Lacanian Ethics, the Psychoanalytic Group, and the Question of Queer Sociality

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This article is an attempt to frontally pose a question queer theory gravitates around, yet never effectively spells out: what is a togetherness of those who have nothing in common but their desire to undo group ties? First, I consider the take-up of Lacan's ethical experiment in Seminar VII, the Ethics of Psychoanalysis *by queer theorists. I contend that queer theory has not given Lacan's interpretation of* Antigone *its full import, which demands its placement in the philosophical tradition of the West brought to its highest fruition in Kant. I further contend, however, that to do so does not quite offer a solution to the queer problem, for, as contemporary debate on the political import of* Antigone *shows, the purity of her desire does not immediately translate into a sustainable politics. Lacan himself was faced with the problem of translating his ethics into a politics after his "excommunication" from the psychoanalytic establishment, and came to falter before it. Nevertheless, Lacan's efforts allow us to pose the undoubtedly queer question of how to group together those whose only attribute is to undo group ties. Responding to the unanswerable demands of a theory and a practice that allows us to answer that question, I propose the figure of the smoker's communism, as elaborated upon by Mladen Dolar, as a preliminary queer suggestion as to how we might go about mitigating the gap between Lacan's ethical brilliance and his admitted political failure.*

Keywords: *Jacques Lacan; desire; sociality; Antigone; anti-social thesis in queer theory*

Introduction

What is the sociality of those who have nothing in common but their opposition to identity? Queer theory appears to skirt around this question, without thereby posing it directly. Most of what has been written on the issue of queerness appears to take for granted that there is a sociality that predates it, something that might be called, for instance, the LGBT+ community. If it is undisputable that such a community has existed and has been a political force to be reckoned with, much recent queer literature can be construed as the anxious chronicling of the slow disintegration of queer modes of sociality. For instance, concepts such a homonormativity (Duggan, 2003: 50), homonationalism (Puar, 2017: 39), and homocapitalism (Rao, 2015: 47) all tend towards a diagnosis of the breakdown of our claims to truly alternative modes of life, denoting the easy compromises we effect with regard to majority culture and the assimilationist impulse of every rights-claim premised on bourgeois norms of belonging (Brown, 1993: 395).

The slow disappearance of our claim to alternative modes of sociality has led Cathy Cohen to recently declare, as against her earlier call for queer to serve as a rallying point of political alliance (1997: 438), that the space for provocation queerness has purported to open up over its 30-year history is quickly closing (2019: 142). Though I am ready to agree this is the historical juncture in which we currently

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write, I believe it should also be stressed that not all queer reflection is directly indebted to this silent equation of the queer to the LGBT+ or to any given empirical constituency. One of the early statements of the queer programme indeed construes it as nothing less than "the project of elaborating, in ways that cannot be predicted in advance, this question: What do queers want?" (Warner, 1993: vii), a question that decisively propels queerness into the realm of ethical potentiality (Muñoz, 2009: 1), separating it from its social scientific cousin of Lesbian and Gay Studies – a separation arguably undermined by the institutionalisation of Queer Studies in Anglo-American academia, to the detriment of queer theory proper (Wiegman, 2015: 331-332).

Be that as it may, Michael Warner's call for reflection on what it is that the putative "we" of queerness – a "we" that is always under construction – wants is crucial insofar as it points us towards the two of queer theory's open problems. I would venture to express them in the following form: what is our desire, if it is unrecognisable from the standpoint of the totalising thrust of heteronormativity? And what binds us together, if we are outside those very codes that confer upon us the only semblance of intelligibility we may attain as subjects, and therefore pose the conditions of possibility of sociality as such? Posing these questions at this level of generality and abstraction is crucial to rethinking queer theory in light of its ongoing normalisation.

I wager here that Lacanian psychoanalysis, in regard to these questions, has not yet reached the limit of what it can offer. Queer Lacanian scholarship, sparse though it is, has myopically tended to focus on Lacan's putative commitment to the strictures of binary gender, almost to the point of reducing the notion of the symbolic to that of gender difference (Butler, 1999: 36-7; Carlson, 2010: 61). This reduction, and the endless debate it has elicited, has eclipsed the fact that Lacan's ethical commitments, be it in regard to the psychoanalytic cure or the psychoanalytic institution, are explicitly tailored to unsettle the sort of identificatory movement under which we might subsume "gender" in the first place. Further, scholarship more sympathetic to Lacan has relied on something of an inmixing between two drastically different moments in his work, notably *Seminar VII* and *Seminar XXIII* (Edelman, 2004: 1-66), to the detriment of more sustained consideration of what motivated Lacan's earlier ethics, namely, his ongoing struggle with and within the psychoanalytic institution.

These two omissions signal a need to rethink the bases of a Lacan-queer theory alliance. To the ends of revisiting the rudiments of such an alliance and of sketching a Lacanian answer to the question of a queer sociality I explicate in this introduction, this article proceeds in four parts.

A first section discusses queer proposals pertaining to the ethical and political act, notably through the figure of Antigone in Lacan's ethical thinking. I discuss the two major interpretations of the play in queer theory, Judith Butler's and Lee Edelman's, and argue that both elude the distinctive ethical value Lacan sees in Antigone – namely, that of answering *avant la lettre* to the Kantian ethical revolution.

A second section argues that *Antigone*, insofar as it offers an image of the moral law as pure desire, is an allegory for the psychoanalytic itinerary and for the purification to which the analysand's desire must be subjected so the desire of the analyst, their work instrument par excellence, can come about. In this sense, though Antigone's act is effectively suicidal, her death may also amount to the preparatory steps for another sociality, a sociality that, for Lacan, takes the shape of the analytic institution.

That said, I argue in a third section, Lacan explicitly considered the sociality of the analytic group to be in need of questioning. As the commitment to ego-psychology betrayed in his time, analysts were too directly buying into a common-sense liberal humanism, emphasising adaptation to one's environment and a conflict-free ego, ideals against which Lacan will rise throughout his career. This spelled out the need for nothing short of a renewal of psychoanalytic sociality. In the context of Lacan's effort to bring about his own school, I contend with Gabriel Tupinambá, he aids us in directly posing the queer question par excellence, namely, that of the togetherness of those whose sole commonality is to dissolve social ties.

Finally, to the end of suggesting a preliminary answer to this latter question, I introduce with Mladen Dolar the figure of the smoker as a less immediately tragic counterpart to Lacan's great ambitions for Antigone – and one divorced from the institutional requirements of the psychoanalytic profession. Dolar's smoker acquires the dignity of a *dramatis persona* insofar as it is only upon accepting the immediate implication of death in desire that the smoker subjects themselves to the chains of addiction, but in those chains finds a spontaneous and contingent sociality premised solely on a commitment to that self-effacing desire.

Queer Antigone

The fate of Antigone has been much debated in recent years. The Sophoclean tragedy has been pivotal to a new set of reflections on ethics that allow us to sidestep the usual association of the ethical domain with either the empty formalism of the Kantian moral law or the traditional domain of the Greek ethics of the master. Such reflections take as a point of departure Lacan's exploration of the tragedy in *Seminar VII*. As Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe has noted, Lacan's reopening of the question of ethics in its relation to tragedy and the intractability of desire took no small amount of nerve in a context defined by the very foreclosure of an ethics irreducible to a set of rules of conduct. In his words, "the [20th] century had *forbidden* ethics" (1990), for instance, with the reduction of Marxism to a moral doctrine.

Lacan's *Seminar VII* is, in this sense, a remarkable tour de force which still exerts its great influence today. There are two major interpretations of the play in queer theory, Judith Butler's and Lee Edelman's, each enacting a different relationship to Lacan's work – itself subject to no immediate consensus, not only because it is complicated by Lacan's commentaries of *Hamlet*, in *Seminar VI* (2013: 279-422),

and of Paul Claudel's Coûfontaine trilogy in *Seminar VIII* (2015: 265-328), but also because Lacan's position on pure desire Antigone embodies in *Seminar VII* is problematised as early as *Seminar XI* (1973: 276).

The bare bones of *Antigone* are well known. Polynices, Antigone's brother, has been denied funeral rites due to having opposed Eteocles, his brother and then co-ruler of Thebes, in war. The brothers killed each other in the conflict, such that Creon, Jocasta's brother and uncle to the four of Oedipus' sibling-children, took power, and enforced the edict whereby the traitorous Polynices' body was to be left to rot in the open. Antigone opposes that edict, accepting her own death in the process. By Creon's decree, she is to be buried alive within a cave and left to starve.

Judith Butler's reading emphasises two aspects of Antigone's predicament: first, there is no way for her to directly express her love for her dead and disgraced brother through the categories of established kinship. Indeed, Antigone's relation to Ismene, her surviving sibling, is one of derision, bordering on contempt, suggesting that her relationship to her brother is irreducible to the attribute of siblinghood. We need only refer to very first dialogue of the play, where Antigone has clearly had enough of her sister's calls to leave well enough alone: "I am not trying to persuade you. No, / even if you were willing, I would not let you / join me in this now. Be what you are" (Sophocles, 2007: 5).

Antigone has no vocabulary, no words, that might bring her love for her brother, irreducible to, as it were, the brother's brotherness – it is his *being*, his singularity, that is at stake – into the domain of publicly sanctioned speech. For public speech is constrained by the interdictions that constitute it, most notably the incest taboo, and by which its ability to signify is always both enabled and limited; Antigone "is unable to capture the radical singularity of her brother through a term that, by definition, must be transposable and reproducible in order to signify at all" (Butler, 2002: 77).

Second, Butler argues that Antigone's language falters in such a way that she cannot offer a compelling justification for her deeds, but must resort to an alternate legality that can only be expressed in Creon's sovereign vocabulary (2002: 11). We find confirmation of this from Antigone herself, who justifies her intransigence before Creon by recourse to the law of the gods. Upon being asked whether she had knowingly defied the law laid down by Creon, she retorts: "Yes, for it was not Zeus who made that law, / nor Justice who dwells with the gods below and rules / in the world of men and women [...]" (Sophocles, 2007: 20).

If, then, Antigone's problem is insurmountable, all that is left for her is to offer herself as something of a tribute to the very alternate legality she cannot but articulate as an already accomplished rule, one that takes place beyond and despite the caprice of man – though, in so doing, she takes the place of a kind of spectre, a shadow not quite of that alternative legality but rather of the inexhaustibility of any determinate legality. In Butler's beautiful closing words, "[Antigone] acts, she

speaks, she becomes one for whom the speech act is a fatal crime, but this fatality exceeds her life and enters the discourse of intelligibility as its own promising fatality, the social form of its aberrant, unprecedented future" (Butler, 2002: 82).

Butler's rendition of the tragedy rehearses familiar themes from her work. Notably, Antigone's act is figured as the promise of a future in which kinship norms are not constrained in the same form as those that fail her. As Butler states elsewhere in her itinerary of establishing a politics of resignification, "for the purposes of a radical democratic transformation, we need to know that our fundamental categories can and must be expanded to become more inclusive and more responsive to the full range of cultural populations" (2004: 223).

Edelman's critique will of course seize upon Butler's necessary reference to the future of signification, a future in which normative environments enable rather than foreclose possibilities of living-otherwise. As he puts it with characteristic force, "small wonder, then, that [for Butler, Antigone's] subversive act [...] returns us [...] to familiar forms of a durable liberal humanism whose rallying cry has always been, and here remains, 'the future'" (2004: 105-6).

In Edelman's critique, Butler's Antigone fails to surpass the mores of an intelligibility that is irretrievably heteronormative, only ever so slightly enlarged in reach – for, as Berlant and Warner put it in explicating the classic definition of heteronormativity, "one of the most conspicuous differences is that [heteronormativity] has no parallel, unlike heterosexuality, which organizes homosexuality as its opposite [...] homosexuality can never have the invisible, tacit, society-founding rightness that heterosexuality has" (1998: 547). Put simply, in the absence of sexual revolution, heteronormativity is *the* principle of intelligibility and not *one* principle of intelligibility among others; it knows neither outside nor oppositional complement (Wiegman and Wilson, 2015: 13), therefore Butler's insistence on enlarging the field of the intelligible is an insistence on reworking heteronormativity rather than subverting it.

Building upon his proposal that queers not only refuse the future, but also come to occupy the place of its undoing as the figuration of, as it were, the end personified, Edelman proposes that Antigone admit of no such rescue fantasy:

> what if Antigone, along with all those doomed to ontological suspension on account of their unrecognizable and, in consequence, 'unlivable' loves, *declined* intelligibility, declined to bring herself, catachrestically, into the ambit of future meaning – or declined, more exactly, to cast off the meaning that clings to those social identities that intelligibility abjects (2004: 106)

Edelman, then, reproaches Butler for conforming exactly to the scripts of futurity, always premised on a heterosexualised view of the self-reproduction of the socius, rather than asserting Antigone's

paradoxical dignity as abjected, as an internal outside to the social order, the obstacle the prevents the totalisation of heteronormativity into a seamless whole.

While these views could easily be mapped onto the usual queer dichotomy of social utopianism/anti-social negativity (Caserio, 2006: 819), with Butler advocating for the future as an indispensable battle-ground in any politics, and Edelman refusing any such assurance, the queer framing fails to place Antigone in the context Lacan ascribes her: as answering to the Kantian ethical revolution in strictly psychoanalytic fashion.

Pure Desire

Mari Ruti's recent appraisal of the Butler-Edelman debate over *Antigone* shows us the internal limits of the queer framing. After having repeatedly noted that Butler's qualms with Lacan's argument stem from her need to dispossess the subject of any form of autonomy, Ruti advances the further claim about Edelman's (and Slavoj Žižek's (1989: 117 and 144)) take:

> The problem [...] is that Edelman fails to specify that Antigone does not commit her act "for nothing," that she sacrifices herself for the sake of a principle, and – most importantly for our purposes – for the sake of someone she loves [...] Antigone's act is antisocial but it is not antirelational; it opposes hegemonic forms of sociality – Creon's big Other – out of respect for a cherished relational tie (Ruti, 2017: 108)

While Ruti is certainly right to assert that Antigone's act ultimately gives way to some incarnation, some gesturing to futurity (i.e., the opposition to one hegemonic mode of sociality, arguably with a view to arriving at another one (Coffman, 2013: 56-7)), it appears to me that her contention is also directly opposed to what Lacan intends with the figure of Antigone. For one, psychoanalysis has consistently shown that the status of a "relational tie" is anything but straightforward – caught as it is between identification and desire (Freud, 1955: 105); reliant either on an overvaluation of the object or on a loss of respect for it (Freud, 1957: 185-6); always on the verge of degenerating into hatred (Lacan, 1999: 83), etc. More to the point, however, to contend that Antigone accomplishes her dreadful destiny for what Kant would call a pathological maxim – that is, for an empirical object such as the "law of the gods" or "the love for her brother", something that brings her some kind of pleasure or good – is also to abandon what ethical value her figure represents.

We should note here that Antigone, despite her talk of complying with heavenly law (De Kesel, 2009: 227-8), stands to gain strictly nothing from her defiance. She rebukes her only living sister; she makes a point of rejecting the sole thing she has going for her, her engagement to Creon's son Haemon and, through him, her access to the meagre goods of normative femininity. From the very first dialogue of the play, Antigone knows is already dead – yet she persists. She knows, then, that death itself makes a demand upon those who live beyond it: "We are dead for a long time, and to death's demands / there is no ending ever" (Sophocles, 2007: 5)

The interest of Antigone – at least from the standpoint of us moderns who no longer believe in God or gods – is thus not to exemplify the value of relational ties, for she does not have many and is willing to forgo what few she does have, but rather her unwavering march through the strictly unmotivated itinerary of desire, insofar as it is never her own. The point is precisely not that she is so autonomous as to be able to choose the bleak fate that is hers – already decided in advance, Lacan notes, in all Sophoclean tragedy (1992: 271) –, but that she embodies a desire that exceeds any image of either Good or Beauty; she is unburdened by either fear or pity. Autonomy here is subjecting oneself to one's own law, re-joining one's desiring nature as it has always been decided in advance. Antigone's motto could be something like: "if you can give a reason for wanting it, then you don't really want it – and there is no reason to go on if not to want".

To put this in terms more familiar to a queer theoretical itinerary, pure desire like Antigone's is unmotivated; it only surfaces when it can be seen to bear absolutely no relation, if not an incidentally negative one, to the mores of normativity, including those norms that tell us that it is people who are objects of love, that life is the supreme good, that certain objects are appropriate and others not, etc. In this regard, desire as such is anti-social. The issue is not the typical Freudian one that the aggressive instinct is ineradicable, however much we repress it, but that desire in itself does not aim at any empirical object that may be characterised as good, beautiful, or capable of procuring pleasure or joy. Desire as such is not conducive to a common image of the good; it voids any such image from within.

This is Lacan's point in including his reading of *Antigone* in the same Seminar where he interrogated the limits of modern ethics through Kant and Sade, to the privilege of the former. The issue with Kant, from this perspective, is perhaps not simply that his formalistic ethics allow virtually any proposition to be moral insofar as it can be stated in universal form (Zupančič, 2000: 92-3), up to and including compliance with an order to assist genocide, but rather that Kant does not go far enough, that he retains the figure of the Good, for instance, in the myriad little objects he shows God to be dangling before us as to entice us to be moral (the "voice of reason" (Kant, 2002: 51); "respect" (Kant, 2002: 101-2); "virtue" that is "pleasing to God" (Kant, 2009: 54), etc.)

In this sense, Kant's problem would be that he himself cannot follow through with the inhumanity of the moral law he discovers, but must subordinate it to an absolute Good that we approach at infinity but never quite reach, in exactly the same way Butler enjoins us to expand the field of the intelligible – a properly endless process, for that field, Butler herself has convinced us, is constituted by that which it disavows, and is therefore definitionally incomplete. For Butler, as for Kant, ethics is merely another name of infinite failure; try as we might, we will never reach the Good, nor will we reach full inclusion into the norm. In this regard, it might be said that both Butler and Kant subordinate the categorical imperative to the empirically, socially intelligible, and thereby reduce it to one pathological maxim amongst others.

Lacan differs radically from either thinker in this respect. As Žižek explains, "Lacan's interest rather resides in the paradoxical reversal by means of which desire itself [...] can no longer be grounded in any 'pathological' interests or motivations [...] so that 'following one's desire' overlaps with 'doing one's duty'" (1998: 13). This is why Lacan himself states that the moral law is not the superego, as we might expect from a prohibiting instance so named, but no less than the field of desire itself (1992: 316). It is also the meaning of the most famous ethical injunction of *Seminar VII*, that one can only be guilty of having given ground in relation to one's desire (implying, of course, that everyone who boasts of their social viability (Ruti, 2017: 152) is already guilty in advance, in strictly Freudian fashion (1961: 135)).

What is at stake in *Antigone* is thus no less than the limit of the field of desire, the place where desire shows itself to aim beyond any empirical interest we might take in objects of this world, as constituting its own law divorced from any social or empirical law. To decontextualise one of Butler's characterisations of the privilege of gender as a normative field, Lacan's point is that desire both requires and institutes its own law, rather than being a secondary effect of other normative fields, for instance, those of gender and sexuality (2004: 41). Desire insists both through and beyond normativity, and it is this insistence that Antigone comes to signify. She appears "as a pure and simple relationship of the human being to that of which he miraculously happens to be the bearer, namely, the signifying cut" (1992: 282). She becomes the guardian of the crime – what Lacan famously refers to elsewhere as the "killing of the thing" (2006: 262) – through which symbolisation, the always already past irruption of desire insofar as it insists within and beyond language and its normative strictures, is possible (1992: 283).

Ethics after Kant would thus not be about the future of an endlessly deferred alternate legality that limits and informs possible desires, as Butler might have it, nor about negotiating and resisting social dicta, as Ruti might, but rather about the possibility of acting, here and now, according to the final im/measure of *pure* desire (Copjec, 1996: xxvi), of complying with the law of desire abstracted from any norm but its own inexorable marching beyond its liveable limits.

In other words, there are acts that are ethical in the strict sense, that truly and ultimately comply with the law of desire, notable among which a voluntary death. In this regard, to say that Antigone's desire is unmotivated is to say that its only motive is desire itself, abstracted from all the objects that give it meaning and from any good they may bear, up to and including survival – Antigone "pushes to the limit the accomplishment [*l'accomplissement*] of *that which can be called pure desire* [*le désir pur*], the pure and simple desire of/for death as such. She incarnates this desire" (1992: 282, translation modified).

It is clear that this casts something of a shadow upon Antigone's status as a heroine, at least from a political standpoint. Reading Lacan's account of her act, one might even be struck by a sense that, as with Sade, "the book falls from one's hands" (1992: 201) – that it is shocking, off-putting, distasteful. That, however, is entirely the point; as Lacan goes on, "the work of art in [Sade] is an experiment

that through its action cuts the subject loose from his psychosocial moorings" (1992: 201). Lacan refers to himself as doing something of the same thing: "I asked you this year to enter into a mental experiment" (1992: 313). We ought not to forget, however, that Antigone is part of an ongoing effort of giving body to what psychoanalysis itself has brought into the world – the sense and purpose of Lacan's consideration of tragedy over *Seminars VI* (*Hamlet*), *VII* (*Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*) and *VIII* (the *Coûfontaine* line). Antigone realises pure desire, she shows it to be possible, and it is in this that she is of interest to Lacan the psychoanalyst. In this view, analysis allows us to reach the inhuman that conditions us, and that is its ethical calling.

The Analytic Institution

If Antigone makes present the place to which psychoanalysis can take us, then her story has a direct relation not solely to the pure desire of/for death, but also to something of a rebirth. In the final lessons of *Seminar VII*, Lacan claims that a true analysis is one that brings into being an analyst as its product. The analyst-to-be should be confronted to the human condition as such, namely, to the inextricable relation of desire to the living death that is ultimately its essence, and to the accompanying anguish of radical helplessness:

> At the end of a training analysis the subject should reach and should know the domain and the level of the experience of absolute disarray. It is a level at which anguish is already a protection, [...] Anguish develops by letting a danger appear, whereas there is no danger at the level of the final experience of *Hilflosigkeit* [helplessness] (1992: 304)

No wonder, then, that Lacan would, a year before his death, highlight that "the psychoanalyst abhors his act [*a horreur de son acte*]" (1980: 13). Freud had already compared in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1953: 262-5) the analytic itinerary to the unfolding of Sophocles' other familiar (and familial) tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*; the implication being, though Freud takes no note of it, that a complete psychoanalysis, one that produces an analyst, should lead one to gouge one's eyes out at the sight of the abyss of desire – and persist, like Antigone in her tomb, and like Oedipus at Colonus, in the living death of that darkness. What is at issue, then, is not merely the limit of pure desire, but also the means whereby its unbearableness can nevertheless be lived through. Antigone's destructive and suicidal example, far from solely signalling the infinite negativity Edelman insists upon only to re-join Sade in his lust for jouissance (Chiesa, 2007: 182), thus also clears the ground for another sociality. If we follow Lacan's itinerary, who was after all concerned with psychoanalysis in theory as well as in practice and history, this sociality is that of the analytic institution.

The question remains as to how Lacan can build up this sociality on the basis of such an example as Antigone's. As commentators have noted, there is an obvious issue with enacting Antigone as a model for collective action, namely that her ethical act does not unproblematically translate from an individual level, nor does it lend itself to a clear-cut association of political action and the respon-

sibility towards others it presupposes (Stavrakakis, 2007: 109-147). It would thus be no coincidence that Lacan backs away most explicitly from his position on pure desire precisely in the first Seminar after he was "excommunicated" from the International Psychoanalytic Association, finding himself in the destitute position of having no choice but to found his own school (1973: 1-17). *Seminar XI* marks the moment Lacan was called upon to actively bring something into the world, as it were, out of nothing, to sublimate his name into a new psychoanalysis rather than retaining the relatively comfortable assurance of his marginality within the psychoanalytic movement.

In the closing lines of *Seminar XI*, we are told that "the analyst's desire is not a pure desire. It is a desire to obtain absolute difference, a desire which intervenes when, confronted with the primary signifier, the subject is, for the first time, in a position to subject himself to it" (1973: 276). Lacan recognises here that a pure desire like Antigone's is unsustainable, that it demands incessantly, irresistibly, to resolve itself in its ultimate accomplishment: death. A psychoanalyst, conversely, has to bear his living death a little longer, just enough to contribute to the Freudian cause. So, in this reading, the desire of the analyst retreats from Antigone's inhumanity, it becomes impure because it now purports to allow the analysand to follow them in lodging themselves under another signifier, namely, that of the Freudian cause.

Gabriel Tupinambá indeed argues that this is the most convincing manner of periodising Lacan's work: "only the break that distinguishes a before and an after the founding of Lacan's own School, in 1964, could possibly refer to institutional, conceptual, and clinical changes simultaneously" (2015: 164). In this view, the true test of Lacanian ethics is its passing over into practice, for Lacan claims directly that the ethics of psychoanalysis *is* the praxis of psychoanalysis (2001: 232). Let us take a step back, however, and refer to *Seminar VIII,* which immediately follows the *Ethics*. In his discussion of one of the closing lessons of this Seminar, Tupinambá argues that Lacan was already aware that the main issue facing the psychoanalytic establishment was its constitution along the lines Freud showed to be integral to group formation, that is, the joint assumption of an ego-ideal, a common norm, according to which a collectivity comes to constitute itself around a central identification to the leader (1955: 116). In this context, Tupinambá claims, Lacan disengages a fundamental question for his own institutional practice: "How to identify and group together the set of those whose only shared property is to dissolve group identifications?" (2015: 168).

If we refer to the extended passage from *Seminar VIII* Tupinambá comments, we might get some further clarification of what it is Lacan intends here, and of *Antigone*'s role in his subsequent thinking:

> I am attempting to provide an analysis, in the strict sense of the term, of the analytic community insofar as it is a mass organized by the analytic ego-ideal, such as it has in fact developed in the form of a certain number of mirages. First among these mirages is that of the "strong ego" that has been so often pointed to wrongly in places where people think they see it.

> [...] we should interpellate the analytic community as such, allowing each of us to take a look at it, especially as regards what comes to alter the purity of the analyst's position in relation to his analysand, for whom he serves as a respondent (2015: 335)

Lacan's efforts at this time, then, tended in the direction of undoing the analytic mass, insofar as it fell collectively prey to an analytic ego-ideal premised on a refusal of Freud's message, rather than on its realisation. The link to Antigone's unwavering desire is confirmed in the "purity" Lacan ascribes to the relation of the psychoanalyst to their analysand – a purity assured exactly by the exceptionality of the analyst's desire, one they disavow in subscribing to ego-psychology and retaining their fidelity to the analytic group as an ego-ideal. Lacan's reading of Antigone thus lays down the theoretical basis upon which such an itinerary may be sustained: one has to be confronted to a pure desire if one is to let go of any assurance that has the effect of postponing one's encounter with the groundlessness of desire. Only in acceding to such a position can one come to wield the analyst's desire as a tool, a means whereby to allow an analysand to reach that same experience in turn. So, the dissolution of the analytic group as it then stood was necessary for the reworking of psychoanalysis, in much the same way as dismantling and clearing the rubble of an analysand's identifications is crucial to finding the desire that determines them.

That Lacan backed away from the strict requirement that the analyst's desire be pure in *Seminar XI* does not therefore discount Antigone's immediate value. On this point, Lacan himself tells us to base our readings of Freud's second topography on the political context in which he was writing, namely, that of bringing the psychoanalytic institution into being – perhaps inviting us to do the same to him (2015: 330). This might explain why Lacan returns to Freud's schema from *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* (1955: 116) in the closing lesson of *Seminar XI* precisely in order to suggest that analysis allows us to definitively separate the ego ideal – the norm from which the subject purports to regard itself as loveable – and the gaze as *objet a*, cause of desire insofar as it is desire of/for desire, with a view to desiring beyond identification, rather than on the basis of it (1973: 273).

If we accept this stance, however, we have also to admit that Lacan failed. We learn of this failure from Lacan himself, of course, through the dissolution of his school in 1980. The *Lettre de Dissolution* begins in sombre tone: "I speak without the least hope – notably, of making myself heard/understood [*entendre*]" (2001: 317). Lacan had failed to prevent the materialisation of a "group effect" [*effet de groupe*], rather than the "effect of discourse one expects from [the Freudian] experience" (2001: 318), and it is for this reason that the dis/solution imposes itself. So, Lacan's school had become unsustainable because it spurred on identification with the master rather than the desire to work on behalf of the Freudian cause.

This itinerary has obvious implications for queer theory. It should not escape us that the question Lacan poses is no less than the same one we have been elaborating upon, if implicitly, over the past 30 years. Likewise, it is rather hard not to see a similar problem to Lacan's facing queer theory, insofar

as queer theory's critical edge often appears to have something of a tenuous relation not only to the reality of people's lives and needs, as some critics have long claimed uninterestingly but not without some pertinence (1996: 1), but also to the itineraries of a collective political mobilisation that succeeds in eschewing the established categories of identity politics without thereby becoming desensitised to them.

Put simply, "queer" runs the perpetual risk of becoming one identity among others, like "Lacanian" came to accrue to a definite subset of psychoanalysts lodged under a common master. If the first contention – that queer theory is not concerned with people's lives and needs – precludes rather than enables ethics, reducing desire to need in strictly anti-psychoanalytic fashion, the second – that a sociality premised on desire without identity is an ethical-political imperative – is indeed almost directly posed by Lacan, though in the terms proper to his psychoanalytic vocation. How, then, do we go about operationalising Lacan's insights in the queer field, if he himself failed to assure them?

The Smoking Communism

There would be two ways to go about a discussion of such a problem. One would insist on more theory and suggest that the boundaries between theory and practice are porous and diffuse, and that under certain conditions theory itself is practice, like no practice goes without generating some degree of systematisation which may be captured by theory, etc. In this regard, to resolve the theoretical problem of the togetherness of those whose only shared attribute is a continuous dissolution of sociality would entail the possibility that such a sociality might materialise. This is perfectly right, though not as easy as it seems: we might be reminded of Bersani's blurb to Edelman's *No Future*, which states something along the lines of "this is all well and good, but I'm not sure how I'd survive my agreement to it". Another way would be to offer a practical example of a sociality that is both premised on desire and inimical to identity. I want to close this article by frustrating the expectations that might arise from either of these paths – not in a heroically critical sense that I propose a better path, but in the sense that I will fail in regard to either – and propose the figure of the smoker, elaborated upon by Mladen Dolar, as one instance where the unconditioned of desire, the retreat from identity, and a contingent sociality briefly meet. Dolar writes:

> Smokers, like proletarians, have no country, but they instantly create liberated territories wherever they appear. Smoking always represented liberty, a fickle freedom against the chains of survival, it is an anti-survivalist stance. It states: I am free in chains, while being chained to this habit that I can't give up, but these chains allow taking a bit of distance to the overwhelming other ones and I am willing to pay the price (2013)

Smoking provides a counterintuitively queerer-than-queer image: after all, in its most evocative figures of the anally penetrated man (Bersani, 2010: 3-30), the sinthommosexual (Edelman, 2004: 33-65), the drag performer (Butler, 1999: 163-179), *et al.*, queer theory's attempts to present us the agents

and possibilities of emancipation or resistance have been remarkably heavy-handed in their identity investments, most notably in terms of the very gender and sexuality we are most often called upon to oppose. The smoker, in contrast, is in principle genderless, sexless, faceless, and ultimately self-less. One might go so far as to claim, paraphrasing Jodi Dean's *Comrade*, that anyone but not everyone can be a smoker (2019: 67); like anyone but not everyone can be an analyst.

Each time smokers are collectively kicked out of the harmonious domain of the indoors – I am reminded of the classic queer example of Christmas, a time when Sedgwick claims everything seems to align so beautifully in the most heteronormative of senses (1994: 5) – we create a common, if foggy, territory. Our sociality is as contingent as our continued survival. Dolar himself is aware of the theoretical risks that accrue to such an image, not least of which its almost self-evident banality: "there is of course the danger of romanticizing the fleeting moment and extol its charms, the moment when everything seems momentarily possible, although through a smoke-screen" (2013). Neverthe-less, Dolar takes the risk:

> In the first step, with the magic power of cigarette smoke "everything solid melts into thin air", following Marx's (another smoker's) line from the *Manifesto*, all social relations are momentarily a bit dislocated and shaken, and then in the second step the specter of communism that emerged in the process melts into thin air in its turn (2013)

Following this lead, my own "moment of fancy" (2013) will be to associate the dramatic figure of Antigone with the everyday one of the smoker's vanishing communism. The smoker literally buys into their own death, and only in so doing acquires a degree of temporary, contingent freedom from the symbolic mandates they carry. In those moments smokers are kicked out of family home, the pub, or anywhere with a roof, really, we are dejected, abjected, destitute; yet that destitution clamours for its own brand of dignity. The social death of smoking is sometimes simultaneously the springing up of another sociality, one that has a single condition for belonging: that one indulge in or tolerate the smoke beyond the smokescreens that inevitably weave the thread of normative sociality.

Taken from another angle, the smoker emancipates themselves from the logic of usefulness – the assignment of a place and hierarchy in the social world, the burden of an identity they cannot shed but must work to dignify, the "service of the goods" Lacan staunchly opposes to desire (1992: 216) – precisely by insisting that their early grave will nevertheless be one of their own making, not unlike Antigone's insistence on fulfilling the demands proper to her living death. Smoking makes present the unconditioned force of desire beyond all normalisation, beyond the labour of tending to the chains that bind us to normativity, and at the same time allows for a sociality, however fleeting, premised on that very anti-social desire.

The image of smokers' collective ostracism is an interesting starting point for further consideration on the import of Lacan's ethical and institutional questions to queer inquiry. Even more strikingly, the direct association Dolar makes between smoking and communism should call attention to how Lacan eventually came to characterise Marx's oeuvre not merely as science, but also as gospel:

> It does not seem to me that Marxism can pass as a worldview [*conception du monde*] [...] It is something else, something I will call a gospel. It is the annunciation that history enacts another dimension of discourse, and opens up the possibility of completely subverting the function of discourse as such, and, properly speaking, of philosophical discourse, insofar as a worldview rests upon it (1999: 42)

Is queer theory at its strongest not also something of an annunciation, a gospel? The opening up of the possibility of subverting the function of sociality as such, insofar as a heteronormative worldview rests upon it, strikes me as one of the best possible characterisations of our joint project, though it also paradoxically shows it to be not entirely unlike, say, the Christian variant of annunciation, which spells out the true religion's origin in a radical subversion of the order of sexed reproduction. Read in this light, it is perhaps the case that a queer sociality is yet possible in a future not endlessly deferred, but only a drag away.

Conclusion

In this article, I have traced an itinerary running from the take-up of Lacan's ethical experiment in *Seminar VII* by queer theorists, passing through his and Freud's efforts of codifying the psycho-analytic institution and its praxis, finally to arrive at the counter-intuitively queer figure of the smoker. I have contended that queer theory has not given Lacan's *Ethics* its full import, which demands its placement in the ethical tradition of the West brought to its highest fruition in Kant. I have further contended, however, that to do so does not quite offer a solution to our problems, for, as contemporary debate on the political import of *Antigone* shows, her ethical act does not immediately translate into a sustainable politics.

Lacan himself was faced with this problem in his systematisation of the psychoanalytic institution, and faltered before it, though he did not shy away from claiming he was to persevere. Unfortunately, he would die before such perseverance came to fruition, though he has undoubtedly been immortalised as a signifier in much the same way as his own take-up of *Antigone* has helped revive the immortality of her name. His efforts nevertheless allow us to pose the queer question par excellence, that of the sociality of those who have nothing in common but the dissolution of group ties. Finally, responding to the dual, unanswerable demands of a theory that allows us to congregate those who have nothing in common under the banner of their singular desires, I have offered the figure of the smoker, as elaborated upon by Mladen Dolar, as a preliminary queer effort of mitigating the gap between Lacan's ethical brilliance and his admitted political failure.

The smoker's insistence on enjoying that which slowly chips away at their life places them at an internal distance to a normative sociality that asserts their "needs" against their desire. To step away from such needs – health, cleanliness, propriety, and whatever else smoking has been said to stand against – is also to step towards a possibility of sustaining a being-with that refuses any phantasmatic assurance. In this, our ethical task, if we queers are to represent anything of ethical interest in regard to the history of philosophical reflection, is to sustain queerness not in its empirical consistency as an interest group in a democratic-representative-capitalist polis, but in its annunciatory dimension – its unexpected springing up much like the ad hoc congregation of smokers in collective exile from the indoors.

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