

“‘Antigone versus Oedipus?’” Feminist Theory and the Turn to Antigone¹

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(This is Chapter One of *Antigone, Interrupted*, a book MS currently in final stages of revisions. Comments, criticisms, etc., are therefore especially welcome right now)

We only smoke the *Lamentations*.
Hunger, directed by Steve McQueen²

“Even if you are not aware of it, the latent fundamental image of Antigone forms part of your morality,” says Jacques Lacan and so, Lacan suggests, working through the trope (if not the play) of Antigone is necessary to establish a critical relationship to morality (*Ethics*, 284).

Sophocles’ heroine forms latently part of our *politics* as well. It is now a mainstay of political and cultural theory to diagnose certain political problems as “Oedipal” and to recommend a solution that is, somehow, “Antigonean”. What is meant by Oedipal and Antigonean varies, however, so much so that it sometimes seems as if these terms might be empty signifiers. I argue here, however, that the “Antigone versus Oedipus” frame is itself generative, it resists instrumentalization, and its unintended political cultural effects are not always positive.

As we saw in the Introduction, those who turn to Antigone now do so in the hope she might break the spell of the father’s legacy of rationalism (Oedipus, the puzzle solver), rule or governmentality (Oedipus, the king), or hierarchical, naturalized

¹ This chapter and Chapter Five began as a response to audience questions to my keynote address to a 2009 graduate student conference in Frankfurt, and grew out of two seminars in 2010, one graduate at Northwestern, one graduate and post graduate at the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell.

² This line is spoken by Bobby Sands during the IRA hunger strike to a republican priest, who asks whether the protesters have yet used all the Bible’s pages to roll their cigarettes. For a reading of the film that emphasizes the non-instrumental character of the hunger strike, see Peter Bradshaw’s film review for *The Guardian* (2008).

patriarchal power (Oedipus, the incest and parricide). Against these, political and feminist theorists have variously embraced Antigone as a bearer of true feeling possessed of a true ethical compass, powerful disobedient to tyrannical, tone deaf or impositional law, anti-patriarchal devotee of the natal over conjugal family form, or great lamenter and lover of the equal brother whom she grieves and buries at no small risk to herself.

For those who worry that invocations of “Antigone versus Oedipus” do not always have a salutary effect on democratic theory and politics, one response to her recent omnipresence might be to dispense with this figure entirely and turn elsewhere for inspiration. But, as Lacan’s observation suggests, and as our tracking of contemporary classicizations of mourning mothers also shows, abandoning Antigone is not something we are simply free to do. This classical heroine is pervasive. The idea that we could leave her behind and think politically in ways untouched by her is as improbable as Oedipus’ hope that he could leave Corinth behind and live out his life elsewhere untouched by his fate.

If there is no dispensing with Antigone, then we must work through this figure, rereading her and working our way out from prior, now conventional receptions in order to find another Antigone who may have a different impact on democratic theory and may offer a different prod to our political imagination. That is the aim of this book. Promoting its own turn to Antigone, it begins by reviewing the constraints that result when political and feminist theorists invoke her.

In this chapter, I look at a few exemplary “turns to Antigone,” assessing their aims and impact on political and cultural thinking. I focus here, in differing degrees of detail, on four thinkers who mobilize Antigone versus Oedipus – Jean Bethke Elshtain

(the political theorist writing on Antigone and feminist theory in the 1980's), Diana Taylor (who assesses the gender politics of Latin American theater), Judith Butler (who begins trying to excavate a new Antigone for a feminist and queer theory of alternative kinship and then, later, mobilizes Antigone on behalf of an ethics of vulnerability and a politics of precarity), and Lee Edelman (who criticizes Butler's first Antigonean turn and deploys a Lacanian Antigone on behalf of a different queer theory).

Finally, after canvassing the limitations of the various turns to Antigone listed here, I turn to one important theorist of lamentation and resistance who does not take his bearings from the classical heroine: Douglas Crimp (art critic, AIDS activist, founding member of ACT UP). Crimp theorizes a politics of mourning beginning in the mid 1980's and yet when U.S. feminists, since the 1980's, want to think about mourning and politics they do not turn to him. Why not? They turn to Antigone, or to the Madres of the Plaza in Argentina, as we will see. Or both. Why the neglect of the U.S. experience with mourning around AIDS? And why, of all these political and cultural theorists, is Crimp the only one who never mentions Antigone, notwithstanding his avowed interest in the politics of lamentation? This chapter will speculate as to why he avoids, while others embrace, Antigone for politics. Does he perhaps intuit the risks of classicization, the ways in which those who turn to Antigone seeking to enlist her power find themselves instead subject to her power?

"Antigone versus Oedipus," I: Elshtain and Taylor

Since the 1970's and in the last few years in ever increasing numbers, feminist scholars have called for moving out of the shadow of Oedipus and the incest ban that

founds the traffic in women (in structuralism) to Antigone who seems a more promising feminist figure.³ Two feminists whose treatments of this classical figure have had possibly the greatest impact in political theory are Jean Bethke Elshtain and Judith Butler.⁴ Writing almost twenty years apart, these two deploy Sophocles' ancient tragedy in ways that mirror each other uncannily. Uncannily, since these authors' politics could not be more different, with Elshtain championing traditional family values in conservative journals like *Reason* and Butler endorsing alternative gay and lesbian kinship structures in outlets like the *Nation*. Still, both turn to Antigone, the woman who defies her uncle's edict to leave her traitorous brother unburied and later dies for her dissidence. In Antigone, Butler and Elshtain see, first, a figure to authorize a politicized feminism against the state (Oedipus, the king) and second, a lamenter who stands for a universal ethics or humanism that may have a political impact but is not itself primarily political.⁵ Instead it seems to be primarily *apolitical*.⁶ The question posed here then is: is it perhaps the move to Antigone – meant to figure or incite resistance – that has driven

³ Recently some turn to Ismene in place of the supposedly too masculine or heroic Antigone. On the turn to Ismene, see Chapter Four, which appeared in earlier form as "Ismene's Forced Choice: Sacrifice and Sorority in Sophocles' *Antigone*" in *Arethusa*, January 2011.

⁴ Elshtain wonders why feminists had not yet turned to Antigone as a resource. Elshtain was focused perhaps on the American literature. Irigaray's reclamation of Antigone for feminism had appeared years earlier in the mid-70's in France and her work was included in an edited volume, *New French Feminisms* (1980), cited by Elshtain in this very essay ("Antigone's Daughters," 311 n.13). In *Antigone's Claim*, Butler wonders, for her part, whether Antigone might be a queer heroine. Peggy Phelan dismisses the possibility in *Mourning Sex*.

⁵ My reading of Antigone's lamentations in Chapter Two (an early version of which appeared as "Antigone's Laments, Creon's Grief," *Political Theory*, February 2009) as primarily political takes seriously the 5th century context and may put an obstacle in the way of the otherwise seemingly inevitable ethical slide.

⁶ That Elshtain and Butler each has two Antigones is apt, since the *Antigone* is all about doubling – the doubling of kinship roles in which Oedipus the incest is father/brother to his children/siblings, the doubling of two brothers fighting over the throne and two sisters, differently locked in struggle over how to survive in the aftermath of civil war in a city that mistrusts and admires their family. I note below too: these two receptions map onto the split orientation toward tragedy: as a genre of conflict and a genre of suffering. The latter is eventually taken up by melodrama which, I will argue in Chapter Six, is, however, itself usefully seen as a conflict genre as well. (On the move from tragedy to sentimentality, see Viv Soni's important book, *Mourning Happiness* [2010]).

feminists to universalism and lamentation as a politics? Might a critical reading of the turn to Antigone, then, provide a lens through which to assess what some refer to as “left melancholia”?⁷

In “Antigone’s Daughters” (1983),⁸ her first of two essays on Antigone, Elshtain argued that Antigone modeled a maternalist, care-centered social feminism that cherishes family ties as resources of democratic politics. Political without joining itself to official power structures, Elshtain’s social feminism fit well with Sara Ruddick’s “maternal thinking” (1980).⁹ Elshtain did not assimilate Antigone to maternal thinking but she established an alliance between them: Both opposed utilitarian statecraft on behalf of human dignity and care (“AD,” 310).

Elshtain’s second essay, “Antigone’s Daughters Reconsidered” (1989),¹⁰ published some years later, moves from a focus on U.S. based social feminism to a more universal, humanistic ethics and post-politics of lamentation and loss. Here the emphasis shifts from Antigone’s divisive resistance against Creon to her powerful lamentations for her brother, cast in universal terms.¹¹ Elshtain’s aim here remains anti-statist but, though she underscores yet again her commitment to a feminism poised for politics by its location in the “exigencies of the private” realm (“ADR,” 229-230), she also insists now that Antigone is a “great representation of the *human* spirit” (“ADR,” 231; emphasis

⁷ For further discussion, see Wendy Brown’s essay, “Resisting Left Melancholy” (1999).

⁸ Hereafter cited in text as “AD”.

⁹ Ruddick’s maternal thinking, Elshtain said, focused on “the concrete reality of a single human child” in opposition to forms of public policy that tend to be “impersonal, calculating, and technocratic” and “amoral.” An early critique of maternalist politics, and a sharp rejection of Elshtain, in particular is Mary Dietz’s 1986 essay, “Citizenship with a Feminist Face: The Problem with Maternal Thinking.”

¹⁰ Hereafter cited in text as “ADR”.

¹¹ The distinction between resistance and mourning is real but tenuous. Elshtain embraces the women’s mourning that Hegel saw as a threat to state stability precisely because women’s laments do threaten state stability, on her account. Still the difference is there too: indeed, Elshtain’s two essays map onto the two strands of tragedy which center, respectively, on conflict and suffering and which devolve into two distinct genres –tragedy and melodrama – as I argue in Chapter Five.

added). Noting that “Antigone resists simple capture,” Elshtain nonetheless captures her for a humanism of grief, connecting Sophocles’ heroine to brave women who stood up to Nazis to bury their murdered male relatives during the second World War and then to the Madres of the Plaza in Argentina who faced down an army to demand an accounting of those “disappeared” in the Dirty War.

The move from resistance to lamentation triggers a shift of emphasis as well – from Elshtain’s focus on the unique singularity of persons (violated by state bureaucracy) to their equality (violated by murderous juntas) and from her specifically anti-statist social feminism to a transnationally iterated universal humanism with anti-authoritarian effects.¹² The latter’s premise is the equal dignity of the dead, whose equality often seems easier to grant than that of the living.¹³

Elshtain’s comparison of the Madres and Antigone in her second essay took hold, and well beyond the domain of political theory.¹⁴ It was even embraced by some of the Madres themselves. The Madres marched as mothers, Elshtain claims, and they were brought into politics and its more universal promises (of human rights and dignity) reluctantly, moved by the immediate losses they suffered and protested at great risk to themselves. She celebrates the Madres and all those she calls the contemporary “daughters” of Antigone for resisting, while “reject[ing] both revenge and self-sanctimony” (“ADR,” 233), never noting that the trouble with Antigone, as it were, is precisely her propensity, in Sophocles’ rendering of the story, to call sanctimoniously for

¹² Which is both concretely maternal and yet transcends any particular articulation, says Elshtain, drawing on Fred Dallmayer’s work to help establish this dialectic.

¹³ A recent illustration of death’s specific power to equalize: an op ed cartoon depicts three identical flag draped coffins with the caption “Which is the gay one?” (April 14, 2009, *South Florida Sun Sentinel*).

¹⁴ See, for example, the documentary film, *Following Antigone: Forensic Anthropology and Human Rights Investigations* (2002), produced by EAAF and the American NGO, Witness. Thanks to Lindsey Smith for alerting me to this film.

vengeance.¹⁵ Reported by the sentry to have “called down curses on the heads of those” who desecrated her brother’s body, Antigone is given to hot incitements, not soft laments (something Lacan’s anti-humanist reading of her is more open to). Her vengefulness disappears when Elshtain ennobles the Madres by comparing them to the classical Antigone (a point noted by many others, including R. Clifton Spargo [2008] and Diana Taylor). With this move, Elshtain puts the Madres above or beyond politics. But she also does something else: she also softens and humanizes Antigone by comparing her with the Madres. The effect on Antigone of such comparisons is less often noted than are the ennobling effects of classicization on others by way of her. R. Clifton Spargo notes that the Madres’ dissidence seemed political “*until* they took on, for Elshtain as for others, ‘the classical grandeur of Antigone,’” (cited in Spargo, 291).¹⁶ Conversely, we might say, Antigone might have seemed vengefully partisan had she not taken on the humanist halo of the Madres. Hegel prepared the way for this by making Antigone a saintly sister whose actions may have deleterious political effects but whose consciousness is in no way politically engaged or motivated.

Such apoliticality may add to rather than subtract from the political effectiveness of dissidents like the Madres, as Spargo points out. But the Madres’ was not a naïve apoliticality; it was strategic, Spargo says. Insofar as the Madres not only acted as

¹⁵ On Antigone’s calls to vengeance, see Chapter Two. Elshtain also, I can’t help but note, discloses her own role in the contingent materiality of the universality she claims to discover, when she mentions in her second essay that she shared her first one, “Antigone’s Daughters,” with one of the Madres, who read it and saw herself in its mirror: “[W]e *are* your daughters of Antigone,” the woman said to Elshtain in response: “I did not get to bury my children, as Antigone buried her brother. But I have risked my life to make public their suffering” (“ADR,” 232). This classicization is not, however, entirely Elshtain’s doing. The identification with Antigone goes on in a larger context, a point made by Diana Taylor in her work on the Madres and noted by R. Clifton Spargo (2008) when he lists just a few of the prior Argentine and Latin American Antigones (130).

¹⁶ Or, more accurately, classicization introduces a different politics. James Porter makes the point in Introduction, *Classical Pasts*.

mothers (as Elshtain would have it) but more importantly *acted* as mothers (wearing “dowdy, old-fashioned maternal clothing for their protests,” for example), “they were ‘ironically’ interpreting their own apolitical status” (Spargo, 130).¹⁷ And this gained for their actions a certain political traction.

There is a difference, however, between noting the efficacy of such naïveté (as Spargo does) and falling for it (as Elshtain arguably does). Diana Taylor, in a study of the gender politics of Latin American resistance culture, goes yet further to analyze the *costs* of such naïveté, especially when it genders feminine. In her book, *Disappearing Acts*, she argues that the Madres’ self-effacing but powerful performance of powerlessness bought them some power but it was also disempowering. Specifically, Taylor blames the “bad script” of “Antigone versus Oedipus” embraced by many of the Madres.

The Madres represented motherhood as “universal, immutable and eternal,” Taylor explains. They claimed their lamentations were in “the tradition of women’s lamentations that dates back more than 2,500 years to Greek drama.” They positioned themselves as mediators between “between warring fathers and sons... [T]hey even perpetuated the Oedipal framing of events by repeatedly asserting they had been made pregnant by their children [and they] identified restoration of their sons with restoration

¹⁷ Making real and visible “a duality that,” on Spargo’s account, “haunts apolitics, as the sign both of excluded personhood and of voices decrying such exclusion, as the expression both of a true realm outside the polis and of claims exercised exorbitantly against it.” In a way, Butler’s own Antigonean turn is focused in a way on the very trait named “apolitical” by Spargo: The duality of exclusion and exorbitancy produced by apolitical politicking in which we “effectively protest the procedures and binding force of the State by way of motives and principles purporting to be constituted elsewhere” (119). For Spargo, this paradoxical site of exclusion and exorbitance goes by the name ‘Antigone’ in both its classical Sophoclean form and its more modern Kierkegaardian formation as well. And, as he puts it, “any invocation of universalist obligation so as to supersede the political ordering of the public realm necessarily exploits, by my account, a hypothesis of apolitical positionality I wish to associate with Antigone’s gesture. At the same time, it is my working assumption that Antigone’s gesture, even as it hypothesizes a possibility of standing beyond the sphere of the polis, depends crucially on its located political context” (119; cf 130).

of the phallus” (203; cf. 220).¹⁸ The result? The women brought down a regime (though, Taylor suggests, the Falklands war played perhaps a more key role), but they did not win agency or equality for themselves. Their sons were left with little choice: they could not ally with their mothers, who had styled themselves as weak, and so the sons joined or replaced the fathers in power and left the women “on the sidelines, somehow marginal to the happy ending” (203-4).¹⁹ This, Taylor says sadly, was the predictable “political denouement of this national fantasy” (204).

Taylor sees more promise in classical *receptions*, in particular in Griselda Gambaro’s Argentine rewrite of Sophocles’ *Antigone* as *Antigona Furiosa*. Gambaro too wants to “mine the canonic possibilities first expressed in classical art and feeling’ in order to stage women’s defiance” (209), says Taylor. But, unlike Elshtain, Gambaro does not sanitize Antigone’s passion and violence, nor does she classicize in a way that universalizes. Gambaro maintains a “tension between Sophocles’ work and her own” (210), going back and forth between the 5th century Athenian and 20th century Argentine contexts, highlighting the frictions and not just the continuities between them.²⁰ Gambaro sets out to rewrite the canon with, Taylor says tellingly, “a vengeance” (222).

Still, Taylor cautions, even Gambaro simply “cannot change the role of Antigone, who is doomed to sacrifice herself time and again” (222).²¹ That is, even the best

¹⁸ Missing and marked by the first ellipses is a universalising qualifier: the Oedipal script “has problematized [and constructed] generational and family boundaries for thousands of years” (Taylor, 203).

¹⁹ The Madres “accepted the Jocastian logo for their movement: ‘Our sons [*hijos*] gave birth to us; they left us pregnant forever’” (cited in Taylor, 220).

²⁰ Just as Antigone experiences a tension between life and death, belonging to neither, and therefore calling herself a metic. And Gambaro’s *Antigona* takes on masculine characteristics normally attributed to Haemon, who is, Taylor says, “furious, heroic, individuated” (221). *Antigona* is also more “loving and vulnerable” than Sophocles’ heroine and less “inhuman” and onstage for the whole play (post-mortem) (Taylor, 216). In Chapter Five, I discuss whether/how to classicize with friction.

²¹ In other words, Gambaro plays Butler to the Madres’ Elshtain, on Taylor’s account. Gambaro and Butler test the limits of established modes of representation and rail against them; Elshtain and the Madres

vengeful classicizations will succumb to humanist martyrdom or to what Carl Schmitt (2009) called “Hamletization,” which is “the transformation of the figure of the avenger into a reflective, self-conscious melancholic,” mournful and incapable of action (Schmitt, 19).²² As we shall see, Taylor’s concern (along with Schmitt’s diagnosis) is borne out by Judith Butler’s shift, by way of Antigone, from a citational politics of vengeful sovereignty to a humanist ethics and politics of lamentation.

“Antigone versus Oedipus,” II: Butler’s Antigonean Turns

Although she is drawn to Gambaro, Taylor is nonetheless at best agnostic about whether “feminist writers [can] open up new roads for themselves through ventriloquism” (222). Such rewrites or receptions seem more promising to Judith Butler, who emphasizes throughout her work the promise for progressive politics in practices of reiteration and resignification. It is ironic then that it is Butler who succumbs to the lure of lamentation. This may be because Taylor charts the working and reworking of Antigone scripts while Butler is herself a participant in the reclamation of Antigone for ethics and politics.

Butler turns to Antigone several times in her work but I focus here on two texts that I take to be exemplary.²³ The first of her two Antigone-related books, *Antigone’s*

embrace those conventional representations and endorse the power and resources they do provide while empowering them yet further. I note here that Taylor, in highlighting of the limitations of Antigone, does not fall prey to Edelman’s critique of Butler which I discuss below, in which he says that Butler like almost everyone else allies Antigone with a future even though her non-reproduction is what is most interesting about her.

²² For Schmitt, such Hamletization was an effect of history’s intrusion into the world of the play, point to which I return in Chapter Three.

²³ One of my interests in this book is to explore the bifurcation of Antigone into a humanist extra-political lamenter versus political agent of resistance and to find ways to pull these back together or, given that Butler’s project is not that different, to find other ways to pull these back together. This requires that we de-sentimentalize her. I focus here on *Antigone’s Claim* (2000) and *Precarious Life* (2004) before turning

Claim, is an extended reading of Sophocles' play and of previous deployments of it by Hegel, Lacan and others; the other, *Precarious Life*, is more of a mourning-work of US violence after 9/11, and it invokes Sophocles' heroine. As with Elshtain, so with Butler: the first engagement with Antigone is about an Antigonean politics in which the focus is on the conflict with Creon.²⁴ The second endorses a more universal humanist ethics of lamentation in which the focus is on suffering: sensitivity to shared vulnerability and exposure, Butler argues, can move us to cross the merely political lines of friend/enemy and inspire us to treat *all* lives as grievable and human. Finally, as in Elshtain so in Butler, Antigone's self-sanctimony and her calls for vengeance go unremarked. I begin with the second of Butler's two books and work backwards from humanism to politics, from suffering to sovereignty, from the post-9/11 context of 2004 to the pre 9/11 world of 2000.

(i) *Precarious Life*

Precarious Life shows how the U.S. media and state institutions establish certain *hierarchies* of grievability, putting the lie to the old saw that we are all equal in death.

finally to *Frames of War* (2009). *Undoing Gender* (2004) has a chapter on Antigone, focused on her political action, and this may seem to put in question my claim of chronological shift from a sovereignty-seeking Antigone in 2000 to a later one given to lamentation in Butler's work (2004). However, the Antigone in *Undoing Gender* is the very one from *Antigone's Claim*. The chapter, "Bodily Confessions," recasts the earlier material as part of an argument about confession and the chapter is indeed noted to have been given as a lecture in 1999, before what we may call Butler's ethical turn. One of my interests in this book is to explore the bifurcation of Antigone into a humanist extra-political lamenter versus political agent of resistance and to find ways to pull these back together or, given that Butler's project is not that different, to find other ways to pull these back together. This requires that we de-sentimentalize her.

²⁴ The conflict is driven by Antigone's singular devotion to her brother. The devotion to the brother stands for Antigone's identity as an incest, says Butler, whose observation works against Elshtain's celebration of the private as a resource for politics, itself untouched by politics: Unlike Elshtain, Butler sees that the brother is actually a radically plural kin position in this incestuous family, available to be occupied by three distinct people. Beyond that, Butler might also have noted the varieties of incest, the difference between cross-generational and same-generational desire (vertical and horizontal), for example, a point noted by Steiner and explored by John Seery (2006) in a critique of Butler. But Butler claims such distinctions are rendered ambiguous by incest itself which casts the same person as both horizontal and vertical, father and brother.

Some deaths seem to call for public and private grieving and others simply do not. Some death circumstances are seen as political, others are not. Some obituaries are published, others are not. Some bodies are treated honorifically, others horrifically. Butler asks: “What are the cultural barriers against which we struggle when we try to find out about the losses that we are asked not to mourn, when we attempt to name, and so to bring under the rubric of the ‘human,’ those whom the United States and its allies have killed?” (*PL*, 46).²⁵

The issue here is not only the hierarchy of deaths but also what it evidences and re-secures. After 9/11, loss and mourning were treated as occasions to restore the sense of sovereign impermeability pierced by the attacks. The sovereign response to grief was to seek out vengeance and violence to shore up sovereignty’s damaged form. But why, Butler asks, must grief and loss license aggression? These can move us instead to cultivate *non-sovereign* modes of being that reject rather than cultivate violence. For Butler, *Antigone* is helpful here because she provides an important example of alternative grief practices that resist instrumentalization by sovereign power: “*Antigone*, risking death herself by burying her brother against the edict of Creon, exemplified the political risks in defying the ban against public grief during times of increased sovereign power and hegemonic national unity” (*PL*, 46).

Butler here cites her own earlier book, *Antigone’s Claim*, and this intimates she has not altered her position from the one *Antigone* to the other. But in fact there is a shift: In *Antigone’s Claim*, the focus is not only on *Antigone*’s willingness to risk herself to

²⁵ The argument about grievable life is prefigured most clearly in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) where Butler argues that “The ego becomes moralized on the condition of ungrieved loss” and then asks: “But what conditions make it possible to grieve, or not to grieve, loss?” (186). Butler is not yet here attending specifically to death practice but this formulation is later pressed into service in that context as well.

bury Polynices but also and more fundamentally on Antigone's own efforts to claim *sovereignty* against Creon.²⁶ Antigone may not in the end "achieve the effect of sovereignty she apparently seeks," Butler says (*AC*, 77), but sovereignty *is* what Antigone seeks. As Butler herself puts it, Antigone counters Creon's "sovereign speech act by asserting her own sovereignty" (*AC*, 11; cf. 23). An assertive politics that quests for power in *Antigone's Claim* gives way in *Precarious Life* to a lamentation of sovereignty's excesses on behalf of a (post-)politics or ethics premised on human commonalities of vulnerability and mortality.

Such commonalities limn the "more general conception of the human" toward which Butler works in *Precarious Life*, emphasizing our dependence on others and our vulnerability to them (31). This primordial dependence on others means we are defined by vulnerability, which demarcates a range of possibilities from "the eradication of our being at one end [of the range, to] the physical support for our lives at the other" (*PL*, 31). Notably the two end points of Butler's range of human commonality map onto Hannah Arendt's labor (in which we are governed by the time of mortality and risk eradication) and work (in which we insulate ourselves from the time of mortality by fabricating physical supports of life that outlast a human life). But what about Arendt's third element of the human condition: Arendtian action, a collective, non-sovereign endeavour whose principle is natality? Arendtian action also exposes us to vulnerability (if action goes awry, we may be hurt or misunderstood and, since it is collective, we are dependent on others and the good will of their "constant mutual release"); and action helps produce supports for life (what Arendt calls the "web" of human relationships)

²⁶ Notably the sovereignty claims made by Antigone are reiterations of Creon's, on Butler's account. I argue in Chapter Three, however, that the play is best seen as dramatizing a conflict between two forms of sovereignty: aristocratic (Antigone) and democratic (Creon).

(Arendt, 216).²⁷ Missing from Butler's spectrum of the human in *Precarious Life*, Arendtian action is of interest here because it points beyond sovereignty (as Butler now wants to) but also beyond the grievability that replaces it, while nonetheless, bearing the marks of both. Action, which expresses what Arendt call the "ontological fact of natality" is, for Arendt, a non-sovereign performance that works to re-constitute communities and inaugurate new realities. Arendtian action exposes us to mortality, we may die in action, after all; but it is not about grievability, notwithstanding its dependence, for its power and meaning, on stories modeled on none other than Pericles' Funeral Oration.²⁸

Natality is little in evidence in *Precarious Life*. The price of the book's turn to equal grievability seems to be the displacement of a more political and natalist Antigone on behalf of a humanist and mortalist one. It may even be that Butler, like Elshtain, is drawn by Antigone (but also, of course, by events of the day: the Madres, for Elshtain, 9/11 for Butler) from a politics that quests for power to a lamentation of power's excesses, and from sovereignty into "humanism," a term Butler puts in scare-quotes.²⁹

Although Butler mentions in passing in *The Psychic Life of Power* that passion and love are similar in their ek-static structure to mourning, and although she thematizes the idea of a "liveable life" (as opposed to a grievable one) in *Undoing Gender*, her

²⁷ Elsewhere the third appears, when Butler mentions "mortality, vulnerability, agency" as all implied by the body (*PL*, 26).

²⁸ For further discussion see Arendt (1958). I note too that action is uniquely governed by the timelessness of immortality and postulates human (non-sensual) pleasure, individuation, vulnerability, and risk. In other words, Arendtian action may be seen as one way of countering mortalism. It is not, in the end, my way.

²⁹ Luciano notes Butler's care regarding humanism and the human: "Never simply given, the human, for Butler, 'comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know'" (Luciano, 264, citing *PL*, 30, 23;). Still, for Luciano, even Butler's careful "humanism" shares traits with "sentimental mourning care," especially "a certain faith in the instructive value of grief" (264-265). Seeking to render contestable Butler's "embrace of grief as a political resource," Luciano turns to Emerson's 1844 essay, "Experience," in which he laments (the death of his son) otherwise: "'I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature'" (Emerson, 29; cited in Luciano, 265). Emerson's account of grief is usefully balanced in my view by the call to lament and/as action in Douglas Crimp's work, which I discuss below.

affective repertoire is largely oriented to loss.³⁰ Again, here, we feel the absence of Arendt's third dimension of the human condition: action. In neglecting it, Butler does not follow *Antigone's* lure. No one does. It is true, the play's protagonist is focused (almost) exclusively on the lamentations denied her by Creon, but it is important that the issue for her is not just the lamentations but what they stand for: the forms of individuality and membership they postulate (as I argue in Chapter Two). More to the point, the play was performed in the 5th century in the context of a larger festival of Dionysius. The play's focus on the *mere* life orientation of finitude was supplemented by the *more* life orientation of festival in the 5th century. Thus, mortality is counterbalanced by natality and this is evident not only in the play's context, but also in the text itself. We see it in something the chorus says at the play's beginning.

Relieved that Thebes has narrowly averted a destructive civil war, the chorus asks, in effect, "now what?", and responds as follows:

Now let us win oblivion from the wars,
thronging the temples of the gods
In singing, dancing choirs through the night!
Lord Dionysus, god of the dance
That shakes the land of Thebes, now lead the way! (167-172)

These lines immediately precede Creon's first speech in which he responds to the recent emergency by declaring one brother a friend of the polis and the other its enemy. The former is buried with full honors, the latter left out to rot. With his edict, Creon seeks to

³⁰ Thanks to Moya Lloyd for reminding me of these exceptions to Butler's later focus on grievable life. For further discussion, see Lloyd (2005). I note here that Butler was criticized in the 1990's for being inadequately mournful of the transsexual Venus Xtravaganza, whose desire for a house in the suburbs with a washer and drier Butler found less than inspiring. It is possible that Butler, who has been talking about mourning and melancholy throughout her writing career, may have turned to *Antigone* in way a few years later to deliver on the mourning demanded of her by critics like Jay Prosser (1998). If so, the irony is that *Antigone's Claim* is surely less oriented to mourning and loss than any other reading of the play since Hegel. Thanks to Nick Davis for reminding me of the *contretemps* regarding Venus and for good conversation generally about melodrama, film, and queer theory.

steady the unsteady polis. The chorus has just proposed that rather than remember who did what and make an example of them, it would be better to forget – in dance. Rather than steady the polis, the chorus wants further to unsteady it, or to unsteady it otherwise, by way of communal release and abandon. Their call to Thebans to forget strife in dance would have been familiar to Athens, the “city of forgetting” which staged its theater in the context of precisely the sort of festival to which the play’s chorus calls Thebes.³¹ That the call is unheard or rejected by Creon seems to forecast his downfall. He is too much in the grip of remembering wrongs. Butler’s call – to let lamentation guide us past friend/enemy distinctions like Creon’s – allies her with an Antigone Butler had earlier struggled to overcome: the great lamenter.³²

(ii) *Antigone’s Claim*

If it is fair to say that Butler and Elshtain are pulled out of politics and into a universalism and/or ethics of lamentation by Antigone, it is particularly ironic that it is Antigone who draws them in.³³ Sophocles’ protagonist does risk herself to cross the lines of friend-enemy in grief and she does declare the dead are all equal. But she also invokes

³¹ Loraux dubs Athens the “city of forgetting” in *The Divided City* (2002).

³² Neither of Butler’s two Antigones’ is oriented toward festival but it would not be correct to say that both are identically oriented toward death. Butler’s first Antigone, the heroine of *Antigone’s Claim*, is grabbed by grief but her grief is not solely about loss and finitude, as it will later come closer to being, in *Precarious Life*. Instead, Butler connects it to Antigone’s liminal status; she is a forbidden daughter of incest, Oedipus’ daughter, and his half-sister, born of the same mother. If Antigone seems excessive in her laments, this is only a sign of the excessiveness of incest which always, from the perspective of the ban on it, seems to double and redouble. To be clear, melancholy plays a role throughout Butler’s work and in particular in all her references to Antigone and this is because melancholy, as she understands it, is a constitutive feature of the gendered subject whose formation requires, on Butler’s account, the foreclosure of same sex desire in heteronormative social orders, and prohibits the treatment of that foreclosure as a loss to be mourned. Melancholy appears as a theme, major and minor, in virtually every book Butler has authored from *Subjects of Desire* (1987) to *Frames of War*, published in 2009.

³³ One of my interests in this book is to explore the bifurcation of Antigone into a humanist extra-political lamenter versus political agitator or agent of resistance and to find ways to pull these back together in an effort to desentimentalize and repoliticize her.

the very hierarchies of grievability that Butler deplors in her name. As it turns out, there are some people even Antigone won't try to "bring under the rubric of the 'human'" (*PL*, 46). When Creon tells her that Eteocles would not approve of her actions, that to honor Polynices is to honor Eteocles' enemy, Antigone does not respond with humanist universals. Instead, she quarrels about precisely where to draw the line between who is in and who is out of the circle of concern: "But it was his brother, not some slave that died" (581), she says, making clear to Creon the limits of her "humanism."³⁴ Thus, Antigone can be a pure figure of mourning only if we project her politicality – sometimes ugly, violent, difficult – onto others. One obvious site of such projection is Creon, who is depicted by Elshain and Butler as a tyrant who divides people up rather than joining them together. We are alerted to another instance of such projection, when Butler overlooks the rough curses directed by Antigone at her foes, while taking particular note of the brutal curses Oedipus directs against his sons.³⁵ Even so, Butler's first Antigone is more divisive than her second.

³⁴ Creon then calls her attention to the different criterion that grips him – that of friend-enemy: Polynices died, Creon says, "Ravaging our country! – but Eteocles died fighting in our behalf," to which Antigone's responds by invoking her famous principle of equality for the dead: "No matter—Death longs for the same rites for all" (581-584). But we already know her "all" is not quite all for it does not include slaves in the rubric of the "human." Thus she differs only in the specifics of how to distinguish grievable from ungrievable life. For Creon, the relevant line is friend-enemy. For her it is freeman versus slave. But even this difference gives way since these lines converge in most cases: in the 5th century slaves are those taken in battle, who prefer servitude to slaughter. Antigone's friend-enemy politics has been occluded since Hegel sanctified her as a model of mortalist humanism. Her martyrdom may have helped prepare the way for this more Christian reception. For further discussion on the Christianization of Antigone, see Geary (2006), discussed below. On the connections between the friend-enemy distinction and that between freedman and slave, see Jacqueline Stevens' *Reproducing the State* (1999) and Nicole Loraux's *Children of Athena* (1993). I am grateful to Jackie Stevens for talking through this point with me.

³⁵ There is a similar split in Holocaust studies, which distinguishes Jean Amery, cast as resentful and vengeful (see his "Resentments" essay from 1964 [1980]), from Primo Levi (1988), cast (by Amery himself) as the "forgiver." Notably Butler has engaged Levi in detail but not Amery. Nancy Wood (1999; cf. Chapter Three, "The Victim's Resentment"), in a nuanced reading of the two, focused precisely on this way of dividing them, pointing out the more vengeful and resentful moments in Levi's writing and the world-building aspirations of Amery's. I note Levi's more resentful sentiments come out in the writings addressed to a German audience and that he hazards this addressee only later on.

If, for Elshtain, Antigone returns us to the family over the state, for Butler in *Antigone's Claim* Antigone's very forbiddenness as an incest shows how imbricated are the heteronormative family and state. In what we could take to be a direct rebuttal of Elshtain (whom Butler does not mention), Butler says: Antigone cannot *represent* "the normative principles of kinship, steeped as she is in incestuous legacies that confound her position within kinship" (*AC*, 2). This means we cannot simply treat her as a good sister (Hegel) or mother (Elshtain) as if that explains anything, "as if kinship furnishes a [prior] principle for action" (*AC*, 58). But neither is Antigone outside of kinship as such. Instead "her action is the action of kinship, the performative repetition that reinstates kinship as a public scandal."³⁶ The scandal is that she loves her brother/father too much. She is an incest and her mere existence fractures the polis. Only in Butler's later mentions of Antigone, after *Antigone's Claim* (and *Undoing Gender*), will Antigone's scandal become the non-controversial basis for an ethics of burial poised to overcome statist distinctions between friend and enemy.

In *Antigone's Claim*, Antigone's scandalous act is generative: it "implicates her in an aberrant repetition of a norm" (58).³⁷ The norm is not a rigid law antecedent to practice but rather "a lawlike regulation of culture that operates with its own contingency" (*AC*, 58) and so it is vulnerable to subversion. This is a postulate of norms as such, a point on which Butler insists throughout her work, positioning herself beyond

³⁶ Diana Taylor says the same thing about maternalism; we could productively essay the same claim about humanism: "In speaking of the Madres' movement in terms of performance, then, I wish to make the connection between the public and ritualistic display of mourning and protest orchestrated by the Madres, and the notion of motherhood and womanhood as a product of a coercive system of representation that promoted certain roles as acceptable for females and eclipsed (and at times literally 'disappeared') other ways of being" (Taylor, 186).

³⁷ As John Seery points out, there is a certain carelessness, though, in treating incest, as such, as other rather than attending to differences among horizontal versus vertical alternatives (para. 5). Butler argues that incest, as such, renders vertical and horizontal differences indistinct.

the perfect repetition and pure negation of the law that most Lacanians treat as the only two options. Butler's aim here is to break the grip of the Oedipal law and find the agency that remains in the universe of psychoanalysis after Antigone's famous "no" to Creon has been said. Butler says in response to Lacan: the "position outside life as we know it," which he identifies with Antigone (a position that is beyond life and death, beyond the limit and beyond the human), "is not necessarily a position outside life *as it must be*" (italics added). The "position outside life," the Antigonean position, gives us not just "a perspective on the symbolic constraints under which livability is established," but also "a critical perspective by which the very terms of livability might be rewritten" (AC, 55). This comes not from "a prepolitical opposition to politics, *representing kinship as the sphere that conditions the possibility of politics without ever entering into it*" (AC, 2), as Irigaray also intimates. Irigaray develops the reading in a distinctive way, finding in *Antigone* evidence of a pre-political, prior matriarchal arrangement that might decenter patriarchy. But, Butler argues, by trying in this way to rebut Lacan on the totalizing quality of the symbolic, Irigaray ultimately *recycles* his arguments rather than breaking out of them fully, for what institutes the distinction between matriarchal and patriarchal forms, at all, if not the symbolic? Irigaray is thus stuck inside the very thing she seeks to get out of, Butler concludes. We are better off seeing Antigone's resistance in relation to her scandalous reiterations of Creon's discourse, her hybrid and shocking mixture – in her incest and her love of Haemon – of natal and conjugal family forms, and her mother-laden identification with and desire for her brother(s), Polynices (and Eteocles and Oedipus).³⁸

³⁸ In short, for Butler, there is more promise in fusion than faction, contra Rancière, and so when she embraces Antigone it is in principle the very same Antigone, rejected by him as an ethicization of politics,

“Is Lacan right,” Butler asks, “that ‘Antigone chooses to be purely and simply the guardian of the being of the criminal as such’ (283) or does this criminality assert an unconscious right, marking a legality [which, presumably unlike Irigaray’s matriarchy, is] prior to codification on which the symbolic in its hasty foreclosures must founder...?” (cited in *AC*, 55).

It is not entirely clear what Butler is thinking of when she refers, as she does here, to the symbolic’s *hasty foreclosures*. Foreclosure is an important term in her work before *Antigone’s Claim* where it relates to same-sex desire foreclosed in the process of gendered subject formation and not, as here, a legality prior to codification. But the term ‘hasty’ is entirely new (in *The Psychic Life of Power*, she describes foreclosure as a “preemptive [but still not *hasty*] loss [23]”). The term “hasty” seems to make the point that the symbolic is more vulnerable to penetration and reiteration than most Lacanians think. Indeed this is her modification of Foucault in her early work – that the Lacanian law of the father depends on performativity and a repetition that, “as imitation, works to contest and destabilize identity” and not, contra Foucault, to consolidate it (Butler, “Lana” 13). This has been Butler’s project throughout her work, to identify openings for resignification, iteration, subversion, to press for the aberrant repetition of norms, insisting on their weak dependence on the acts of subscription that others take as a sign of the norms’ power and dominance. That is, her claim is that they need us and our compliance more than we are formed by them.

that Butler embraces as the most or best political figure we can turn to on behalf of those marginalized by current kinship forms. The Antigone that fits Rancière’s epithet “ethical” in other respects, the great lamenter who witnesses catastrophe, *that* Antigone is not part of Butler’s conceptual universe until *Precarious Life* after 9/11.

But why connect the symbolic's vulnerability to *haste* in its foreclosures, when elsewhere Butler attributes its vulnerability to the incompleteness of its foreclosures and, in particular, to its disavowed dependence on subjects' rarely fully obedient reperformance of the symbolic's laws in the social sphere? The answer may be a sign of the power exerted by Antigone over her interpreter as Butler shifts focus away from Oedipus (in Freud and Lacan) and to Antigone.³⁹ That is, in her turn to Antigone, Butler not only gains a heroine for feminism, but also a new antagonist: By way of Antigone, Butler is moved out of confrontation with the Oedipal law, implacable, incontrovertible, (even if also subtly generative, in psychoanalysis), to face instead Creon's edict forbidding the burial of Polynices.⁴⁰ It is Creon's edict, after all, that is a *hasty* foreclosure, issued too fast and ultimately retracted. Creon's is the sort of patriarchal power even a feminist can love – impotent, defeasible, ultimately regretful. In Creon, after all, we have a man who actually says he is sorry.⁴¹

This newly fragile symbolic is not just the condition, it is also the product of Antigone's agency, on Butler's account. The law is always "at risk of going off its course" not just because the symbolic's foreclosures are hasty but also because of the

³⁹ Just as Lacan in his reading of the play shifts attention from Oedipus to Jocasta as the real bearer of incestuous desire.

⁴⁰ In her earlier work, Butler went to some lengths to argue that in such Oedipal "no's" inhered a "yes": Modifying Foucault, Butler said his "characterization of the 'law of desire' in Lacan... fails to talk account of the generative effects of that law..." Where for Foucault, the law of desire is "a power to say no" and "it is basically anti-energy," for Butler the law "is exercised energetically" and desire is therefore "not expunged but rather assimilated into the very act of negation itself" (Butler, "Lana," 12). There is, Butler insists here, "a productive and generative dimension of power" – what I am calling natality – that Foucault identifies with Nietzsche and attributes to "a rival and subversive power regime" rather than see that the law of desire has "generative effects within psychoanalytic theory" ("Lana," 11). In *Antigone's Claim*, Butler continues to excavate the affirmative in the negative and seems to move closer to the Foucaultian position she earlier criticized.

⁴¹ Relevant here is Butler's response to Adam Phillips in *The Psychic Life of Power*, in which she says that it may be necessary to create "a typology of 'refusal' and 'exclusion' that might help us distinguish between what is rigorously repudiated and foreclosed and what happens to be less rigidly or permanently declined" (163). One assumes that *hasty* foreclosures – not yet mentioned by Butler at this point in her work – might find a place in such a typology.

indefatigable power of words that Antigone finds the courage to utter on behalf of a “rival autonomy” that is much more than the mere “negation” to which Lacanians seek to confine her (*AC*, 65; 68).⁴² The words she utters are Creon’s, turned to new and subversive purposes when she, a daughter of incest, a woman, a dissident, speaks them. In sum, where Lacanians ask: How does heterosexuality fatalize Antigone? Butler wants us to ask: what in Antigone’s act is fatal for heterosexuality in its normative sense? And what other pleasures and possibilities might arise in its place? It is not enough to pervert or reject or negate the norm; it must also be rearticulated. Later, in *Precarious Life*, all this will be upstaged by the need to mourn the norm’s violence. But in *Antigone’s Claim*, Butler argues that “Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human, achieved through political catachresis, the one that happens when the less than human speaks as human” (82).⁴³ Her actions prove fatal, it is true, concedes Butler but, she says, positioning Antigone as martyr for the cause, “this fatality exceeds her life and enters the discourse of intelligibility as its own promising fatality, the social form of its “aberrant, unprecedented future” (*AC*, 82).

Citing Lacan’s own words, “aberrant, unprecedented future,” Butler positions herself vis-à-vis Lacan in precisely the way she says Antigone positions herself vis-à-vis Creon, borrowing and reiterating his language to make her “claim.” Butler strives not

⁴² Butler’s aim here is to move beyond negative dialectics, which only gives us a (Creonic or Oedipal) law “invested in perversion” and does not go beyond that to make possible “other forms of social life,” that may be inadvertently “produced by the prohibition” and may “come to undermine the conclusion” that the “social organization of sexuality follows of necessity from the prohibitive law” (*AC*, 68).

⁴³ Butler notes that “[s]he [Antigone] is not of the human but speaks in its language . . . she upsets the vocabulary of kinship that is a precondition of the human,” questioning “what those preconditions really must be . . . If she is human then the human has entered into catechresis; we no longer know its proper usage” (*AC*, 82).

merely to negate Lacan's symbolic but to force it into rearticulation.⁴⁴ She does this more than once but one more example suffices to illustrate the tactic: Lacan famously says that Antigone is a creature of monstrous desire. Butler takes that figure and turns it to advantage in a politics identified with the figure of monstrosity, catachresis, which makes sense of monstrosity by making monstrosity make sense.⁴⁵ Through catachresis, when the not human speaks as human it becomes human. This is no mere inclusion, however, for the human is itself altered by this action.

'Antigone versus Oedipus,' III: Edelman, Latency, Resignification

If Butler seeks to open up a different future by way of Antigone (versus Oedipus/Creon), Lee Edelman sees instead in Antigone an invitation to reject the future altogether. Antigone is best read, Edelman argues contra Butler, not as a liminal incest who resists heteronormative marriage and points the way to the non-conventional attachments of new kinship forms. Instead, Antigone's marriage to death is what stands out – her rejection of all potential supporters and her monstrous embrace of death. She forces us to confront a radical anti-humanism from which tragedy's humanist receptions have for centuries tried to shield us with their focus on the redemptive powers of art, martyrdom, and love.

For Edelman, the fundamental divide is between a monstrous anti-humanism – queer and anti-futurist – versus humanism, an ineluctably heteronormative and redemptive ideology of reproduction. The catachresis to which Butler turns recovers

⁴⁴ Mere negation, she suggests in *Antigone's Claim*, is Irigaray's error, though in *Undoing Gender* Butler expresses greater appreciation of Irigaray's contribution here: "She derives a place for women where there was no place." (201).

⁴⁵ Where deliberativists and others charge that Butler is too negative and has nothing positive to offer a politics beyond critique, Lacanians like Lee Edelman argue that she is not negative or critical enough.

Antigone for intelligibility, rather than insisting on her opacity and monstrosity. Butler absorbs Lacan into her reading, but, Edelman argues, resignification always bleeds into remediation and recuperation.⁴⁶ Edelman develops this criticism of Butler, claiming that when she allies Antigone with a future (i.e. kinship to come), Butler succumbs to the allure of the sacrificial Symbolic and falls into the ideology of “futurism.” Futurism, Edelman’s term, is the quest for human meaning and ontological status, tied not to kinship per se but more specifically to reproduction, and this with no small impact on those whose desire is enmeshed in non-reproductive sexual practices that are specifically resistant to domestication by way of reproduction.⁴⁷

Differences between Edelman and Butler can be parsed by way of the figure of the Child, central to Edelman’s critique of the ideology of futurism which, he argues, incessantly invokes “the children” as an uninterrogatable reason to sacrifice ourselves for the future and in turn casts aspersions on the childless who are always under suspicion, suspected of standing outside the sacrificial symbolic. The Child comes up in an interview with Butler recorded in 2000 (when she was writing *Antigone’s Claim*) in response to a question put her by Paul Rabinow. Rabinow asks Butler what he should do

⁴⁶ For example, Butler positions Antigone as a martyr for a cause but she does not ask after the politics of martyrdom and sacrifice. Heroes who die to make our future better are the essence of humanism, which gives redemptive meaning to forms of suffering that might otherwise seem senseless. Humanism makes an exception of the human (only our suffering *means* something), at the cost of licensing the infliction of suffering on others.

⁴⁷ Edelman says: “Like the ‘aberrant, unprecedented future’ [Lacan’s terms, appropriated by Butler] to which she stakes her political claim, Butler’s Antigone, far from transforming Symbolic law, *repeats* it – and repeats it, in fact, as nothing less than the law of repetition by which our fate is bound to the fate of meaning through signification whose continued functioning has always relied on reproductive futurism” (105). For Edelman, Butler is drawn back in to the mere repetition demanded by the Symbolic. For Butler, however, this is no mere repetition but rather a productive iteration. She denies (in Edelman’s parsing) “the assertion that Symbolic law necessitates such repetition ([of the logic of intelligibility], insisting, rather, that the law depends on the *appearance* of such necessity,” thus reprising the theme of her *Gender Trouble* (102; emphasis added).

about his friends in Paris who insist gay couples must be raising psychotic children.⁴⁸ He is mystified: “And these are thinkers, people who are socialists or communists or Trotskyites or leftists of all friendly bourgeois sorts who are defending all the right things in every other realm.” Butler responds: “Your question brings us back to the sphere of liminality. What would it mean for the psychotic to speak and to make a claim, to go school and – ...I think that when you hold the view that such kids would be psychotic, and then the putatively psychotic kid comes over to your house – and wants a cookie, and wants to play with your kitten, tells you his feelings about balloons – there’s a certain kind of *insistent mundaneness* that, I think, undermines that highly phobic relationship, maybe even lives in some kind of tension with it until it breaks open to something else, until it becomes unsustainable in some way.” Paul Rabinow: “So you really are mildly optimistic?” (Butler and Rabinow, 45-46; emphasis added).

She is. But it is worth noting that the power invoked by Butler, of the insistent mundaneness of the everyday, is more than just that: the child that Butler imagines is seductive. He represents desire in the form of appetite (he wants a cookie), play (he wants to play with the cat), and sociality (he shares with the prejudiced adults “his feelings about balloons”). Does his seductiveness undo the status quo, as Butler hopes, or just recirculate and enhance its power? Lee Edelman opts for the latter.

He refers to balloons as well, citing in his book an early scene in Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train*, in which Bruno Anthony (played by Robert Walker) “punctures the

⁴⁸ I cannot follow this up here but it is worth noting that Edelman’s rejection of the Child as a political figure is matched by Arendt (with whom he would otherwise not much agree, given she naturalizes mere repetition and excises it from politics), who condemned what she saw as the “use” of children for political purposes at Little Rock. For this she was famously taken to task by none other than Ellison, who, I argue elsewhere, is otherwise as anti-Futurist in Edelman’s sense, as Edelman. The episode between Ellison and Arendt is reported and analyzed by Danielle Allen in *The Oklahoma City Law Review* (2001). Jean Elshtain (1995), in what we may see as an extension of her social feminism argument, has opposed Arendt on this point to champion children’s role in politics.

balloon of cuteness that hangs like a halo above one annoying child” (121). Edelman sees the scene as an effort to cast as unspeakably cruel the villain (a homophobic’s gay man), a sinthomosexual figure who visits wanton violence on the iconic innocent Child of the ideology of reproductive futurism. Uncharacteristically, Edelman does not pause to note the overtones of homoeroticism, pedophilia and castration in this scene, in which the adult man punctures the boy’s balloon with the heat of his lit cigarette. Still, the scene alerts us to the place of balloons in the repertoire of normal, idealized childhood and suggests that perhaps what comforts Butler’s imagined phobic parents when the lesbian or gay-parented child shares his feelings about balloons is a reassurance subtly conveyed by the balloon: that this child has taken up his place in the “ideology of reproductive necessity” (Edelman, 121). Edelman would focus on the betrayal, for queer politics, of this reassurance, while Butler sees enfolded in it a possibly radical agent of change.

For Edelman, no effort to expand “the reach of the human” can deliver on its promise of real and equal inclusion. Instead, we must expand the field of the *inhuman* and insist on “enlarging what, in its excess, in its unintelligibility, exposes the human itself as always misrecognized catachresis, a positing blind to the willful violence that marks its imposition” (152; emphasis added). In an extended reading of Hitchcock’s *The Birds*, Edelman invokes the birds as a marker of *inhumanity*’s expansiveness, but, even though he does discuss Sophocles’ *Antigone* as well, he neglects to mention the complex role played by birds in Sophocles’ play, in which birds are said to eat the carrion of Polynices’ body and Antigone is herself likened to a bird bereft by her empty nest.⁴⁹ Carol Jacobs (1996) notes that when the sentry compares the mourning Antigone to a

⁴⁹ The common cultural motif in which we are called to mourn in the way that a mother mourns her child is subjected also to withering critique by Edelman in his discussion of the Matthew Sheppard murder (115ff.).

mother bird at an empty nest, the comparison works two ways: It both puts Antigone in the caring maternal role in relation to her brother (the mother bird) and in a more devouring relation, since birds are at that very moment feasting on Polynices' body (the vulture) (904).

The undecidability need not be a problem for Edelman, who argues that the monstrous inhuman is always trying to break free of the grasp of the human.⁵⁰ But when Butler takes catachresis, the figure of the monster, for her new 'humanism', Edelman insists not on undecidability but on the decidably anti-humanist commitment of Lacanian queer politics. And he charges her with evading humanism's true monstrosity. Against Butler, reprising Diana Taylor's critique of Elshtain and Gamabaro, Edelman insists that even catachresis just catches us in the trap of re-articulation: Resignifying a term like "human," does not, he says, efface or transcend the "prior uses to which it was put: no historical category of abjection is ever simply obsolete. It abides, instead, in its latency, affecting subsequent signification, always available, always waiting to be mobilized again" (Edelman, 115). Edelman departs from Taylor in one significant way, though: unlike Taylor, who worried that mobilizing Antigone versus Oedipus may be an inherently limiting move (part of the "bad script" of Antigone versus Oedipus), Edelman does not hesitate. His frustration apparent – *why*, he asks, must Antigone's readers always make a mother of this anti-maternal heroine? Why must she be said to open a *future*? – he accuses Butler of an ameliorative reading that betrays queerness, but then stakes his own claim to Antigone: his is a fully monstrous Antigone that resists all domestication and turns no face to the future.

⁵⁰ There are two sorts of bird in Hitchcock, as well: one domesticated in the pet store, noticed by the heroine, and the ones that are wild and threatening, as Edelman points out. He sees the work performed by the other birds in the film – the doves, the love birds, the mynah birds, and so on – as well.

Edelman's critique of Butler epitomizes a central debate within queer theory about the (im)possibility of remaking or rejecting the terms of intelligibility. Where Butler hopes for future kinship forms that repeat the law of kinship with a difference, Edelman calls for the renunciation of futurism, the embrace of the death drive with which gay people are in any case insistently identified and the dethronement of the Child as the *arche* figure of hopeful politics. Edelman puts his position starkly: "The queerness we propose...knows nothing about 'sacrifice' now for the sake of future generations...." (Edelman, 31).⁵¹

Ironically, however, and in spite of his claim that old figures abide in their "latency, affecting subsequent significations, always available, always waiting, to be mobilized again," Edelman seems to assume that his own monstrous Antigone, who rejects motherhood and reproduction, is so fully resignified that she breaks fully out of the old Oedipal frame or at least entirely negates it with her "no!" (115). As it turns out, the break is less than complete. At the end of a fabulous book-length screed against generational inheritance (*No Future!*), in which Edelman celebrates Antigone briefly and a host of others at length for turning "no face to the future," he affirms a lesson that he says is "bequeathed" to us by a queer character in a Hitchcock film (105; 109). The lesson matters less for our purposes, than the fact that it is "bequeathed." With this term, *No Future* is drawn back into futurism, the intergenerational kinship ideology whose captivations Edelman's book works so hard to reject.

⁵¹As I argue elsewhere, that sacrificial logic is apparent in Kant's own faith in, or his call for us to have faith in, progressive history, a point to which Moses Mendelssohn was particularly sensitive. For further discussion, see *Emergency Politics*, Chapter Two. Elizabeth Freeman (2010), in the context of a critique of progressive history, says Edelman goes too far: Generation should "not necessarily be tossed out with the bathwater of reproductive thinking... [Instead, what if we] thought less in the psychic time of the individual [and more] in the movement time of collective political fantasy" (65).

Edelman's brief engagement with *Antigone* does not help him avoid this slide. The problem of the contested but magnetic intergenerational frame is there in the play. If Antigone's "no" is her legacy, then either it cannot be "legacy" as such to which she says "no," or her "no" is less effective than Edelman thinks. It may be the case that Antigone is simply resistant to all assimilations to (re)production and destruction. This possibility is invited by Butler, who notes that Antigone's name can be taken to mean both "in the place of the mother" and "anti-generation," the former connoting a different (re)production and the latter destruction (*AC*, 22).⁵²

For her part, Butler attends more to the act of inheritance than to the bequeathing. Antigone, who has no choice but to transmit the Lacanian symbolic, repeats the Oedipal curse, but "by obeying the curse upon her, stops the future operation of that chain" (*AC*, 52).⁵³ By the time we get to *Precarious Life*, however, Butler's Antigone seems only able to lament the paternal law. This might seem to vindicate Edelman's critique but, to be fair, the lamentation theorized by Butler is not passive or resigned. It asserts an ethics or politics of grievable life that may not be natal, but is not merely absorptive either. Either way, we have seen here that a certain pull from action to lamentation exerts itself on those feminist theorists who turn to Antigone. In Butler we shift from an Antigone who stops the future operations of the paternal law (as Butler says in *Antigone's Claim*) to one (as in *Precarious Life*) who laments it. From *Antigone's Claim* to *Precarious Life* and, most recently, *Frames of War*, Butler's earliest Antigone of rival citational sovereignty gives way to the humanist lamenter of the dead.

⁵² But see Goldhill (1986) on this, particularly his chapter, "The City of Words."

⁵³ Butler's position is reminiscent of the line from Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1990), when the dying father bequeaths a final lesson to the boy: "Agree 'em to death and destruction" (16).

Framed

My aim here has been to highlight the magnetic powers of the “Antigone versus Oedipus” frame. Invoking Antigone versus Oedipus, first Elshtain, then Butler finds herself pressed from a politics of agonistic conflict in quest of (counter or anti-)sovereignty into a humanistic ethics of lamentation of sovereignty’s excesses. In her study of “frames” in *Frames of War*, Butler proposes that since frames have the power to inflect and subvert our purposes we may sometimes find that social change requires that we change the frame that sets the limits of what we can see and say. Our current frames of war seem to press us into violence, and so, Butler argues, we need to change the frame from one of sovereignty to one of precarity. But the figure to whom she turns again and again on behalf of the new frame – Antigone – is herself, as we have seen, a figure of sovereignty *and* precarity. Does the received Antigone who props up the naïve Madres and is propped up by them, does that received Antigone, who laments her brother and brings down a tyrant, herself press Butler from sovereignty (the focus in *Antigone’s Claim*) to precarity (the focus in *Precarious Life*)? Does Butler, then, come to inhabit the “Antigone versus Oedipus” frame, rather than rework or remobilize it? She certainly struggles not to fall into that trap. She strives to avoid implication in the powerlessness that Taylor charges is the unavoidable effect of Antigone-framed resistance and Edelman sees as necessarily the consequence of an ongoingly humanist appropriation of classics. To this end, Butler recurs repeatedly to the connections between lamentation and anger, loss and dissidence, mourning and resistance. There are some signs, however, that the frame exerts more power over Butler than Butler does over the frame.

If this is so, it may be because even Butler's first, powerful and more political reading of Antigone sidesteps some of its more radical possibilities and leaves intact, if latent, certain elements of the "bad script" of Sophocles' text as it is conventionally interpreted. Arguably, her focus on sovereignty and citationality in *Antigone's Claim* leaves lamentation, in its unprocessed apoliticality, empowered to return later and exert its seemingly innocent force in *Precarious Life* (much as Butler would claim sex-gender norms operate when unsubjected to critical appropriation, redirection and critique).⁵⁴ Moreover, since Butler, throughout her work, sees Antigone as an isolated, lone, suffering heroine, this protagonist's capacity to act in concert never surfaces to exert a political counter to Butler's ethics and politics of precarity. Butler's treatment of Antigone as always a lone heroine, opposed to her sister and seeking glory for herself, a martyr to the proverbial lost cause, captures modern romantic and liberal imaginations and feeds a certain left melancholia in which activists are more pure but also less powerful.⁵⁵ This rather conventional Antigone slips all too easily into the self-indulgence for which Anouilh made her famous, a charge also often directed at Butler by critics who seriously mis-take her politics of performativity for mere wardrobe choices and solipsistic fashion statements.

In *Frames of War*, Butler understands the importance of resisting the hero's allure, though she never considers the implications for Antigone: "Maybe the 'act' in its singularity and heroism is overrated: it loses sight of the iterable process in which a

⁵⁴ Here the contrast with Derrida's treatment of eulogy in *The Work of Mourning* as always already contaminated and contested is useful.

⁵⁵ This problem – Antigone's lone and therefore inefficacious heroism – is occasionally noted by others as well. In a letter written as if from Antigone to Ismene, Jina Politi (2006) goes further to suggest such heroes are often enlisted by authorities seeking to defeat them: Politi has Antigone say: "what the Antigonids forget is the fact that Authority bases its power on the icons of heroes and saints" (134).

critical intervention is needed and it can become the very means by which the ‘subject’ is produced [as sovereign] at the expense of a relational social ontology” (184). This speculation actually commits Butler, it seems to me, to a reconsideration of her earlier, admiring reading of Antigone’s rejection of Ismene as a mark of the more famous sister’s heroic singularity (*AC*, 27-28; 61-62). More importantly, it calls us to attend to the not always salutary power of the “Antigone versus Oedipus” frame: The frame privileges the heroic, individual act and hides from view evidence of the always already operational social ontology in Sophocles’ play and this occlusion has long operated, as Butler’s own argument should lead us to expect, as a condition of its production of a would-be “sovereign” subject: Antigone, herself – the heroic and solitary dissident, who is still read, reperformed, inhabited and channeled, daily.

But the text invites a more difficult reception. Evidence of what Butler calls a “social ontology” is apparent also in the risk that attends Antigone’s choice to cross the lines of friend/enemy in grief (as Butler wants us to do now), and in the lines of inequality that can be seen to constitute her social world. For, although it is true that Antigone declares the dead are all equal, and risks herself in the name of that commitment, it is also true, as we saw above, that Antigone *invokes* the very hierarchies of grievability that Butler deplors in her name. When Creon tells her that Eteocles would not approve of her actions, that to honor Polynices is to honor Eteocles’ enemy, Antigone does not respond with humanist universals; she quarrels about precisely where to draw the line between who is in and who is out of the circle of concern: Polynices may be a traitor but he is no slave. And, as I will argue in Chapters Two and Three, Antigone’s laments mark her belonging to a form of life. Moreover, as we shall see in Chapter Four,

there is heretofore unremarked evidence of a deep sororal connection between Antigone and Ismene that presses on us the responsibility to interrogate the palimpsests of reception that isolate Antigone and make of her a radical individual – something quite different from Sophocles' creation.

Crimp, A Road Not Taken?

Voltaire said that heaven has given us two things to compensate for the many miseries of life, *hope* and *sleep*. He might have added *laughter* to the list.

Kant, quoted in Critchley (1999), 236

There is another model of political mourning, not drawn upon in the current post 9/11 context of catastrophe, and yet itself born of (another) catastrophe: the AIDS crisis. If I turn to close this chapter with the work of Douglas Crimp, it is because he theorizes his ambivalence about mourning's promise for politics, recognizing it may displace political energies, but acknowledging at the same time the absolute need to mourn.⁵⁶ Crimp learned that lesson the hard way. After his father, with whom he had a vexed relationship, died, Crimp did not mourn. He soon acquired an eye infection that blocked his tear duct making it impossible for him to cry and, as the infection ran its course, the eye then gave forth liquids of infection that could not be stopped. Crimp yielded finally to what he took to be his body's demand to grieve a difficult loss.

That lamentation will not be denied is an Antigonean motif, but Crimp does not classicize his experience. Perhaps this is because the lamentation he theorizes, the losses

⁵⁶ This comes out most clearly in his essay on the AIDS quilt, "Melancholia and Moralism," his introduction to the book of the same name (2002). I want to thank Stephanie Youngblood, as well as some other members of my 2010 Antigone seminar at the School of Criticism and Theory, for sharing with me their enthusiasm for Crimp's work just as I was turning finally to it.

he mourns in his work, are not just of individual persons but also of a form of life. (But as we shall see in Chapter Two, this is true of Antigone, as well). As he says: in the wake of AIDS, “people whose energies and resources had gone toward the invention of gay life either succumbed or turned their attention to dealing with death” (Crimp, 13).

Emergency, crisis, catastrophe – these narrow our focus from more life to mere life; they make survival paramount. Invitations like that issued by the chorus to pleasure’s oblivion have a different resonance in the context of a new, frightening and fatal disease that is sexually transmitted and such calls are in any case barely heard amid the noise of the Creons and Antigones, the moralizers and the lamenters.

Turning now to Crimp’s work, I cast Crimp’s reflections on mourning as a “road not taken.” Chapter Five will explore the limitations of tragic emplotment for democratic theory. Here, however, I risk casting this chapter itself as tragedy in order to think about an option too hastily foreclosed. The risk, in my view, is worth it.

Seemingly oblivious to examples of lamentational politics like Antigone’s and the Madres’, Douglas Crimp worries that mourning drains the energies of activist politics and closes off the possibility of change. In the 1980’s, AIDS activists found themselves at a great many funerals. It was important, Crimp argued, not to mistake those collective gatherings for activist political action while also not underrating the need to mourn loss. “Public mourning rituals may of course have their own political force, but they nevertheless often seem, from an activist perspective, indulgent, sentimental, defeatist,” says Crimp, noting the last words of Joe Hill: “‘Don’t mourn, organize!’” (131-132).⁵⁷

Mourning and activism are not necessarily opposed, Crimps says, and if many people

⁵⁷ Echoing as we will see in Chapter Five, a eulogizer in Kluge’s film, *Germany in Autumn*: “If you are truly outraged, you won’t shout but will consider what to do.” The echo is unsurprising, since Hill’s words are a rallying cry for activists of all sorts.

think they are, this may be due to Freud's influence. For Freud, the normal mourning process requires a turning away from the world, and this seems at odds with activism. Also, for Freud, the completion of mourning returns the mourner to normalcy, and this also seems to be at odds with activism. Normalcy is usually what activists are trying to unsettle. Moreover, normalcy signifies differently in gay male grief practices, as Crimp points out. When Freud, who prizes the normal work of mourning, insists the turning away period of mourning should not be interfered with lest it be aborted, he makes clear the quandary of gay men, whose mourning is constantly interfered with (as was Antigone interfered with in hers, though Crimp does *not* make the comparison): Causes of death are hushed up and surviving partners silenced at funerals where families of origin demand that lost loved ones remain closeted in death as they were in life or work actively to return them to the closet from which they in life had emerged. Here Creon's treatment of the dead Haemon is evocative: When Creon takes his son home to his mother (having unclasped the dead Haemon from his corpse-bride), Creon re-establishes his own sovereign paternity post mortem, returns the son to his natal family and overrides the son's final living wish: to exit that family by way of marriage.

Against the turn to mourning, Crimp consistently demands a militant combination of lamentation and festival to feed the activism of self-empowerment.⁵⁸ He seeks to establish rival sovereignties and to generate and pluralize autonomous forms of

⁵⁸ Mourning is necessary to those suffering the loss and rage and abandonment of AIDS in the context of a US politics of neglect, Crimp concludes, but so is militancy, even though militancy may well be mourning in denial, a product of a certain refusal to deal with the psyche's death drive, rather than an acceptance of it or a working-through. (Although Crimp does not note it, Lacan allows that the death drive's "will to destruction" may be synonymous with the "will to make a fresh start," the "will to begin again" [Lacan, 212]. That is, Crimp, who opens this essay with a critique of an early essay by Edelman, here proposes something like Edelman's later proposal in *No Future*: a resignification or queering of the death drive. Crimp himself acknowledges this proximity to Edelman in his later collection of essays, *Melancholia and Moralism*, which includes "Mourning and Militancy," .

representation. In fact he insists that lamentation is itself a contender in an ongoing battle of representation over AIDS. As Stephanie Youngblood puts it: For Crimp,

activism emerges through an alternative mode of mourning, not as representation and recovery in relation to lost individuals, but as an attention to representation as a set of discursive practices that in themselves make AIDS intelligible; he thus takes the emphasis on accurate representation out of the response to trauma altogether, and instead emphasizes that strategies of representation condition not just how we respond to the disease, but what in fact the disease *is*. AIDS is not something “out there” to which we respond, but instead emerges through those representational practices that frame themselves as merely responsive: “AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through these practices” (cited in Youngblood, 28).⁵⁹

Why hasn't Crimp's work been taken up by those working on mourning politics? Why does the gay community's, and in particular ACT UP's, 1980's blend of lamentation, activism and self-criticality regarding representation seem to lack the traction of Antigone and the Madres as a model for contemporary theorists of lamentation?⁶⁰ In Elshtain's case, the puzzle is easy to solve: Her embrace of lamentation for politics postulates the heteronormative kinship structures opposed by Crimp. We

⁵⁹ MS on file with author.

⁶⁰ Might this be because this road not taken is antagonising but not, per se, Antigonean? This distinction is drawn by Thomas Elsaesser (2004), and I discuss it in Chapter Five. I note here that Crimp's work and that of ACT UP more generally have, however, found traction in the area of trauma studies. See, for example, “The AIDS Crisis is Not Over,” a conversation with Crimp, Gregg Bordowitz, and Laura Pinsky as published in *Trauma* (1995), edited by Cathy Caruth.

might even hazard that lamentation is attractive to Elshtain as a politics precisely because one of its effects is to shore up the heteronormative family form that maternalist practices seem to postulate but also actually help (re)produce. Indeed, this was Taylor's critical insight regarding Argentina, that the Madres' commitment to lamentation drove them to *act* like mothers in some traditional sense that was not, however, authentically reflective of their roles in real life, nor authentically progressive.

But what about Butler? In her case, the answer to the puzzle may have to do with a not always fully processed ethical anti-statism that has more in common with the Madres (whom she never mentions) than with Crimp (whom she does mention but whom she casts, as I will argue in a moment, in the role of Madre). The Madres mobilized a post-political ethical universalism (restoration of the dead to their families for proper burial) against the state, while Crimp and ACT UP berated the state for its failure to act. They enlisted the state on behalf of a sexual health politics that was different from the governmental emergency politics of a public health crisis.

When Butler turns to Antigone, first on behalf of a rival sovereignty, and later on behalf of an ethics and politics of grievable life that seems inflected by the Madres though she never mentions them (but by now, twenty years after Elshtain, Antigone has virtually *become* the Madres and vice versa), Butler's aim is to develop an anti-statist feminism and politics. If she mostly skips over the experience of ACT UP and the work of Crimp, that may be because the coalition is not anti-statist at all: its relationship to the state is more ambivalent than oppositional. The aim of ACT UP in the 1980's was not just to oppose the state and expose the irresponsibility of government but to enlist the state's resources. As Steven Epstein (1996) notes, "[f]or a generation of relatively

privileged, middle-class gay men, government had been something to restrict, to keep out of their 'private' lives. As the boundary between private illness and public health exploded, these same men sought active governmental involvement to fund emergency AIDS research and to protect people with AIDS against discriminatory treatment" (187).

Like Butler's first *Antigone*, AIDS activists like Crimp wanted sovereignty, and they tried to claim it; they did not want just to lament sovereignty's excesses. What was needed was both for government to help and for it to get out of the way, for it to regulate less (opening trials and unapproved drugs for those who could not wait, which led to an unlikely but workable alliance with conservatives who favored market deregulation [Epstein, 223]) and for government to do more (pressing pharmaceutical companies to make drugs available and affordable, running public safe sex campaigns, distributing condoms, supporting explicit safe sex manuals, deferring to gay community norms rather than moralizing against them, and so on). To accomplish all this, ACT UP had to, like *Antigone*, shout out or make visible emotions and actions cast as transgressive, and reject the temptation, historically identified with *Ismene*, to collude in keeping their actions a secret. Silence, ACT UP proclaimed, equalled death (as the group first proclaimed in a demonstration at the New York General Post Office in 1984, using a logo provided by the SILENCE=DEATH Project).

ACT UP did not lament power, nor just rage against it (as in Butler's "fuck you" in *Frames of War* [182]). They indulged in both. But they also *sought* power. "Persons With AIDS" educated themselves about the science of the disease and became expert in the norms of pharmaceutical research. They democratized treatment and disseminated scientific knowledge. They turned themselves from patients into partners in health

management before these terms were ordinary and conventional. They used a combination of “insider and outsider tactics,” as Steven Epstein explains, and “resisted the notion – found for example in the animal rights movement – that the scientific establishment was ‘the enemy’ in some absolutist sense.” (226).⁶¹ Larry Kramer’s Holocaust imagery had to give way as activists burrowed their way in to institutions of knowledge, state and power that could help, if they were commandeered to do so. Activists became fluent in the sciences of protease inhibitors, clinical trials and statistical sampling and they won the respect, sometimes grudging, of members of the scientific community. One exemplary pathway to expertise was Mark Harrington’s: A writer with a background in German critical theory, he “stayed up one night and made a list of all the words he needed to understand. That list evolved into a fifty page glossary that was distributed to ACT UP members” (Epstein, 230).

The idea was for activists to educate themselves so they could claim power from experts rather than be left vulnerable to their judgments. ACT UP anticipated Jacques Rancière’s call to “indisciplinarity,” a contestation of the division of the world into subjects and objects of knowledge. As Rancière puts it, “The apportionment of disciplines refers to the more fundamental apportionment that separates those regarded as qualified from those regarded as unqualified; those who do the science and those who are regarded as its objects” (“Interdisciplinarity,” 3). Moving from objects to subjects of knowledge, AIDS activists worked rifts in the scientific community, once they learned to speak its languages. When activists fought to open up clinical trials to patients cast as *imperfect* (those with other diseases, or who were unreliable in their medicine taking, and

⁶¹ Epstein quotes Mark Harrington, who says, “I wouldn’t exaggerate how polite we were . . . At the same time, I would just say that it was clear from the very beginning [that we recognized that], as Maggie Thatcher said when she met Gorbachev, ‘We can do business.’” (226).

so on), clinical researchers resisted. But activists received support from statisticians who were more willing than clinicians to tolerate a little noise in their data (Epstein, 248-250). That is, activists worked one model of good research against another.

Crimp's call to combine mourning and militancy came out of a protest politics that was life-affirming: comic, aggressive, mournful, mobilizing, militant, passionate, and erotic, not unlike Antigone, as I read her here, or Antigona, as Gambaro renders her.⁶² If Antigone is never taken up by Crimp as a model, this is probably – to some extent – because she had been well and fully sanctified by Hegel as a non-erotic sister, and was at that very moment in the 1980's being maternalized by the Madres and their classicizing admirers, like Elshtain.⁶³ Besides, Hegel's and the Madres' quasi-Antigonean embrace of apoliticality for sororal ethics and maternal politics was too close to the position of passivity from which ACT UP was trying to break away on behalf of a fuller portrait of gay male life (Crimp) and on behalf of the needs of the moment, which demanded autonomous aggressive activism. (Crimp, Epstein, Sturken).

In sum, where Elshtain and Butler are drawn by Antigone from anti-statist politics to post-political universal humanism, and where Edelman looks to her for a model that is both anti-statist and anti-humanist, Crimp stands out because he seeks a third option: Anti-humanist on behalf of queer life and, if not pro-statist then, at least agonistically statist on behalf of queer life: seeking to enlist and instrumentalize the state on behalf of a

⁶²And not unlike Fassbinder, whose sequence in *Germany in Autumn* is all these things, cast in melodramatic terms. The body-too-much that, we will see in Chapter Five, Elsaesser describes as obese, unattractive, and vulnerable – *is* vulnerable – but not especially abject. Crimp calls for a body-too-much also, but not the one described by Elsaesser: Crimp sees militancy in the body-too-much of pleasure and promiscuity that was the product of communal gay forms of life before the crisis. Yet another option is presented by David Halperin who endorses gay responses to tragedy that are 'inappropriate.' ("How to be Gay," Northwestern conference on sexuality, spring 2011).

⁶³ She had also been Christianized, as well, by Hegel who positioned her as precursor to German Christianity in place of Christianity's Judaic predecessors. On this, see Miriam Leonard, "The Uses of Reception: Derrida and the Historical Imperative."

political program. Statist because, as he argues, “[s]cientific research, health care, and education are the responsibility and purpose of government and not of so-called private initiative” (Crimp, 30). Agonistically statist because Crimp’s abundant political energies are depleted when faced with conservative efforts like those of Jesse Helms to defund AIDS preventative sex education: “When we see how compromised any efforts at responding to AIDS will be when conducted by the state, we are forced to recognize that productive practices concerning AIDS will remain at the grassroots level” (Crimp, 76).

(i) *Butler, Crimp, and the Quilt*

Butler is not unacquainted with Crimp’s work. She cites him in *The Psychic Life of Power* (212, n.12), *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* in support of the AIDS Names Project quilt, which represents, for her, a politics of grievable life. But Crimp is not as approving of the project as readers may infer from Butler’s simple references to him. For Butler, “The Names Project Quilt is exemplary, ritualizing and repeating the name itself as a way of publically avowing limitless loss” (*Psychic Life*, 148). The quilt exemplifies the politics of grievable life: it names, makes real, and binds together the unnamable and mostly liminal people who died of AIDS. But Crimp criticizes the quilt at length in the very same essay Butler repeatedly cites in support of the quilt.

Crimp worries about what the quilt covers. True, the names (and sometimes ashes) sewn into the quilt’s panels publicize a death and constitute a community around that death’s acceptance. But the quilt also attenuates “the difference between those of us who must learn to accept these deaths and those who still find these deaths acceptable. And who can say,” Crimp asks (in his essay, “The Spectacle of Mourning,” provocatively

first delivered at a 1991 panel discussion called “The Names Project: The Transforming Power of the Forbidden Stitch”), “whether or not the Names Project quilt might cut both ways?” (201).⁶⁴

The issues posed by the quilt are the same as those explored above by way of the iconic child of futurism. The quilt is an icon of mainstream American identity and it is in particular a maternal object, made by women and representing their care within a certain kinship structure. For someone like Butler, it is important to appropriate this symbol on behalf of those marginalized by patriarchal kinship, to resignify the quilt from a mainstream maternalist object to a transitional object that brings all kinds of people in to grieve ungrievable life. The quilt can never go back to being the homey icon it was, once it is reappropriated and resignified in this way. For Edelman, though, even with such resignification, the conventional maternalism of the quilt remains, retains its power, and abides in its latency, waiting to strike back.

One response to the problem would be, as I do here with Antigone and as Crimp arguably does with the quilt, to decenter the iconic figure (make the quilt just one part of a broader political practice of resignification so that other parts might perhaps offset its more deleterious aspects) and to agonistically challenge its propensity to essentialization by generating plural and contending representations of it. Butler does not take this agonistic tack. Her several examples of a lamentation that goes beyond friend/enemy distinction are layered one on top of the other (newspaper obituaries, the quilt) and there is no friction between them (as in Gambaro). Where friction is discernible (as between

⁶⁴ As I noted in the Introduction, Rancière and Butler seem to converge on the politics of naming, about which, as we see here, Crimp expresses ambivalence. This politics of naming is worth more attention than I can give it here.

her two Antigones, as I have shown, or between her and Crimp, as I argue here) she does not thematize it, and even obscures it.

Crimp provides a valuable counter when he both decenters the quilt and pluralizes its meaning. He makes clear his ambivalence about its possibly domesticating effects. And he does not allow it to stand as a memorial to individuals. When he looks at the panels on the quilt, Crimp sees a world lost. He sees people he senses he knew, not those at the center of his life – their deaths had not escaped him – but those on its periphery, “from the bars and the bath houses, from the streets and the parks” (Crimp, 199). But this world is not apparent to all who look at the quilt. For others, he worries, the quilt may “sanitize and sentimentalize gay life,” and if so, then its popularity in mainstream culture is not good news for queers seeking to world-build: “That many in our society secretly want us dead is to me beyond question. And one expression of this may be our society’s loving attention to the quilt, which is not only a ritual and representation of mourning [as Butler will later argue] but also stunning evidence of the mass death of gay men. It would, of course, be unseemly for society to celebrate our deaths openly, but I wonder if the quilt helps make this desire decorous” (199-200).⁶⁵ The quilt gives *cover* to straight culture’s relief at the decimation of gay male life. The gay men whose passing is marked by the quilt do not threaten straights with their sexuality. Once dead, they need not be feared and so they can be mourned. Making their *deaths grievable*, Crimp worries *contra* Butler, *avant la lettre* we might say, is less an achievement than making their *lives acceptable*. The two are connected of course, this is Butler’s insight, but in making the

⁶⁵ Marita Sturken’s book, *Tangled Memories* (1997), comparing the Viet Nam Memorial and the Names Project quilt is especially good at tracking the sentimentalizing powers of the quilt. She also notes the importance of the sheer size of the quilt in conveying the huge loss of life, noting too the numbers: twice as many deaths from AIDS in 10 years as US dead in the Viet Nam war.

former a proxy for the latter, Butler may bypass some of the more vexing elements of the politics of lamentation in order to establish a humanism of equal death – a mortalist humanism. Natality, especially queer natality, may be harder for some to embrace, but it demands our embrace.⁶⁶

Moreover, insofar as the quilt enables acceptance of loss, (that is, insofar as it functions as a conventional kind of transitional object), Crimp worries that it might reconcile gay community members to the inevitability of loss at precisely a moment when insisting on the non-necessity of such loss was of foremost importance, politically.⁶⁷ For Crimp, there is no avoiding the need to register loss, but the risk is that we let go of the rage and righteous anger that drive political protest, activism and self-organization. Something like the rage and call to vengeance that ring through Antigone but go missing in Butler's and Elshtain's somewhat sanitized renderings of her are what Crimp tries to hold on to here. He does so on behalf of a demand to acknowledge not just the dead and dying but the erotic world of gay men. The point is made clear in Crimp's approval of the AIDS memoir film, *Danny*. Crimp sees in *Danny* a worthy effort to represent a gay person with AIDS as not just a victim but also as a life force, not just diseased but also possibly beautiful and sexual not moved just by *penthos* but also by *thumos* – not just human but also gay, in other words: not just mortal but also natal. *Danny* pairs the mortalism of lamentation with the hunger of desire and contributes to an

⁶⁶ Queer natality is also less assimilable to the sentimental public sphere than grievability.

⁶⁷ An analogous point is implied by Simon Stow (2010) who, citing Ronald K. Barrett, says that "African-Americans are more 'death-accepting' than whites (cited in Stow, 683). Stow looks at the politics of the death practices subtended by that acceptance, while Crimp seeks to forestall such acceptance and more fundamentally "acceptability" in the context of AIDS politics. On the place of transitional objects, though not the quilt, in a democratic politics of mourning, see David McIvor's (2010) Kleinian critique of Butler.

archive of representation that contests the cooptation of AIDS memoria by those who might experience satisfaction rather than remorse over gay male deaths (Crimp, 99-101).

All of this is obscured, it seems to me, by Butler's invocations, several of them, of Crimp on behalf of her own endorsement of the quilt for its performance of grief on behalf of ungrievable life. Crimp acknowledges the necessity of mourning and the power of shared lamentation to establish the equal grievability of queer lives, but he ranks this second to the insistence on tending in a more natalist fashion to queer world-building: communal, alternative, proudly inaugural, life-affirming, state-enlisting, sovereignty-seeking.⁶⁸ In her earlier *Psychic Life of Power*, Butler was closer to Crimp: "The emergence of collective institutions for grieving are thus crucial to survival, to reassembling community, to rearticulating kinship, to reweaving sustaining relations." Referring in particular to Queers Nation's famous "die-ins", Butler says these call to be "read as life-affirming rejoinders to the dire psychic consequences of a grieving process culturally thwarted and proscribed" (*Psychic Life*, 148). Already here, however, we see the longing for a grieving process unthwarted and not proscribed. This will become, later, grievable life. Already here in *Psychic Life of Power*, though, the emphasis on survival and re-emergence contrasts with Crimp's emphasis on an adamant natalism in spite of disaster. It is a difference of emphasis. By the time she writes *Precarious Life*. Butler's emphasis has shifted even further, away from political collectivities and toward the

⁶⁸ I find a similar sensibility in Elizabeth Freeman's effort to move queer theory to a focus on pleasure rather than pain: "Why is it that in queer theory, only pain seems so socially and theoretically generative?" She cites with approval the "simultaneously mourning and lusting spectator" of the film *K.I.P.*, who "seems to want to have sex with history" (12-13).

binding power of a humanism of grief.⁶⁹ A certain Antigone, the conventional one, has won.

Crimp directs us toward a politics of lamentation that reaches beyond Elshtain and Butler toward a different post-Oedipal politics and genre-bending future. ACT UP enacts practices of protest and governance that are a *mélange* of tragedy, comedy and militancy, an effective mongrel blend with which to act in concert in the world. Importantly, in this worldly complex of desire, identification, sex, and death, we have an experience arguably more Antigonean than that provided by the Madres and their spectacle of mourning. It is on behalf of such an alternative that we do well to decenter and pluralize Sophocles' protagonist, release her from the grip of the Madres and vice versa. Absent such reclamation, the conventional Antigone of lamentation retains the power to derail radical efforts like Crimp's to build new worlds, and leaves them at risk of being refolded into the mortalist humanism that the Names Project Quilt may well exceed but that it cannot but vehiculate nonetheless.

(ii) *The Politics of Beautiful Death*

If we do not want always to find ourselves drawn to the lone hero and the lost cause that Crimp associates with bourgeois individualism (in *Melancholia and Moralism*) and that Butler worries is undoing the best political activisms (in *Frames of War*), then one thing we must do is to find in Sophocles' text and its critics a different Antigone, one with a different political valence than the ethics or politics of grief for which she is so

⁶⁹ Marita Sturken points to hesitations larger than Crimp's regarding the mainstreaming and sentimentalizing politics of the Names Project quilt. These are unmentioned by Butler, whose frame of grievability makes it difficult to fasten on sentimentality as a problem or to specify what exactly that problem is (since grievability seems to be always already sentimental).

well known and which are so canonically weighty in the disciplines of political theory, feminist theory, and classics. Bruno Bosteels (2008) is not wrong to suggest we should break out of the “bounds of the Sophoclean model of tragedy” and turn instead to Aeschylus and Euripides. He is right that we would do well to decenter Sophocles and pluralize our models of tragedy. But to simply move away from Antigone without also re-signifying her is a mistake, as Lacan’s comment about her latency surely suggests. Moreover, contra Bosteels, we need to consider decentering not just Sophocles but the genre of tragedy. Perhaps this is Simon Critchley’s aim in *Infinitely Demanding* (2007) when he calls us to turn instead to comedy. But comedy is just one among several possible and necessary moves. I will argue in Chapter Five that melodrama may be a promising genre through which to re-engage classical tragedy as we seek to negotiate the challenges of an ontologically tragic world.

For now, though, I note that rereading Sophocles’ play, finding new details, tones, gestures and following new genre cues, we find another Antigone – connected, powerful, rooted, vengeful, scheming, funny and compassionate – and we find that we can do Antigone otherwise. Since the “Antigone versus Oedipus” frame is ubiquitous, this possibility is important. It may even highlight for us how, unwittingly, the Antigone to whom we have turned for power against (Freud’s) Oedipus is actually the Antigone of an older Sophocles, that of *Oedipus at Colonus*. In that play, Antigone is more oriented to lamentation than resistance. In that play, Antigone is also in service to the father whose law feminists now turn to her to resist. As Crimp points out (in a different context), this is a battle of representation.

Crimp theorizes mourning and militancy without Antigone and calls for pluralization – and democratization – in representation: “We must continue to demand and create our own counter images of PWA self-empowerment, of the organized PWA movement and of the larger AIDS activist movement... But we must also recognize that every image of a PWA is a *representation*, and formulate our activist demands not in relation to the ‘truth’ of the image, but in relation to the conditions of its construction and its social effects” (Crimp, 99). We might say the same of Antigone and we might here too follow Crimp’s lead. Criticizing Nicholas Nixon’s photographs of the ravaged suffering bodies of people with AIDS, Crimp endorses the manifesto, “No More Pictures Without Context,” which includes the following: “We demand the visibility of PWAs who are vibrant, angry, loving, sexy beautiful, acting up and fighting back” (86). In so saying, Crimp invites us to join him in taking the place *not* of the lamenting sister of Sophocles play and Hegel’s reception, but of the gods whose place *she* took, the gods who in archaic Greece took it upon themselves to provide heroes with a beautiful death. Their divine unguents and elixirs, traces of Egyptian practices of embalming, remain with us still. They are the pictures, film, interpretations and media that play a part in (what might always have been, in its own way) an agonistic politics of representation, not a simple ethics of restoration or remembrance, in which we depict PWA’s and others we have lost as pure and/or erotic, natal and/or mortal, sexual and/or suffering.

Crimp, perhaps more than Butler, wants a politics of bodies that matter, in which the dead or their survivors resist (what Derrida might call) the cannibalizations of sentimentalization that comply with the humanist demand for a decorous death. Crimp opposes the sentimentalism of grievability. Like Derrida, Crimp is willing to bring

politics even to the quilt, the name, the eulogy; that is, to insistently desentimentalize, and to hunt out every rapprochement with death on behalf of what it remains: a collectively built world that challenges us to rethink even death and burial and their supposed universal post-politicality.

A photo leaves an indelible impression: that of a young man protesting with ACT UP, the back of whose leather jacket features the words: “If I die of AIDS, don’t bury my body: leave it on the steps of the FDA.” PICTURE HERE. He was not alone. Another AIDS activist was famous for saying, “when I die, don’t put me in the damn quilt.” They did, though, and quoted his words on his panel. The most terrible thing from a humanist perspective, is to instrumentalize a corpse, to defile its dignity by putting it to use, treating it as an object. But, the message of these two PWA’s is that, humanism be damned, the most terrible thing to do is to violate their wishes that their corpses be put to good use. Humanism’s normalizing practice of burial calls for us to undermine these men’s power, disrespect their wishes, and absorb dissident lives in death into a community they rejected in life, and which rejected them.⁷⁰

Crimp’s demand to circulate natal and not just mortal images of PWA’s is one we may level at the *Antigone*’s readers, interpreters, staggers, and viewers as well. If the jury is out with regard to such innovative receptions, as Taylor says of Gambaro’s efforts in this direction, that is surely, as Taylor would agree, no reason to stop pluralizing

⁷⁰ Since I argue ultimately in this book for re-employment as a political strategy, it is noteworthy that Elizabeth Freeman’s mention of the quilt, neither sentimental nor angry, breaks through with their partnership with waggish comedy: “among all the blocks of the AIDS Memorial Names Quilt, only one persists in my visual memory: It said ‘I had a FABulous time,’ the word ‘fabulous’ emerging from the label of a bright orange bottle of laundry detergent. Queers have, it is fair to say, fabricated, confabulated, told fables, and do so fabulously” (xxi-xxii).

Antigone but rather a reason to redouble our efforts to do so in an effort to break or at least pluralize the frames by way of which we have received her until now.