Antigone in (Post-)Modern Palestine

During the winter and spring of 2002 I taught at Grand Valley State University in West Michigan. It was a strange period for me for a number of reasons. I had just returned from the University of Pretoria and couldn't get free of the South African spell there; owing to American politics in the Middle East and the monolithic white, Christian, under-educated and over-religious student body, I was seen in the classroom as a 'Muslim outsider.' Moreover, the war in the West Bank awoke in me still fresh wounds and memories of the Bosnian war and the first cases of the Palestinian girls suicide-bombers paralysed me with pain. Teaching, among other courses, World Mythologies, I devoted considerable time to the play and character of Antigone. The usual demarcation of her, as a bride of death, was too close to my years of writing about raped Bosnian girls who later committed suicide, usually hanging themselves; and the 'return of the repressed,' the other name for symptom in modern psychoanalysis, turns the border between law and terror into a fragile sign that resists interpretation.

In the midst of my thinking about the topic, I received an email message from an unknown person, a writer, who had read one of my older texts in a Finnish journal of theory and criticism. As the subject of her message, she wrote the words: 'Thank you for your article,' in the content she talked about the pain caused her by the sights of destroyed Jenin and her inability as a writer to act, and ended her message with the words: 'I am happy that you exist.' I still don't know to what extent her letter helped me, but her words moved me; I forwarded to her some pamphlets about Palestine that I had received from some Universities in New York and South Africa and we have remained in touch.

I was thinking at the same time about Murray Krieger, one of the most decent intellectuals I have met, Jewish, who told me upon my coming to America that although he had lectured many times in Israel, he 'never accepted an offer to live and teach there' – finding it 'impossible to work in a country that is grounded in one nation', even his own, 'and that builds itself in such a fashion'. These words well echoed in me my own inability to live, and to teach about the Bosnian Holocaust, within the borders of Bosnia involved in painful attempts at its own rebuilding. Later, while working with the Palestinian Edward
Said, I learned that it was Murray Krieger who contributed to the promotion of Said's enormous scholarly and teaching talent. That is, I thought, what physical distancing from a conflict makes possible. It saves our capacities to rationalize and sets the distinction between an intellectual and a soldier. Yet what happens when the border is blurred or destroyed, when compassion becomes transgression, when there is no ground for grace, only for murder, when a girl chooses death rather than life and her fiancé (like Antigone, the Palestinian girl I will be talking about was engaged) – when all symbolic protection from the traumatic Real is destroyed? That is the point that must be addressed – the loss of the symbolic protection, the hazardous abyss of sinking into nothingness with no prospect of getting out. Yet what has the symbolic protection consisted of when it so easily gets dissolved?

Neither...nor
Talking about Antigone, one might first connect her to a culture of opposition, see in her 'a figure of defiance that legalizes suspended subjects', in the words of Judith Butler, 'an alternate legality that haunts the conscious public sphere as its scandalous future'. From a contemporary Western perspective we cannot neglect the human rights discourse and the issues of conflicting rights at its heart, neither we can ignore the revival of tragedy and 'Gods' in our times. Political philosophy (here I have in mind Benhabib and Kymlicka) that determines culture as 'an arena of intense political controversy, and as constituted through contested practices' can reframe the classic psychoanalytic insistence on Antigona's incestuous blockage as well as Žižek's insistence on her monstrous totalitarianism. What is certain in all cases is that the substance of her life, her unliveable desire, is death itself.

In his recent study on death and ethics, Jonathan Lear criticizes the Freudian concept of the 'death drive' claiming that: Freud hypostasizes into a positive teleological principle the purely negative fact of breaks and interruptions which cannot be directly contained/integrated in the 'normal' teleologically oriented psychic economy. He accuses Lacan of the same reifying positivisation of the gap/break into a positive 'Beyond' apropos of the notion of the Thing as the Beyond, the unattainable hard kernel of the Real around which signifiers circulate. We can read these words as an attempt to dismantle the postulates of a legality of the
unconscious prior to the symbolic, which will, in our context, confirm Antigone's guardianing of criminality, upon which Lacan (unlike Butler), although enchanted by her 'passionate being in an autonomous ethical act', still insists.

The issue is this: should the unconscious be considered as transgressive, and shouldn't Antigone who, as Butler notes, speaks in the very language of the state, within the language of the entitlement from which she is excluded, simply be taken as a reiteration of its practices of Law? And further: is death in Antigone a positive content to which she was cursed or is what appears as her repetition merely the activity itself, the activity of self-disruption that tends in no direction at all? If we determine her condition as neither...nor, instead of both...and, that preferably imposes on her the patriarchal frame of her (endogamic) desire towards both of her brothers, isn't she already on her way to breaking the taboo of the status of the unconscious having her brothers in fact killed each other in her and leaving her as the real feminist heroine of the war? Should we today read Antigone only through her 'passionate attachment' to her male kin, or should we, rather, try to look for the sources of her-being-towards-death beyond that, elsewhere?

What links the figure of the classic Antigone to the girl suicide in Palestine are the intolerable conditions in the horror of the proximity of everything, the proximity that deconstructs any possible symbolic edifice in advance. If we talk about abjection in suicides, we first refer to the mirror stage and the Other in the social construction of meaning. In an occupation or a siege, in war involving rapes, the self and Other, however, often become indissoluble. What interests me is a possible shift from a passive raped girl to a Palestinian girl rebel, a transition from the passivity of victim to an activity of vengeance that would be neither tragic nor delinquent. Can we understand the moment in which a girl is made to feel like destroying not only herself and a bunch of people but the whole planet (by explosives attached to her own body)? Was that the feeling of the girl who committed the first female suicide bombing in Jerusalem, a girl who had studied at Birzeit University, who was not particularly devout (religious fervour being the usual explanation of Palestinian terrorist acts), who wore Western clothes and was not affiliated with any organisation? The black sea of negativity is very well known to Western theory and Westerners' lives. It is the point
where all of us are stuck, where all politics appears as numb, shallow, awfully stupid.

Her defiance against the rule of the State of Israel was for the sake of her own homeland certainly, 'in the name of Allah' perhaps – but most of all, I thought, she committed it for herself. Can our female and feminine identification go along with the horror of her act? And along with the horror in her leading her to the act? How trivial would Kristeva's essay on abjection read today if we failed to consider Women's Studies, Gender Studies, Post-colonial Studies and Genocide Studies? If Antigone 'stands for the crisis of representation function...and a political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed,' what point of identification can we assume in the politics of performative repetition in a culture that transforms the very terms of kinship to prevent its total extinction? From its beginning in 1987, the Intifada has had the character of a national unification in the Palestinian resistance; in the introduction to The Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank, a respected American-Palestinian scholar Suha Sabbagh writes that: 'As in most third world struggles, the Palestinian women were being asked to put their agenda on the back burner until national liberation has been achieved...but women were determined...they fought the battle on two fronts simultaneously: national and women's, brought 'The bill of rights' – the declaration of principles on Palestinian Women's Rights and produced a virtual army of Palestinian women academics, organizers and activists who became globe-trotters exchanging experiences out of the country'. It is not that the girl we are talking about didn't have a mirror reflection and the symbolic structure of organized female activism, but it is that she lost it.

So we come to the question that I posed earlier: what does the symbolic consist in, if it so easily gets dissolved? And is Lear's comment on a 'normal', teleologically oriented psychic economy in these conditions banal to the point of ignorance? Girl suicide is one of the most serious issues facing the humanities and society. In struggles for national liberation there are powerful, romantic ideologies, positive structures of thoughts and rebellion, yet not all the attacked or oppressed are able to stick to them. A developed ideological superstructure of resistance also involves a group identity into which many women do not fit. A decade ago, referring to the Jewish Holocaust, Shoshana Felman
wrote that Freud's discourse has an unprecedented status in the history of culture because of the radical displacement that it produces in our understanding of the clinical dimension and the validity and scientific recognition that it for the first time gives to the unconscious testimony. What is the death drive and repetition and the girl's suicide bombing, if you will, if not a recovered narrative of losses we can never fully utter and with which we can never fully identify, if not the testimony of the entombment of the woman that abolishes any discourse on "normal" teleologically oriented psychic economy?'

Perhaps the point is the difference in conceptualising the act of 'suicide-bombing'. A Lebanese-Canadian filmmaker, a Christian, who has made a number of documentaries on slaughters and Apartheid in Palestine, corrected me when I said to him that I wanted to write about a girl suicide-bomber. 'The term lacks respect for their cause,' he said. 'We call them women-martyrs, and they are inspired by the Lebanese women martyrs in the eighties.' Out of the abyss of discrepancy in understanding of this act, the interpretation might come – what is suicide bombing for some, for others is martyrdom. And it has existed for centuries in the most diverse cultures (let us just recall that in Greek the word martyr, martis, means witness). In the Israeli retaliation in the West Bank that followed the bombing, CNN cameras recorded a small boy, wounded, and left parentless who said with no tears and with childish decisiveness: 'but when I grow up, I will become a suicide bomber and kill many, many Israelis...' These words are not about terrorism, or even about the ideological pre-set of weaponry. These words are about the guilt and shame of humankind.

Victimizing...whom?
Lacan claimed that the status of the unconscious is ethical, rather than ontic; the subject of the unconscious manifests itself, it thinks before it attains certainty and is there to discover where it was – the Real. In his most recent book Žižek – who is, by the way, awfully ignorant of the Real and the substance of the nationhood of the people of Bosnian Muslims (with whom he shared the same state for decades and even ran for its president) not to mention the Real of Muslims in general (viciously described also in Lacan, Elli Wiesel, Primo Levi, Allain Badieu, Giorgio Agamben as the Real of 'those who are fully drowned and have nothing to say or transmit through
memory13) –this very Žižek deploys the theatre of Antigone ("a masculine fantasy par excellence"14) to develop a scheme of woman's monstrosity.

Antigone's particular decision directly identifies with the Other's (Thing's) injunction/call – she does not merely relate to the Other-Thing, she – for a brief moment directly is the Thing thus excluding herself from the community regulated by the intermediate agency of symbolic regulations.15

What is 'monstrous' there, I guess, is that it is a woman who sets 'a new ethical form' and 'redefines what is a legal norm' and, even, 'introduces Evil that is formally indistinguishable from the Good'.16 Yet I doubt that Žižek has in mind the (Near Eastern) women martyrs at all. One also finds claims about sameness of Evil and Good throughout Badiou's texts,17 but if you apply his ethics to contemporary world developments and add gender, the issue becomes highly complicated.

The Palestinian girl we are talking about simply came to the function of the Thing, having previously been living in seclusion, in the horror of isolation, resentment, hunger, paranoia. Enclosure. That calls for self-disclosure. Hers is a historical, not a hysterical acting out. By destroying her body, she repeats the dispossession of her land and property, being and sex, and at the same time destroys some of the people who might globally be blamed for it. Certainly it is perverse to consider the suicide bombing, or martyrdom if you will, as the disclosure of one's body, but the cause of the perversity is what the story is about. Can we call it a narrative, a performance? (Another girl that followed her example left a video message that was shown all around the globe, produced in the by now well-known terrorist scenography.) It was a performance, for local and for Western eyes, yet I still believe it was likewise a coercion coming from a burnt out, no longer existing psychology. And even if it is 'the unconditional fidelity to the Otherness of the Thing that disrupts the entire social edifice,'18 as Žižek claims for Antigone, and as we may explain terrorism – we can still say that the Thing as well as the validity of a social edifice changes from culture to culture; a forcefully instituted incommunicability between cultures, by bulldozers as well as the state system, symptomatically brings out the reiteration of the Other's word and act. After all, Levinas called Israel 'the coincidence of the political and spiritual... the opportunity to carry out the social law of Judaism'19 – by all means. Yet he categorically refuses to
extend his theory – about the non-anticipatory ethics of encounter, the Other and the rights of the neighbour prior to all entitlement, based on absolute identity – to his Palestinian neighbours claiming that they are enemies, that 'there are people who are wrong.' ¹⁰ Žižek asks in another context: 'does not Fascism ultimately involve the return to the pagan mores which, rejecting the love of one's enemy, cultivate full identification with one's own ethnic community?' ¹¹ In The Other Israel, the collection of essays by Israeli intellectuals who oppose Ariel Sharon's politics and massive retaliations, Tania Reinhart writes: It seems that what we have internalised of the memory of the Holocaust is that any evil whose extent is smaller is acceptable.

Yitzak Laor adds:

but this 'evil of the past' has a peculiar way of entering our present life. We now even learn from the Nazis to save Israel. Israeli soldiers stamp Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) numbers on Palestinian arms. ²²

Were we in such a situation, wouldn't each of us feel summoned, 'called' (in the Levinasian terms of 'the Other's call in me') to the function of Antigone – yet Antigone who also knows and pursues her own story? Isn't hers the knowledge of a tattoo of both soul and body that comes even before one's birth? And because it cannot be put into words, she performs it as her raison d'être? What Edward Said is willing to formulate as 'a bond of a common history of persecution in Jewish and in Palestinians' ²³ gets a sinister meaning when the victim becomes the victimizer. To that chain of victimizing the girl is reacting with her deadly performative jouissance. Is it a matter of the sublime – and is the sublime accessible to a girl, a girl who is already murdered in her desire to desire a murder 'after the last sky' ²⁴ of the death drive, with the awareness that 'they' can always come 'to kill'? It takes only the basic psychoanalytic tools to see that her extinguished culture is the very core of Israel, its very body, its own jouissance that Israeli politics is suicidally expulsing from itself.

**The melancholic Other**

The issue of cross-cultural transmission destabilizes the accepted patterns of kinship, nation and state. What was in the classic Antigone the lack of norm, of 'father' as a normative, regulatory function, and the immediate, both physical and symbolic loss of her male siblings, ²⁵ has been transformed into
the maddening conditions of a curse where these lacks and losses cannot be distinguished from the excess of masculine function. The 'melancholic' internalisation/incorporation of the lack/loss in the Palestinian Antigone (according to Freud26 melancholia implies a real loss as much as of an ideal: country, state, liberty, or whatever), the loss that substituted itself for the world in which it lives, only opens up to irruption of the totalitarian super-ego structures that are masculine per definition, 'to a form of revolt that takes place through repetition and metonymy...The melancholic inverts against itself the indictment it would level against the other: this incorporation of the other is also a 'discorporation of the Master',' as Homi Bhaba writes.

Who is then the mastering Other for the girl? The terms and laws of kinship shift in any dislocated situation, and the displaced and dispossessed body's libidinal attachment cannot be predetermined. Nor can the way in which the social domain imprints the psychic domains of a gendered individual. If the conditions of occupation, siege and slaughter both produce and reveal the true scope of the horror of kinship (that by no means is only the horror of incestuosity), the girl's psychic economy repeats and performs also that horror and in the act of (self) destruction she destroys, symbolically and physically, her own kin as much as the occupiers. 27

Can 'melancholia' help in understanding the constructs of martyrism as distinct from the construct of terrorism? And must these constructs play out the way they do in the dominant Western imaginary? We have to keep in mind that in the twenty-first century, in the age not of de-colonization but of post-colonialism we are experiencing a new colonization of a land by the Israeli forces. These are the forces that – let me quote Said from 1994 – 'first introduced terrorism against civilians to the Middle East, and built their state on conquest, invaded surrounding countries, bombed and destroyed at will and currently occupy Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian territory against international law'. He further remarks, that this is:

simply never cited in the US media or in official discourse, never addressed as playing any role at all in provoking "Islamic terror". Who do those people think they are, that they can make light of or ignore what they have done to us and still wrap themselves in the mantle of "the survivors"28

Yet the troubling connections between gender and culture problematise over-simplified views on national liberation
struggles, and female suicide-bombing or martyrdom cannot result only from that. What is internalised in the girl seems to be the chaotic horror that comes upon the loss of the object-cathexis met by the horror of disoriented drives. It is not necessarily a helpless mimesis of the acts of her ethnic brothers turned terrorists (acts also born from despair, powerlessness, misery and phallusoid fantasies), but defiant to all and abyssal of its own. As I noted earlier, contemporary Antigone, in whatever culture, knows her own, different story. Absolutism and 'totalitarianism' as traits most often attributed to her (by whose weakness and anxiety? What is totalitarianism if not a shackled soul?) may simply reflect the history of the passage of a passive female victim (it is not for nothing that she is so cruel to Ismene) into an active response that manages to suppress aggressivity until the point that all libidinal reference is lost.

Woman's death through exclusion from a symbolic community is also 'a treasure' of all civilizations (Lacan is fair enough to situate Antigone's femininity between two deaths, the real and the symbolic). 'Before the Intifada,' writes Philippa Strum: a woman "contaminates" by rape or other sexual abuse, by soldiers or men of her own society, might well have been ostracized if not killed by her family. Women who were prisoners during the Intifada, however, were treated as heroines by men as well as by women. The whole system of taboos, and the definitions of honour and shame, have changed...as Hanan Ashrawi says, "It was not any longer social issue, but the national and political, to determine what is right, what is wrong." Yet the alteration in values was short-lived for much of the society.29

As it is, unfortunately, for much of the world today. That knowledge Antigone had in her 'monstrous absolutism and totalitarianism' of her 'passion for her brothers', might simply reflect the horror of the totalitarianism of instituting what Butler calls the incestuous fantasy as the universal truth of culture, or of blocking the power of female vision as one of culture's fundamentals. Can we say that her psychodrama indeed repetitively and invertedly stages the forceful imposition of the sexual frame (and desire allegedly issuing from it) that was far from natural? Or that she slid into a masquerade (and the Palestinian girl followed her some millennia later with a technologically effective device) that brought her closer to her mother's womb than to her male kin? Or that, being torn apart by her embattled brothers, she desired an exit to some other

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land through the burial of its potential defender? The history of women's suicides has also contained that other, performative form of self-destruction (Lacan would call it the melancholic turn into Phallus). Since the death drive is a peculiar kind of devastation that mind brings upon itself, and one is obviously forced into it – the only defence a woman has is her own performance of death within death.

However, if the real question for theory is how to make a change – and what can change Antigone's already cursed life? – her only help is not to take the performance for the Real. For suicide bombing is a terrorist act, it kills people, randomly, including those who might support the rights of the tormented Palestinian people, it introduces a factor of tragic violent irrationality that the state, itself made in blood and sin will use for further, bloodier retribution. In her last book Israel, Palestine: How To End the War of 1948, Tanya Reinhart writes: What is particularly frightening about the events in Jenin is how Israel managed to cover its crimes and silence protesting voices: announcing that there was no massacre, no order from above... while the instructions were clear: shoot every window, spray every house... these people were not given any chance to leave the camp... Since there was no formal investigation, the massacres in Jenin became acceptable.30

Inscription of the Real

From the 'Western' perspective, we can also see this through the frame of the postmodern crash of values, the turn of the postmetaphysical philosophy into its metaphysical regression, or the extravaganza of the communication technology by which our own bodies are drawn into video-happenings of massacres. Whatever, the post-Camp David conflict renders the idea of a viable Palestinian state as utopian. Its aged president appears on satellite TV as an excruciated clown, its 'martyrs' as killed, its homes and families as well as its schools, nurseries and hospitals destroyed, all international aid blocked. But in the end isn't Antigone about utopia, about a revision of a doomed family always out of reach because so desperately needed? Can at the core of her crime be her attempt (theatrically) to confer the horror of normative incestuousness instituted by seclusion? What kind of legal system would have worked in the situation of Zionist Apartheid, as a support to the transition that I mentioned earlier, of the girl passive victim into an active, non-

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tragic and non-transgressive avenger? What would redirect the death desire in Antigone if today a curse is still taken as a curse? The psychoanalytic establishment develops; along with our extreme awareness of 'its limits as much as of its powers', the first change it should bring about is a dethroning of the curse. Lacan's 'return to Freud' underlined that the death drive sought to conceptualise the relation of the subject to the signifier. But there remains a serious analytic question: who get to become subjects and what becomes of those excluded? If postmodernism is the enactment of such dethroning, then psychoanalytic theory must transform its own premises, search for the excluded and speak through the analysand's 'I'.

'We have little or no idea what civil rights would be necessary to protect individual autonomy within the context of an alien structure of culture,' responds Robert Post to Susan Okin's provocative essay 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?'. In the same way psychoanalytic criticism cannot really ignore structures of alien cultures (and circumstances) they tend to inform its very foundations, or it can ignore the specificities of female positions within them. And if Palestine has become a metaphor for the postmodern condition (I apologize for this to Palestinians) – that is always there and almost non-existent – an analyst looses her starting point of the 'protected' experienced desire. It is in the fluctuating borders of the transference/contra-transference that the ground for analysis, itself 'a statement of survival', must be revised. A case-history of a girl who, instead of hanging herself, 'rapes back' with her suicide asks for a reader far advanced in reading the cross-cultural, political and gender knots and dead-ends. The nothingness, the void of the Real is also the nothingness of the self that counts for its constitution. If an analytic act starts from the possibility of the knowledge about the Real, of inscribing a truth in our knowledge about the Real, the Antigonian self is to be heard through the analyst's change. Perhaps in that way we should read anxiety in Žižek's claim against 'the overblown celebration of Antigone.'

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Notes


5. Judith Butler’s term.


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34 Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, p.152.