indeterminate character of the object in question. Beauty, rather than being a property of an object, describes a sensation of pleasure arising from an overwhelming feeling of life (*Lebensgefühl*) engendered by the free play of the cognitive powers, imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) and understanding (*Verstand*), insofar as they are not restricted by any determinate concept. Beauty is distinguished from the good and the agreeable inasmuch as it is, for Kant, the only *free* liking. This free liking to which Kant refers is called favour (*Gunst*) and it is marked by a “letting-be” of the object, a disinterested interest. Interest in the *Critique of Judgement* refers to a certain use-value, desire or concern with the existence of the object that, in order for a pure aesthetic judgement to arise, should not be taken into consideration. Lacan’s own definition of the structure of desire is in fact precisely in tune with this definition of beauty as disinterested interest: the object cause of desire (the *objet petit a*), for Lacan, can never be attained and so too causes desire to function as a means without end. In the same paradoxical manner, one’s desire resists conceptual rationalization and is sustained by the tension of its unfulfillment. Something remains beautiful so long as it resists being fully conceptualized.

What it takes for the beautiful to emerge in art, for Kant, is a certain amount of artistic genius. The artist as genius must be able to produce works which have “no purpose outside themselves, yet they are structured *as if* they had one. Beauty is possible

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only if it is fortuitous, if it serves no antecedently given purpose.”

Under this paradoxical demand, it might well be asked how someone can produce something beautiful. For Kant, the beautiful emerges only from the point of view of aesthetic judgement: “it is only in respect of judgement that the name of fine art is deserved.”

The freedom of the imagination inherent in the artists’ production of the work must, for Kant, be tempered by the understanding in its reception by a judgement of taste. “For,” as Kant writes, “in lawless freedom imagination, with all its wealth, produces nothing but nonsense; the power of judgement, on the other hand, is the faculty that makes it consonant with understanding. Taste, like judgement in general, is the discipline (or corrective) of genius.”

Imagination on its own, Kant explains, merely entitles the work to be called inspired, whereas its corrective by way of the judgement of taste renders it fine art.

In this regard, I suggest that the only way for a work of art to appear beautiful in this Kantian sense (without a concept, ohne Begriff) is for the artist-as-genius to plumb the depths and limits of experience without concern for the work as an end. In other words, the artist commits a ceaseless and sublime unworking (désoeuvrement) of the work. In her book Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan, Alenka Zupancic provides a succinct differentiation between the sublime and the beautiful in Kant:

The simplest definition of [natural] beauty is thus that it is a sense-ful form which draws its fascination from the fact that we know this form is entirely coincidental, contingent, or unintentional. [Or in the case of fine art, it appears as unintentional when we nonetheless know it to have been created by an artist.] The sublime, on the other hand, is explicitly a senseless form; it is more of an incarnation of chaos (the eruption of a volcano, a

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12 Ibid.
turbulent ocean, a stormy night . . .). It appears as pure excess, as the eruption of an inexplicable ‘jouissance’, as pure waste. In other words, if the beautiful is characterized as the place where Nature knows, the sublime is the place where Nature enjoys. It is precisely this jouissance of the Other, a jouissance that does not serve any (real or apparent) purpose, that is so fascinating about the sublime.\textsuperscript{13}

Thus, in the Lacanian sense, the near-simultaneous pleasure and pain caused by the Kantian sublime mirrors the structure of jouissance insofar as both appear as excess, inexplicable in terms of means-ends logic. It is then possible to read Antigone’s act as an insistent pursuit of the sublime depths - independent of any concern for the law or her own life. As such, it is judged to be beautiful by Lacan precisely because of its radical indeterminability and unaccountability. If Antigone’s experience is one of death-driven sublimity for her, it appears, when externally mediated, as beautiful to us. In Lacan’s own words: “the beauty effect derives from the relationship of the hero to the limit.”\textsuperscript{14} Kant’s formulation of the sublime entails that the subject feels first an overwhelming sense of fear, which instantaneously turns into pleasure with the realization of the superiority of her ideas of reason (\textit{Vernunft}) in relation to the faculty of presentation. In the face of the absolutely great, the subject feels empowered to move beyond the confines of sensibility and sensuous representations and to appeal to something else. Underlying nature and our faculty of thought, Kant argues, is a supersensible substrate that is comprehensible through reason, but not sensuously apprehensible. The ability to think certain ideas of reason (freedom, God, infinity, etc) is a specifically human ability and is what elevates humans above mere nature. The pleasure we derive from an experience of the sublime comes from a respect for our own vocation and for the moral law within us. Of course, in

\textsuperscript{13} Zupancic, \textit{Ethics}, 157
\textsuperscript{14} Lacan, \textit{Ethics}, 286
order for such a feeling to arise the subject must observe the limit from a secure distance. In Zupancic’s formulation, when faced with the sublime we experience an inflation of our superego as a strategy of avoiding the Thing [das Ding, the Real], “the death-drive in its pure state.”15 From the vantage point of this inflation, the subject can observe itself from outside, in a space that belongs to the Other. Nevertheless, in identifying with the Other’s jouissance in relation to the sublime, as Kant explicitly warns, the subject risks losing contact with her corporeal embodiment and is “ready to give up property, health and even life.”16 The feeling of the sublime describes those “moments when something entrances us so much that we are ready to forget (and to renounce) everything, our own well-being and all that is associated with it; moments when we are convinced that our existence is worth something only in so far as we are capable of sacrificing it.”17 In the case of Antigone, we see a subject who identifies entirely with the Thing, the limit, without a protective distance and in so doing meets her demise.

It is against this backdrop that Antigone’s act is radically re-thought by the Lacanian school, as a case of pure means. For Lacan, Antigone is precisely driven by a certain jouissance and not – as is the case with Creon – by any adherence to a concept of an ethical good (representing family or divine law, as some other commentators suggest). As Butler explains, “Antigone will emerge, then, for Lacan as a problem of beauty, fascination, and death as precisely what intervenes between the desire for the good, the desire to conform to the ethical norm, and thereby derails it, enigmatically, from its

15 Zupancic, Ethics, 155
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 151
Antigone’s act could not be judged beautiful in the Kantian sense if it were merely an external embodiment of a moral good. It is precisely the non-conceptual element of her act that fascinates Lacan and propels his interpretation forward in his later consideration of feminine sexuality in Seminar XX.

Zupancic’s description of the sublime as the ‘jouissance of the Other’ in the above-cited passage provides a key to understanding why it is that Antigone’s act is formulated as a ‘feminine act.’ In Seminar XX: Encore, feminine jouissance is defined precisely as the ‘jouissance of the Other.’ In this lecture, Lacan discusses the particularity of feminine jouissance in contrast to phallic jouissance. The title of the seminar, meaning “again”, signifies the manner in which enjoyment (jouissance) is never satisfied. There is always a gap or remainder left over and desire is sustained through this impossibility of satisfaction in the sexual relationship. In his lesson “On jouissance,” Lacan famously says that “to man insofar as he is endowed with the organ said to be phallic – I said, ‘said to be’ – the corporal sex or sexual organ of woman – I said ‘of woman,’ whereas in fact woman does not exist, woman is not whole – woman’s sexual organ is of no interest except via the body’s jouissance.” He is here describing what he calls ‘phallic’ jouissance or the jouissance of the organ – which should not be misconstrued as concerning a biological category. There are phallic women and non-phallic men. It rather denotes to what extent a person identifies with the phallic function. Phallic or “sexual” jouissance, for Lacan, is “the obstacle owing to which man does not come (n’arrive

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18 Butler, Antigone’s Claim, 46
pas)... to enjoy woman’s body, precisely because what he enjoys is the *jouissance* of the organ.”

Feminine *jouissance*, on the other hand, is “beyond the phallus” by virtue of its non-subsumption in the phallic order. Impossible to know anything about it other than that some women (and men) experience it, Lacan explains it using an example of mystical ecstasy. In his invocation of God and the mystics, Lacan’s ‘explanation’ of feminine *jouissance* points to a pure *jouissance* of being, a being that is at the very limit of language. With recourse to (post)-Lacanian thinkers like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, it is possible to conceive of this feminine *jouissance* as relating to the primary relationship with the m(O)ther and the pre- or extra-symbolic inscription of language on the body. In Kristeva, we find a model of this in her concept of the semiotic, the unnamable within the symbolic, what she calls the “transsymbolic, transpaternal function of poetic language.”

Returning to Antigone, we find in Lacan’s *Ethics* a clear alignment of Antigone’s act – her unwavering love for the pure ‘there is’ of her brother – with this experience of the limits of language. Antigone’s act is fixed to the singularity of her brother’s being, without reference to any particular content:

The unique value involved is essentially that of language. Outside of language it is inconceivable, and the being of him who has lived cannot be detached from all he bears with him in the nature of good and evil, of destiny, of consequences for others, or of feelings for himself. That purity, that separation of being from the characteristics of the historical drama he has lived through, is precisely the limit or the *ex nihilo* to which Antigone is attached. It is nothing more than the break that the very presence of language inaugurates in the life of man. That break is manifested at every moment in the fact that language punctuates everything that occurs in the movement of life.

20 Ibid.
The radical limit or *ex nihilo* to which Antigone is fixed is at the limits of the signifying chain ("beyond the phallus") and is precisely that on which it is founded and articulated as such. This, in turn, is how Antigone’s character comes to be read as exemplary of the Kantian ‘beautiful.’ She has touched the limits of language in her insistence, *ohne Begriff*. With Lacan’s notion of feminine *jouissance* in mind, it is now possible to see precisely why Zizek identifies Antigone’s act as the real ‘feminine’ act.

**Zizek: The Act as Feminine and Radical Passivity**

Zizek’s interpretation of the real, or feminine, act draws on this same feature of non-instrumentality that appears in Kantian aesthetics and in Lacan’s notion of feminine *jouissance*. Zizek defines the radical act as feminine in the following terms:

… every act worthy of this name is ‘mad’ in the sense of radical *unaccountability*: by means of it, I put at stake everything, including myself, my symbolic identity; the act is therefore always a ‘crime,’ a ‘transgression,’ namely of the limit of the symbolic community to which I belong. The act is defined by this irreducible *risk*: in its most fundamental dimension, it is always *negative*, i.e., an act of annihilation, of wiping out – we not only don’t know what will come out of it, its final outcome is ultimately even insignificant, strictly secondary in relation to the NO! of the pure act.23

The purity of Antigone’s act is at the limits of the means-ends logic constituting the symbolic order. The work to which Antigone commits herself, insofar as it can be called a ‘work,’ is marked by a ceaseless ‘unworking.’ She quite literally goes to the limit - to her own death - and as the multiple and never-ending interpretations of Sophocles’ play suggest, Antigone’s insistence is ultimately ambiguous with regard to any positive

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conceptualization and offers no determinate program in advance. Though her explicit action is to bestow Polyneices with a proper burial, it is uncertain in which name she insists upon doing so (whether divine or family law, or defiance of the state, or something entirely else). As I have previously remarked, Lacan suggests that Antigone acts in relation to the pure ‘there is,’ the singularity of her brother independent of any particular content, in the ineffaceable character of what is. Lacan regards this unshakeable yet indeterminate stance as the crucial issue of Sophocles’ text, and the reason for its ceaseless fascination:

What is, is, and it is to this, to this surface, that the unshakeable, unyielding position of Antigone is fixed. She rejects everything else. The stance of the-race-is-run is nowhere better illustrated than here. And whatever else one relates it to, is only a way of causing uncertainty or disguising the absolutely radical character of the position of the problem in the text.24

In his book Enjoy Your Symptom!, Zizek draws on this insight with regard to Antigone, in order to put forward a model of a political subjectivity that might be called ‘anarcho-communist.’ He recounts a historical event: Tito’s ‘No!’ to Stalin in 1948, or the split of Yugoslav Communists from the international communist movement. Zizek argues that the importance of this act was to deny Stalin’s hegemony outside of any pre-determined positive ideological project, and to do so from the very situated position of communism itself; to resist Stalin as a communist, to create a rupture in the communist monolith from within, and to subject it to renewed critical consideration. Zizek remarks that a typical liberal reproach to this Lacanian ethic is to depict it as incompatible with a notion of community, as a suicidal ecstasy that suspends the social dimension. Instead, Zizek wants to suggest that a ‘suicidal gesture’ – as Antigone comes to exemplify it – is at the very

24 Lacan, Ethics, 279
foundation of every new social link: “with an act, stricto sensu, we can therefore never fully foresee its consequences, i.e., the way it will transform the existing symbolic space: the act is a rupture after which ‘nothing remains the same.’” Antigone’s No! to Creon is presented as the real feminine act, the real ethical act as such, because it is situated at the limit of being, the very birthplace of the social itself, a place of pure potentiality from which real change can emerge.

But, what does it mean to commit an act that is without pre-conceptual content and that is characterized entirely by a rupture? The complex notion of ‘radical passivity’ helps to clarify this point. In the same way that Blanchot’s concept of désœuvrement is importantly translated to English as ‘unworking,’ the idea of radical passivity is best understood as encompassing a similar modality of active-passivity. To ‘unwork’ something denotes a negative process as anti-foundational but nevertheless not without active movement. Indeed, as we have seen via Zizek, it is the act par excellence. In Blanchot’s book The Writing of the Disaster, passivity is repeatedly invoked in its relation to passion and pas (both negation and step). He describes passivity as the passion of the psychotic (“dispossession,” “the self wrested from itself,” “total abjection”) insofar as it does not belong to this world and cannot be conceived of without being completely transformed, or underdetermined as merely the obverse of activity. This

25 Zizek, Enjoy, 45
26 In the recently published Political Writings of Maurice Blanchot, there is a similar formulation of the ‘communist exigency’, which may help to further elaborate my link with désœuvrement in the Blanchotian sense: “Communism cannot be an heir. We must be convinced of this: it is not even the heir of itself and is always called upon to allow the loss, at least momentarily, yet radically, of the legacy of centuries, however venerable this legacy may be. The theoretical hiatus is absolute; the rupture, in fact, is decisive. Between the liberal capitalist world, our world, and the present of the communist exigency (present without presence), there is only the dash [trait d’union] of a disaster, an astral change.” Maurice Blanchot, Political Writings, 1953-1993, Trans. Zakir Paul. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010., 93
definition is perfectly in line with Lacan’s explanation of feminine *jouissance* as the *jouissance* of the Other (the self wrested from itself), with Zizek’s suggestion that Antigone’s act is in fact ‘mad’ (as non-symbolizable, ‘psychotic’) and, finally, with Kristeva’s formulation of the limit of the speaking being, in the maternal relationship characterized by the semiotic (‘total abjection’). The idea of radical passivity is perhaps most succinctly formulated by Zizek in his consideration of Antigone and the act:

…the act is not simply something I ‘accomplish’ – after an act, I’m literally ‘not the same as before’. In this sense, we could say that the subject ‘undergoes’ the act (passes through it) rather than ‘accomplishes’ it: in it the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn (or not), ie. The act involves a kind of temporary eclipse, *aphanisis*, of the subject.²⁸

It should now be possible to see how the Lacanian ethic, as it is formulated with regard to Antigone’s act, differs markedly from Butler’s reading. Butler criticizes Zizek’s interpretation, arguing that in it Antigone’s act is opposed to a “more affirmative” masculine act and is “understood to have constituted the founding negation for the polis, the site of its own traumatic dissolution that the subsequent polity seeks to cover over.”²⁹ As should be clear now, the Lacanian understanding of Antigone’s act refuses this very definition, which already reinscribes it in instrumental logic with the thought of a ‘subsequent polity.’ While Butler presents Antigone’s deed as a parodic and subversive repetition of Creon’s powerful subjective position, the Lacanian interpretation posits a profound rupture and a (near)-annihilation of the subject. I will now turn to the work of Ana Mendieta in order to consider to what extent it can exemplify Butler’s claim, and to interrogate recent attempts to place her work securely in either pole of essentialism or

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²⁸ Zizek, *Enjoy*, 44  
²⁹ Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 68
performativity.

**Ana Mendieta and Judith Butler: Parodic Performance, Promiscuous Obedience**

Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta’s earth-body *Silueta* series, an oeuvre of around 200 works completed between 1973-1980, comprises several documents in photography and film depicting the imprint or silhouette of her female form embedded in the earth. One piece from the series, *Untitled* (1976), adorns the cover of Judith Butler’s book on Antigone. In the acknowledgments of the book, Butler extends her gratitude for having been introduced to the work of Ana Mendieta; it is clear that the choice of this work is not arbitrary and that the appearance of congruity between Butler’s theoretical work and Mendieta’s artistic practice is not entirely unfounded. I hope to show the way in which Mendieta’s work can be read as antecedently embodying Butler’s notions of parody in terms of unfaithful repetition or, as it is formulated in *Antigone’s Claim*, ‘promiscuous obedience.’

Mendieta was born into an aristocratic family in Cuba in 1948. After Fidel Castro took power, her father Ignacio joined the counterrevolutionaries and was imprisoned for 18 years as a result of his involvement in the Bay of Pigs. In 1961, at the age of 12, Ana and her sister were sent to the U.S. and spent the next five years in and out of orphanages and foster homes in Iowa. In 1966, their mother and brother were eventually able to join the girls in Iowa, where they settled as a family. Mendieta later studied fine art at the University of Iowa. Beginning her career as an artist in the 1970s, her practices spanned various media, including performance, earthworks and video and centred around feminist
issues of sexuality and embodiment. Mendieta was married to Minimalist sculptor Carl Andre and, in 1985, she died tragically after falling from their 34th floor apartment window in Greenwich Village. Though ultimately considered a suicide, her death gained significant media attention and Andre was subsequently both tried and acquitted of murder.30

Mendieta’s tumultuous childhood – marked by exile from her homeland and uneasy integration in the US – informed much of her later artistic practice. In her work, Mendieta borrowed freely from various Cuban indigenous rituals and tried to assert a trans-cultural identity by referencing the exclusion of women artists of diverse backgrounds from the art world and early feminism. She maintained strong ties with Cuba and returned to the island 18 years after her departure, at which point she formed bonds with the Afro-Cuban population and appropriated many practices from Santeria in her art. In particular, the Silueta series seems greatly influenced by these religious practices. Her traumatic transition to a state society in which she felt largely excluded led Mendieta to create these earth bodies that represented a kind of mourning for a primordial communion. While these personal and biographical details are certainly important for any understanding of Mendieta’s work, it is perhaps more fruitful to engage directly with the materiality of her Silueta series in order to interrogate its relation to Butler’s theory.

It was by no means unintentional that Mendieta should choose to create imprints of her body directly into the earth. In part, this idea can be attributed to her use of Santeria practice: “One aspect of outdoor Santeria ritual practice is described as going

‘monte adentro.’ One searches for a monte, uncultivated land, on which to perform a ceremony, and adentro means to go inside. Monte adentro thus signifies ‘going back to the roots.’31 Nevertheless, the timing of Mendieta’s Silueta series, as well as her parodic use of the term ‘earth body,’ suggest an engagement with the dominant art discourse in America at the time as well. In October of 1968, Robert Smithson and several other ‘land artists’ had inaugurated a group exhibition of what would become a prolific art movement, entitled ‘Earth Works,’ in New York. This event, and Smithson’s famous 1,500 foot-long protrusion in Great Salt Lake Utah, ‘Spiral Jetty’ (1970), solidified a new technique that was presented as a protest against the commercialization of art practice in the late 60s. Mendieta’s parodic use of this medium – dominated at the time by male artists from the Minimalist tradition - points to a need for her to reinscribe her own exclusion, both from this male discourse and from her homeland, through a performative repetition of a physical and literal in-clusion into the land.

Mendieta’s earth bodies were essentially outlines of a female form, either built up or dug into the ground, whose final product could be seen through the mediation of photography and super-8 film: “traces of traces of the body.”32 As such, the artworks rely upon an absence that makes them open to a Butlerian reading. Susan Best has argued in her essay “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta,” that, seen in the light of its alteration of a fixed narrative of femininity, Mendieta’s art has been construed as paralleling Butler’s notion of gender as performance. Yet, the whole force of that argument relies on the interpretation of Mendieta’s physical absence from the work as subversive. Specifically,

31 Ibid., 14
her absence has been made to invoke Butler’s idea that there need not be a “‘doer behind the deed’, [that] the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed.” The idea that no single identity precedes the act, and that the stability of identity is always in question, is the crucial tenet of Butler’s notion of performativity. Mendieta’s physical absence in most of the Siluetas is thus pushed to the foreground by some theorists in order to point to the way in which her unfaithful repetition of norms of femininity and nature destabilizes and produces sex. This opens up a reading of the Silueta series as constructing an identity in and through the instability of the trace in the land. But, as Best pointedly remarks in her essay, the need to foreground Mendieta’s ‘absence’ also denies the overt specificity of the female body and feminine identity in her work.

Depending on how you approach Mendieta’s earth bodies, they can be mobilized in support of a Butlerian idea of performativity or simultaneously put the effectiveness of that idea into crisis. It would seem that Mendieta is convinced by a notion of community as defined on ethnic and gender lines which she explicitly seeks to regain through ritual engagement with religious and cultural practice. In this sense, she subscribes to an identity politics, not uncharacteristic of feminism at that time. Nevertheless, the mode in which she insists on the validity of that community is ‘performative.’ She re-inscribes her marginality in the mainstream. This mirrors precisely what Butler wants to present as Antigone’s claim: her interrogation of what it means “when the perverse or the impossible emerges in the language of the law and makes its claim precisely there in the

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
sphere of legitimate kinship that depends on its exclusion or pathologization.”

Mendieta’s art confronts a similar exigency. However, at the heart of Mendieta’s artistic action is a commitment to a certain identity, charged with a kind of naïve essentialism. And it is this fixed notion of community that both Butler and Lacan are working against in their writing on Antigone, though from very different poles. On the one hand, Butler wants to posit a multiplicity of meaning that is never fixed beyond the performance of a deed. In this sense, Butler’s notion of ‘performativity’ is not so different from the Lacanian ethical idea; but only to the extent that it puts into question the notion of a ‘doer behind the deed’ – a fixed subjecthood – just as the Lacanian ethical act destabilizes the subject. The major difference, however, is that Butler sees political potential in what she regards as Antigone’s imitative gesture toward Creon, or in what we might see as Mendieta’s ‘promiscuous obedience’ of the tenets of monumental land art. Rather than pursuing the destabilized subject to the point of rupture, extreme danger and risk, the point where new possibilities truly emerge, Butler believes in the possibility to gradually dismantle what already exists by parodically using the tools already given, without the act of destruction. Converging on the body of Antigone, we can see two political stances emerge: death-driven insistence on the singularity of being in contrast to a vitalist view of the limitless plasticity or multiplicity of being. In this sense, Antigone’s legacy concerns, fundamentally, no less than the state of our social order itself. Antigone brings to the fore the question of resistance today. Is it any longer possible to resist capitalist-patriarchal heteronormativity by means of parody? Or is it not, rather, that notions of parody and performance have themselves been subsumed within that very order itself and thus

35 Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 68
exposed to their own impotency?

Sophocles’ *Antigone* has been repeatedly resurrected over the last centuries as a result of the fascinating, timeless and unresolved problematics that it presents. In Lacan’s account, mobilized to support his ethics, the radical non-instrumentality of Antigone’s act is brought to the fore. In this way, it becomes for Lacan the site of similarly constituted ideas: the beautiful and the sublime in Kant’s aesthetics, and feminine *jouissance*. I have added to this list *désoeuvrement* and radical passivity. What each of these thoughts holds in common is a paradoxical active-passivity, an ‘unworking’ that pursues the limits of experience. In the pursuit of the limit – the Lacanian Real – the subject is in a position of extreme risk and death-driven instability without recourse to any pre-determined conceptual aim. For Zizek, this is the act *par excellence*, the act that puts into crisis the stability of any order. Indeed, Antigone’s act “most forcefully exposes the utter injustice and contingency of the Law, the fact that the Law functions precisely to ‘actively’…cover over the fact that it is constructed across a void.”

I have argued that to a certain extent Butler’s understanding of Antigone does not differ radically from this conception. The congruity lies in the fact that neither Butler nor Lacan adhere to unalterable gender positions in their theories. However, while Butler conceives of this alterability in terms of a multiplicity of social positions that depend on no fixed category of truth or structural necessity, Lacan’s ethic posits a ‘singular universality’ of being in which particularities are bypassed or short-circuited in the name

36 Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 193
of a universal idea. This was precisely illustrated in Lacan’s treatment of Polyneices: Antigone’s insistence on the burial of her brother exemplified a commitment beyond any particular characteristics inherent in his person. Her act was, rather, propelled by her insistence on an as-yet-conceptualized and unverifiable truth of being in its very singularity. Zizek transposed this argument onto the political field in his example of the internal communist rift between Tito and Stalin, the thrust of which relied upon a commitment to communism independent of, and indeed in constant critique of, its manifold state manifestations. The modern problematic presented by these two readings of Antigone is the difference between a destructive and a subversive act. At a point of crisis in the political climate of late capitalism, in which neoliberal instrumentality consumes indiscriminately notions of openness, creativity and multiplicity, it might well be time to reconsider Lacan’s crucial insights on Antigone’s act in their proximity to a politics of pure means. The fact that Antigone’s act and feminine jouissance underlie this form of political resistance renews the necessity of understanding Lacanian psychoanalysis from a feminist perspective.
Works Cited


