

*The character of Antigone goes against the word of King Creon and buries one of her dead brothers after a fight broke out between the two over a spot in the throne. In this story, the King forbids her to bury a traitor, but she buries her brother anyway.*

In *Antigone's Claim*, Butler examines the various readings of 'Antigone' by structuralist thinkers that cast her as representing normative principles of kinship, where that kinship **"conditions the possibility of politics"** (AC, 2). On Lacan's reading, kinship (which is taken to represent any normative social relation) is a function of language, which is instituted in a person the moment they learn to speak, and thus not easily altered by social arrangements (14-5). The idea is that kinship is some ideal that exists on a plane causally prior to social life. This makes kinship and other normative relations, such as paternity, immutable; the father **"does not cede to the demands for a social reorganization of paternity"** (AC, 20). Butler takes issue with this reading naturally, as they follow Foucauldian thought and think that the cultural field where normative relations are structured are effectively the result of power relations that have been constructed from within, as opposed to structuralist thought which posits an external force that is the arbiter of everything in the cultural field. Both lines of thought have diverging political implications that will be explored in this paper. My aim is to articulate Butler's project and highlight the spots where Foucauldian and Derridean thought motors their argument against Lacan's reading of Antigone. Then, I'll comment on whether Butler's work can provide good reasons for reconciling Foucault and Derrida's biopolitical frameworks.

The tale of Antigone is the center of the debate over how the cultural field transforms. The structuralists read Antigone as a figure who placed herself outside the legal order to be able to subvert that order. She had to essentially be "outside" power to subvert power (i.e., defy Creon). In order to grapple with this thought, I need to elucidate Lacan's schema to show how he substantiates this 'outside' power. In thinking about how a cultural field gets subverted, Lacan maintains that it can only be possible by evoking the "real", which is something that exists purely outside that cultural field and accounts for its production and alterations. Apparently, the *real* cannot have content. For example, Lacan thinks that Antigone's love for her brother is irrespective of the *content* that brother is said to have, but rather she loves his **"'pure Being', an ideality of being that belongs to symbolic positions"** (AC, 14). So, the ideality of kinship relations superimposes on any of the symbolic positions or norms in the cultural field. Butler, being a Foucauldian, thinks that the only form of exteriority that exists is the *episteme*, which isn't even exterior in the universal, immutable way that the structuralists think, but rather contingently so (and thus transformable).

Butler's interest is how Lacan ends up sneaking content into the real when giving his theory of how the cultural field gets changed, when the real is supposedly posited as empty/undetermined. Lacan does this by projecting a host of presuppositions/positions that they assume to be necessary and unchallengeable. This concerns Butler for two reasons: positing things in this way make it seem permanent and beyond critique (which makes political resistance to it difficult), and that *universalizing gestures* in general create unjust conditions that later trend into requiring political resistance. When we consider the category "homosexual" now, we think of a completely

different characteristic than when it was considered a psychiatric condition. By not pathologizing it, the category was transformed, which implies that these categories gain their power through performative actions rather than any essential marks they might bear. This has political relevancy because when the contingency of these categories isn't highlighted, homosexual individuals are rendered unintelligible as normal beings, and this leads to a lack of recognition in the cultural field (as perhaps normal people who deserve normal rights), which leads to oppression and rejection. Categories also denote which lives are worthy of mourning, since norms usually guide the feelings we ought to have about the loss of certain lives (e.g., in the titanic, the wealthier folks got priority on boarding life-rafts because their deaths were considered a greater loss than of those from the third class). This idea of categories can be woven into the biopolitical thoughts in both *Death Penalty & The Beast and the Sovereign*, where the idea that what happens with a person's body after their death can be worse than death/execution itself, because if a person doesn't get treated with human dignity (via a proper burial), it implies that our lives aren't differentiated from the life of animals (which we usually connote with being dispensable).

Circling back to the earlier point about the issues of positing an outside thing to account for transformations within a cultural field, it's important to note that this idea was sort of a critique of Foucault, where many theorists didn't understand how power transformed itself, or where this occurred exactly. But Butler maintains their Foucauldian position of thinking that through biopower's own activities, biopower can reconfigure itself without needing to posit some external absolute entity, which is really just operating as a category to determine the normative structures within the cultural field (e.g., Lacanian kinship is fixing what Antigone's feelings are for her father/brother). For example, when Lacan aligns Antigone with kinship and the home rather than the polis, he's effectively giving her content (e.g., feminine content, non-political content). This content, on Lacan's view, isn't challengeable because it's super embedded into us (through language) and pretty much just some absolute thing we have to take for granted. But Butler pushes back on Lacan and opts for a reading of his analysis that shows that the 'content' he ascribes to Antigone is contingent! Butler draws an example to provide an alternative perception of Antigone: in the Lacan's reading of Antigone that tries to make her kinship seem fixed/pure, a contradiction punctures this ideal flat: Antigone's family relations are highly incestuous, which pushes all taboos and norms that Lacan is trying to evoke via the ideal. That is, how can you claim that she represents something normative if her very story is one that crosses all these normative relations? Butler writes, ***"can we assume that Antigone has no confusion about who is her brother, and who is her father, that Antigone is not... living the equivocations that unravel the purity and universality of those structuralist rules?"*** (AC, 18). So, Butler spotlights this paradox that Antigone's desires towards her brother go against structuralist psychoanalytic thought, dismantling the universality of structuralist rules about kinship (i.e., rigid conceptions of daughter-father relations, or brother-sister relations).

The critique that Butler gives (about how the cultural field can affect the episteme and thus account for internal change) uses the Derridean supplement, which exists when something external to a thing is simultaneously constitutive of that thing. Derrida uses this term to loosen the grip that the supplement may have on the original thing, to show that it's not essential. Butler uses this idea to define the episteme, showing that it's a supplement (i.e., the episteme is

constitutive of the cultural field, but somewhat external to it). That is one way to account for the change that occurs within the cultural field, showing that it's some mutually affective relation, rather than the structuralist view on which the real determines the cultural field.

Butler also uses another form of Derridean logic to fray the structuralist's readings of Antigone: *deconstruction*. In the story of Antigone, she's associated with kinship, with corresponds more to domestic life rather than the domain of the polis. However, there are examples that defy this reading, and show how she isn't confined to this position. When Antigone uses the language of the state to claim/confess the deed of burying her brother, she's taking on King Creon, which is very much an action that engages at the level of the political. Butler thinks that the domain of domesticity and the polis can't be separated in a straightforward manner, because on this new view of Antigone, we can see that those categories are deconstructed. Antigone defies kinship continuously; ***“Antigone embodies both an opposition of kinship to the polis, as well as an opposition to kinship, expressed by her attachment to a sibling by means of a disruptive desire, philia beyond kinship”*** (AC, 88). Derridean ideas are interplayed in Butler's reframing of Antigone, because Derrida himself thought that deconstructing binaries and thereby destabilize hierarchies (e.g., between kinship and polis) would be a political activity, which is the ultimate purpose that Butler took up in *Antigone's Claim* – they wanted to embark on a feminist project that would lead to effective policies that didn't need to hinge on any essentialist conception of femininity, and thought Antigone could be a candidate for making that conception viable.

While Butler resists the idea that Antigone is representative of pure kinship/outside ideal, they still want to maintain that Antigone is subversive. Here, Butler uses Foucauldian thought to express how this is the case. Butler thinks that there's no place outside of power, but power still creates divisions and zones of unintelligibility. In the cultural field, there are norms that guide attitudes and practices towards those who defy those norms. Those people can be thought of as unintelligible if they don't conform to the norms that the social order set up. Antigone defied gender norms by acting 'sovereign' and stepping up to the King, which even Derrida highlighted as being a male position (e.g., the sovereign is lined up with 'masculine', while beasts/animals/irrational beings/children are 'feminine') (TBTS, 32). Antigone also defied kinship by having incestuous relations with her brother. In these examples, Antigone was unintelligible because she can't anymore be thought as straightforwardly female, or as embodying kinship as an epitomized standard (i.e., incest is taboo...); ***“Antigone is caught in a web of relations that produce no coherent position within kinship”*** (AC, 57). Butler uses Derridean logic to deconstruct the categories that the structuralists tried to align with Antigone, for the Foucauldian aim of showing how by recognizing all the ways our episteme is producing these zones of unintelligibility, we can use the deconstructed in our attempt to resist its power. That is, by showing how Antigone is a figure who is illegible on the current available terms (of female and non-sovereign and kinship), we can open up possibilities for reading her differently, and reconceiving our future political possibilities based on this re-reading.

I'll emphasize a bit of importance that *Antigone's Claim* has to Butler's political work to show how it can be used to bring Foucault and Derrida together on their respective biopolitical frameworks. The basic premise of Antigone's story is that she was not allowed to bury her

brother. Her brother's death wasn't legible as a mournful death like other deaths would be, in that story. The motif of kinship rings back the notion that if some relations are fixed in certain ways, it'll dictate what we're able to do with their bodies when they're dead. When the Pharaoh dies, his body is enclosed in a gold sarcophagus and an entire pyramid is built for his tomb. But the slaves that died in the process of building the tomb weren't allocated a plot of land to commemorate their existence. The fixed relationships in kinship may have political repercussions that make it difficult for us or those we love to live dignified lives.

Antigone is also depicted as the sovereign on Derrida's view, who does whatever they want irrespective of the external order. In the *Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida deconstructs the binary between human beings and animals to push back against narrative that there's a quintessential feature of humans. This is tied to his larger combative project against 'purist metaphysics' (which tries to create hierarchies between things such as speech and writing to claim that one has more value than the other). Derrida disagrees with any notion that tries to assign any essentiality to anything, like how stories have tried to tie rationality to sovereignty and irrationality to the beast, since sovereignty is the one that manifests in the bestial characteristics of brutality and stealthiness. With connection to Antigone, the sovereign is someone who uses their superior status, overriding and ignoring laws, doing whatever they want because inherent in their sovereign title is the right to not be responsible for their corruption and omnipotent-like ruling. Here, Derrida and Foucault can be thought together on their view of the sovereign as an individual who places himself above the law, and decrees things based on the 'pure force of assertion' rather than reason. With Derridean deconstruction, various binaries that challenge the political order can be explored, and philosophical traditions can be overcome, and using Foucauldian thought about the cultural field, we find many examples that can be candidates for this deconstruction.

Derrida's Biopolitics work in *The Death Penalty* resurfaced in Butler's work in *Antigone's Claim*, in the moments where Antigone's brother is within the law but still not allowed to be treated like a citizen who has a right to a dignified burial. Derridean deconstruction was used to refigure Antigone and Foucauldian thought was used to detach universalizing concepts from categories. Though I find it difficult to point to places in *Antigone's Claim* where Butler's work can help show the biopolitical compatibility between Foucault and Derrida, I do think Butler's external work in gender performativity can show how changes occur in norms in Foucault's biopower using deconstruction. Foucault tends to trace historical events in showing how certain norms came about, such as evoking a new discourse on labour/time to bring about the new brand of human "homo economicus" and thus show how new norms came along having to do with our relations to our bodies. And Derridean logic is used (e.g., in *Antigone's Claim*) by Butler to carry out the transformations between the forms of logic used in Butler's work, which differs from Foucault's methods of offering more historical-based approaches to explain these shifts in thinking. In other words, Butler's thoughts have Foucauldian aims and Derridean methods.

### Citation List:

Citations (AC, ...) refer to:

Butler, Judith. 2000. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. New York; Chichester: Columbia UP.

Citations (TBTS, ...) refer to:

Derrida, Jacques. 2009. *The Beast and the Sovereign (Volume 1)*. Chicago; London: U of Chicago P