Kinship Trouble: *Antigone's Claim* and the Politics of Heteronormativity

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Heteronormativity has recently emerged as a fully shaped and well theorized concept in numerous fields, and it proves central to sexual politics and the politics of sexuality. In *Antigone's Claim* (2000), Judith Butler explores the heteronormativity of kinship as structured by the state, and she links this language of kinship to the incest taboo. This article focuses on Butler's politicization of kinship structures in her reading of the figure of Antigone. Because she sees the incest taboo as a social force that maintains heteronormativity by producing a particular configuration of the family, Butler advances the critique of heteronormativity. She does this through both her introduction and explication of the concept of (un)intelligibility and her explicit attention to the "incest born" person. The unintelligibility of the incest-born demands a thoroughgoing reconsideration of the liberal framework of tolerance: The unintelligible cannot be tolerated because they have not even been granted access to the category of the human. By asking us to reconsider kinship outside the defining and dominant terms of heteronormativity and the incest taboo,

Butler promotes a distinct conception of politics. She thereby makes a noteworthy contribution to the political project of undoing gender hierarchy.

> "In short, feminism must call for a revolution in kinship."
> Rubin 1975, 199

*H*eteronormativity has recently emerged as a fully shaped and well theorized concept in fields from gender studies to literature to film theory (Chambers 2003a; Dennis 2003; de Lauretis 1987; Halley 1993; Halperin 1995; hooks 1982; Kaplan 1997; Rich 1980; Sedgwick 1991; Warner 1993, 1999; Watney 1996; Wittig 1992). While still little referenced in political science, this concept proves central to sexual politics and the politics of sexuality (Babst 2002; Blasius 2001; Butler 1999; Carver and Mottier 1998; Currah 2001; Josephson 2005; Pateman 1988; Phelan 2001; Segura et al. 2005; Shanley 2004). "Heteronormativity" denotes the normative power of heterosexuality in both society and politics. Following the literal invention of "heterosexuality" — a term introduced in the nineteenth century, and only after the coining of homosexuality — social norms, political practices, and legal structures all developed to produce a practical truth that at the time was merely presumed (Katz 1995). This "truth" is the idea that heterosexuality is the "normal" or "natural" way through which human physical and social experience must be lived. Heteronormativity constructs not only the natural domain of heterosexual practices and relations but also the attendant realm of denigrated or despised sexualities, relationship forms, and identities — particularly homosexuality and other putative threats to "the family" (Butler 1993; Evans 1993; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Foucault 1978).

Thus, heteronormativity could be taken as a political concept that draws attention to those deviant, abjected, or marginalized individuals who are somehow stigmatized or discriminated against by the dominant sexual norm. However, to read heteronormativity in this way would be to reduce it to a problem soluble by liberal tolerance. It would, on this reading, add little if anything to a rich tradition and a vibrant literature in political thought that calls on us to include the excluded, to defend the rights of the marginalized, to uphold the human dignity of those rendered abject (e.g., Benhabib 2002; Mendus 1988, 1989; Mendus and Edwards 1987; Mendus and Horton 1985; Rawls 1971; Young 1990, 2002). In this article, we use the recent writings of Judith Butler to mobilize the concept of heteronormativity in the service of a quite distinct set of ends.

In turning to the question of kinship in *Antigone*, Butler rethinks the political[1] by challenging the so-called foundations of kinship as proposed by certain psychoanalytic arguments. She moves beyond universalizing accounts in order to make possible a more open and culturally variable understanding of kinship. We argue here that Butler's "troubling" of kinship structures takes up the challenge proposed 30 years ago by Gayle Rubin in her classic essay "The Traffic in Women." Rubin made the powerful claim that the roots of gender hierarchy lie in the structures of kinship and that for this reason, only a revolution in kinship would do for those who seek to eliminate that hierarchy: "[T]he oppression of women is deep; equal pay, equal work, and all the female politicians in the world will not extirpate the roots of sexism" (Rubin 1975, 198). By analyzing the incest taboo as a force that maintains heteronormativity by producing a particular configuration of the family, Butler's recent work makes an important contribution to the politics of gender. Her analysis of the "unintelligibility" of the incest-born suggests a thoroughgoing reconsideration of the liberal concept of tolerance (contra Edelman 2004, 103; cf. Brown 2006). The concept of unintelligibility, as we develop it here, reveals the political blind spots of tolerance. We argue that unintelligibility gestures toward that sphere of existence of the non- or inhuman; precisely because liberalism tries to fix and distribute all identities, particularly marginalized identities, it cannot grasp this "other." The unintelligible cannot be tolerated, for they have not been granted access to the category of the human. By asking us to reconsider kinship outside the defining and dominant terms of both heteronormativity and the incest taboo, Butler offers us a powerful critique of contemporary kinship structures. She thereby makes a noteworthy contribution to the political project of undoing gender hierarchy.

TROUBLING KINSHIP WITH ANTIGONE

Antigone, of course, has generated extensive commentary since the time of Aristotle, and the figure of Antigone has become a classic of modern

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1. Butler consistently engages in what she names, but does not elucidate, "fugitive theory." We take this to be a "practice of theory" that rejects any rigid separation of theory from practice (see Chambers 2006, 23). Butler rethinks the political by carefully considering the way in which universal categories are derived from political contestation. This makes her politics untimely (i.e., open to future transformation) and her theory subversive, and it means that the two can never be separated. For pressing us to emphasize these crucial points we thank an anonymous reviewer for *Politics & Gender*.

political theory (Burns 2002; Tralau 2005; Tyrrell and Bennett 1998; cf. Steiner 1984). While no theorist can afford to be cavalier in reading things into and out of any given textual object of engagement, it is not our purpose here to locate Butler's work within that history of commentary, or to criticize her construal of the characters and situations. Butler is no classicist; she says as much herself, and we take her at her word (Butler 2000a, 2; see Elden 2005, par. 2). *Antigone's Claim* (2000), then, is not really about the classical tragedy. Butler's book centers instead on the structures of kinship and their imbrication with political power. Critics of Butler who take her to be reading *Antigone* inauthentically are therefore probably right, so far as their argument goes, but their challenges to Butler also miss her broader point concerning heteronormativity and intelligibility in relation to kinship, and therefore underestimate the most important implications of her work (see Markell 2003; Seery 2004; Elden 2005).

Like Rubin before her, Butler challenges putatively universal structures of kinship through her analysis of the incest taboo. This "law," as everyone knows, decrees as a matter of logical consistency and linguistic intelligibility that son and husband, father and grandfather, brother and father, for example, cannot be the same person. The incest taboo therefore dictates a fixed and constrained family structure, in which every member can be distinctly sorted into nonoverlapping categories. And yet, as we will discuss in our penultimate section, both historical and modern kinship structures have proved highly variable. Indeed, the taboo against incest has meant strikingly different things at different times and places: often prohibiting but sometimes allowing or indeed requiring opposite-sex marital relations between particular people *identified as family members* through the kinship structure. This is a crucial point established by Rubin, but often overlooked in later analyses: The *function* of the incest taboo is not to prohibit incest. Rubin puts it this way: "[S]ince the existence of the incest taboo is universal, but the content of their prohibitions variable, they cannot be explained as having the aim of preventing the occurrence of genetically close matings" (Rubin 1975, 173).

This variability in kinship structures is in significant tension with the supposed universality of the incest taboo. It thereby provides the context from which we extract and articulate Butler's critique of heteronormativity. This tension is one reason why Butler is interested in Antigone *not* simply as a proto-feminist rebel who stands against the political rule of men, nor perforce as a metaphorical challenge

to the heterosexuality through which female gender subordination is constructed. Butler's Antigone, like many Antigones before, performs an antiauthoritarian intervention by repeating her acts of defiance and adhering to her own interpretation of her duties and rights. But Butler goes further: She links this reading to a critique of the limits of "representation and representability" *in language itself*, given Antigone's incestuous (non)position in the heteronormative kinship structure. Put simply, Antigone, like any incest-born person, confounds the language of kinship. Butler thus moves the focus on Antigone from her dramatic role as a woman (who acts) to a view of her as an *incest-born person* and therefore as both a figure of abjection and a representation of the unrepresentable — the unintelligible (Butler 2000a, 1–2).

Incest proves, obviously, to be an inescapable feature of the tale of Oedipus, of which Sophocles' play presents an episode (Sophocles 1967). The novelty of Butler's reading lies in her emphasis on an astonishingly neglected facet: Antigone is both the child of an incestuous relationship and a sister quite possibly in love with her brother. Commentators have been centrally concerned with Antigone's public actions *as a woman*, but this has blinded them and their readers to *all* the incest at the heart of the story (see Seery 2004, for a contrary view). Antigone and her three siblings — and indeed her entire family as it devolves from the tragedy of Oedipus — represent a figural challenge to intelligible kinship. Even in fictional terms, they *are* that which cannot be, the *unintelligible*. While commentators may mention the incest, and link it to the general and inevitable "family" tragedy, in Butler's view they have missed the significance of the incest taboo in its power to order the language of kinship into a heterosexual matrix of logical exclusions.

That is, relationships within the heteronormative structure of kinship only make sense within stated terms of consanguinity, which *proscribe* sexual activity between "close" relations (as variously defined), and thus also proscribe (via a presumed necessary link with reproduction) the possibility of any offspring. Such offspring would be living embodiments of linguistic disorder. They are, therefore, an uncategorizable impossibility. In a mundane sense, the incest taboo thus *prescribes* exogamous marriage outside the immediate "blood-related" family (according to varying rules of consanguinity) in order to create the orderly and intelligible family as a set of necessary and consistent kinship relations and practices. With that order and intelligibility come the patterns of responsibility and care, permitted rules of inheritance and prescribed rules of intestacy, and innumerable other informal and state-sponsored categorizations

of right, privilege, and obligation (Butler 2000a, 71–72; Josephson 2005; Stevens 1999).

Within this order, as Butler shows, there are no categories for the incest-born. Or worse, there are too many categories, because they fit into more than one. In other words, like language itself, the incest-born always prove to be in excess of the categories of kinship (cf. Butler 1997a). In the case of Antigone, Butler states this logical and linguistic fact succinctly: "Antigone's father is her brother, since they both share a mother in Jocasta, and her brothers are her nephews, sons of her brother-father Oedipus" (Butler 2000a, 57). "Antigone," Butler says, "is one for whom symbolic positions have become incoherent, confounding as she does brother and father, emerging as she does not as a mother but . . . in the place of the mother" (2000a, 22).

Butler then puts this very *confounding* to work, by explicating the relationship between kinship structures (which presume the incest taboo as a necessary truth that mirrors nature and orders language) and heteronormativity (which is defined and enforced both through legally sanctioned institutions and through the lived norms of daily practices). We give this phenomenon of "confounding" the name that Butler casually suggests: "kinship trouble." We define it as a theoretico-political practice of challenging current structures of kinship so as to open a space of intelligibility for both the incest-born and for those "others" who are also subject to the defining and denigrating power of heteronormativity.[2]

HETERONORMATIVITY AND THE UNINTELLIGIBLE

The language of "intelligibility" and explicit references to the category of "the unintelligible" only emerge in Butler's later writings — particularly in *Precarious Life* and *Undoing Gender* (Butler 2000b, 2004a, 2004b; Butler, Laclau, and Zizek 2000). Here, we offer an exegesis of this concept in the context of Butler's confounding of kinship structures, but it seems significant to note at the outset that the idea of unintelligibility can be traced back to a number of earlier ideas and arguments in Butler's work. It resonates in important ways with numerous previous

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2. In trying to make kinship trouble, our argument here takes a path distinct from, but complementary to, other recent work on Butler's political theory. Many of her critics have been cynical or merely dismissive about her writings (Nussbaum 1999; cf. Benhabib 1995). For this reason, we engage instead with those who argue that Butler's work has political significance yet has been underdeveloped as a contribution to political theory (Lloyd 1999, 2005; Stone 2005; cf. Salih 2002).

concepts: "interpellation," as Butler develops it from Louis Althusser, in *Psychic Life of Power* (1997b); the "constitutive outside," which Butler reworks, drawing from Jacques Derrida in *Bodies That Matter* (1993); and "abjection" as Butler reconfigures it from Julia Kristeva both in *Bodies* and in *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 1999). Ultimately, the genealogy of Butler's thinking of unintelligibility must be traced back, in general, to her crucial engagement with the Hegelian philosophy of reflection and, in particular, to the Hegelian theory of recognition. This is not the space to engage with Butler's interpretation of Hegel but, to put the point succinctly, we can say that Butler reads "recognition" in Hegel not as a status that one pregiven subject would bestow on another (Butler 1987a; see Hutchings 2003). Instead, "recognition" names a reflective process in which *one comes to be only through being recognized*. This means that neither subjectivity nor human existence can be taken for granted in advance; the process of recognition (not contained or controlled by any single subject) makes human being possible.

With this in mind, we turn now to elaborate Butler's conception of unintelligibility. We argue that one of the strengths of *Antigone's Claim* is her evocation of Antigone not only as a metaphor for (un)intelligibility but also as a character we already feel we know — that is, as a potential real person with a real dilemma. This makes *Antigone's Claim* a crucial site for grasping Butler's work on intelligibility, since we have, on the one hand, a greater chance of *relating* to the concept (through a story that most readers already know) and, on the other, a greater risk of *reducing* that concept to something else entirely (namely, the tolerance of an already existent subject).

The stakes of this reading can be clarified by making a few distinctions. First, the unintelligible is not the marginalized or the abjected. Intelligibility is not the same as recognition understood in the sense of Charles Taylor's "politics of recognition," since in Taylor's multicultural politics, recognition requires a prior visibility that is ruled off-limits for the unintelligible (Taylor 1992). That is why the discourse of intelligibility is not the same as a discourse of oppression, and why the political response to the problem of unintelligibility cannot be the same as a response to oppression or discrimination. Butler effects a move from a multicultural politics of recognition to what Patchen Markell calls the politics of acknowledgment, which "requires … that no one be reduced to any characterization of his or her identity for the sake of someone else's achievement of a sense of sovereignty or invulnerability" (Markell 2003). Butler writes:

> To be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you
> are there as a visible and oppressed other for the master subject … *To be
> oppressed you must first become intelligible*. To find that you are
> fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and
> language find you to be an impossibility) is to find that you have not yet
> achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always
> *as if you were* human, but with the sense that you are not. (Butler 2004b,
> 30; first emphasis ours, second emphasis Butler's.)

To be oppressed you must *first become intelligible*. Thus, the unintelligible
are not merely the oppressed, the victimized, or the marginalized. The
unintelligible are those "others" who are made invisible by the norm. To
be rendered unintelligible, says Butler, is to be barred "access to the
human." Thus, by definition, the "unintelligible" cannot exist as "human."
But this is no mere definitional stipulation. To say that the unintelligible
cannot exist as human is to suggest that the category of the human is not a
given, but rather an achievement or production. And to assert that one
only exists if one is intelligible is also to contend that human existence
cannot be presumed, since our very existence depends upon norms that
precede, produce, and constrain us. As we will discuss further below, for
Butler, a "livable life" may be impossible without intelligibility.

This means that the power of intelligibility, that is, the normalization of
visible subjects, operates with a stealthy silence. That is, normalization does
not just categorize human subjects; it produces the conditions of possibility
for the "human" in the first place. Therefore, the power of normalization
cannot only marginalize or oppress; it can render one unintelligible.
This makes unintelligibility an unruly and paradoxical concept. If to be
rendered unintelligible is to be made invisible, unrecognizable as
human, then we will only "see" the unintelligible after they have
become intelligible. Every time we try to offer an example of the
unintelligible (e.g., in the form of the incest-born, the transgendered, or
all gays and lesbians in relation to heteronormativity),[3] then we have
already, by way of the example itself, rendered them intelligible.

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3. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's pathbreaking 1991 work on "the closet," can clarify our point here that *in
relation to heteronormativity*, all gays and lesbians are rendered unintelligible. The closet is not a
protected space that shields one's sexual identity, nor is it a relic of ignorance and deception that
"out" gays merely leave behind. Building on Sedgwick's work, David Halperin explains as follows:
"[T]he closet is an impossibly contradictory place: you can't be in it, and you can't be out of it"
(1995, 34). You cannot be *in* the closet because others may always suspect you are gay. And
heteronormativity makes it impossible to be *out* of the closet because many people will continue to
assume you are straight (see Chambers 2003a). The closet is a liminal realm of unintelligibility
because the closet is *uninhabitable*. Heteronormativity produces the closet and therefore creates, for
gays and lesbians, this unavoidable liminal place.

Nonetheless, this paradoxical logic does not prove that there is no unintelligible; it merely demonstrates that we have no immediate access to the unintelligible until we have attempted to make them visible.

For precisely this reason, Butler's argument does not center itself on "the abject" as a category of identity, already there and awaiting help or emancipation (and identified under labels such as "victimized" or "oppressed" or "discriminated against"). Butler's is not simply an impassioned plea to help the helpless. Instead, Butler designs her argument and structures her account of norms so as to reveal the very existence of "the unintelligible" (always for lack of a better term) *as unintelligible*; this revelation occurs by exposing the workings of intelligibility as a normative force. Unintelligibility prevents one from even appearing within the political realm as a human being, a being with desires, wants, or needs.

The concept has clear resonances with Jacques Rancière's description of politics as only occurring after those who are not supposed to "count" within the political order do appear and demand to be counted. Rancière also stresses a point that proves crucial to understanding Butler's notion of the unintelligible. For Rancière, "parties do not exist prior to the declaration of wrong" (1999, 39). This means, in Butler's language, that the unintelligible can only be brought to light as a category of human subjects *after* they have been rendered intelligible. Usually such "rendering intelligible" occurs through a struggle for recognition, but it may also result from an analysis that exposes or challenges precisely those norms through which unintelligibility comes about in the first place. "The people" or "the workers" cannot be taken for granted as a category of human beings that make political claims; "the people" comes into existence *by way of* those claims. Butler's unintelligibility is like Rancière's "declaring a wrong" in that it may make the unintelligible intelligible. Yet, having been *made* intelligible, we cannot presume that they already *were* intelligible at all times.

To be rendered unintelligible, to be forced, as Butler says in the previous quotation, to speak only "as if" you were human, is to render one's life unlivable. She introduces the notion of "a livable life" on the very first page of *Undoing Gender*, when she argues that norms of gender can "undermine the capacity" for a livable life. In this vein, Butler redescribes the task of the movements of "The New Gender Politics" as follows: "to distinguish … among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself" (2004b, 8).

To pull together these two strands of Butler's argument, we can say that the unintelligible are those for whom the norm makes life unlivable.

Butler insists, counterintuitively perhaps, that a "livable life" cannot be presumed from the outset. Here we see a different way of asserting the point about unintelligibility, since the concept of unintelligibility counters our intuitive notion that "everyone" counts as a human and is recognizable as such. Butler writes that "if the answer to the question, is life possible, is yes, that is surely something significant. It cannot, however, be taken for granted as the answer" (2004b, 29). It might be the case that, for some, life is not livable.

It is tempting nonetheless to read *Antigone's Claim* as a passionate defense of the individual, as a critical attack on the linguistic apparatuses that sustain the state-sponsored legislation and informal social rules that make some lives unlivable by dictating abjection and victimhood (as exemplified in Antigone's fate). This makes the text into a moving political case for a more *inclusive* social and legal approach to human relationships, most particularly self-chosen ones of friendship, commitment, and trust — including, but not limited to, sexual relationships polymorphously conceived.

No doubt, Butler does mean to suggest much of that. But to read her argument in this manner would be to limit its political impact in profound ways, and it would be to overlook the depth and breadth of the power of heteronormativity. Inclusion cannot solve the problem of unintelligibility, since (again, by definition) the unintelligible cannot be included given that *they do not even exist* as human. Unintelligibility creates political problems that go well beyond the bounds of legislation or public policy. The concept of unintelligibility proves powerful because it reveals the constitutive difficulty of "normative violence": This is a violence done not merely *to* subjects but *at* the level of subjectivity. If there is no subject position in which one may appear, then one cannot inhabit the human.[4]

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4. We use the Foucauldian language of "subject position" here only as a way of sharpening the point. We do not wish to imply that "the human" can be reduced to or exhausted by a distributed set of subject positions. The human, as Butler would certainly emphasize, "exceeds its boundary in the very effort to establish" both the category of the human and its boundary. And, of course, no subject fully inhabits the human, since "life" relates the very category of the human to that of the nonhuman (Butler 2004b, 12). Our point is that *in order to inhabit the human*, one must have a space from which to speak *as human*. The Foucauldian term "subject positions" conveys this notion nicely (and, of course, Foucault himself would have strenuously resisted the reduction of his notion of subject position to a structuralist version that takes subject positions to be rigidly allocated and productive of a closed social totality).

We develop Butler's concept of unintelligibility to make it clear that if one wishes to foster, not limit, livable lives, then only a significant restructuring of kinship will do. Rubin succinctly calls this a *revolution* in kinship, while Shane Phelan elaborates the point: "[T]he imbrication of kinship and citizenship, and the heterosexual formulation of kinship that defines gays and lesbians (as well as unmarried adults) as either outside kin networks or unable to form new ones . . . suggests that kinship will have to be rethought" (Phelan 2001, 157). To use Butler's language, kinship must be *confounded*, must be profoundly *troubled* at its very core if we are to create conditions in which the unintelligible can emerge into the realm of intelligible humanity. That is why Butler seeks the critical subversion of heteronormativity (see Chambers 2007), a rupturing of the heterosexual matrix that creates new spaces for newly intelligible, livable lives. In turn, as Michael Warner suggested many years ago, this sort of kinship trouble also requires the reversal of almost all social theory *methodologically*, where the strategy until very recently has been to ground norms in nature (whether materially or psychologically), one way or another, and thus to construct supposed truths or limits to which human society must conform, and according to which individuals must be disciplined (Foucault 1978; Warner 1993). This conclusion proves radical precisely because it refuses to shelter *any* realm from the force and conflict of politics. To *pre*politicize kinship is to *de*politicize those norms and practices that exclude the incest-born and the incestuously coupled, for example, from the realm of intelligibility.

This argument poses, in a different light, a well-known question in gender studies: If some form of behavior is natural, why then does it need social and legislative protection (e.g., heterosexual marriage) — should not the natural survive quite well on its own? And if some form of behavior is unnatural, why does it have to be demonized or prohibited (e.g., homosexual behavior or same-sex marriage)? Should not the unnatural suffer quite nicely on *its* own (Connell 2002, 3–4)? Further, how is the natural/unnatural coded in practice? And, above all, if that coding occurs through the mechanism of culture or politics, then is the natural really anything other than that which we code *as* natural (within the utterly contingent realm of the political)?

In making these queries, Butler refuses the psychoanalytic reading of incest. She captures that reading as follows: "[O]ne might simply say in a psychoanalytic spirit that Antigone represents a *perversion* of the law and conclude that the law requires perversion," and thus the law is itself perverse (Butler 2000a, 67). That reading, she argues, merely pairs two

static entities — the law and perversion — with one another, all to produce what she somewhat sarcastically calls a "satisfying" result: "that the law is *invested* in perversion" and is therefore other than it at first appears (Butler 2000a, 68). This "satisfying" reading, however, does precisely nothing to make life possible. It makes no effort at all to render the unintelligible intelligible. Instead, it closes off that possibility by merely asserting that the law, which is still the law, is itself perverse. Mimicking Antigone's own resistance to the law, Butler challenges psychoanalysis: "[W]hat happens when the perverse or the impossible emerges in the language of the law and makes its claim precisely there in the sphere of legitimate kinship that depends on its exclusion or pathologization?" (Butler 2000a, 68).

Structuralist and psychoanalytic accounts provide the target for Butler's critique, particularly because they so often render Antigone, and her desire for her brother, unintelligible. Butler consistently demands that we move away from accounts that would place kinship structures beyond question, that is, by situating them in a putatively universal realm. Instead, she asks *how*, *why*, and *to what ends* such a universal is constructed; for her, the constitution of "the universal" or of "the human" is precisely a *political* issue.[5] Once again, Butler makes a move that parallels Rubin: Both ask us to look at the so-called foundations of society in order to envision a radical approach to politics. Rubin says that the sex/gender system once organized *society* but now only organizes *itself*, and she leverages this claim into a call to restructure the system of sex and gender (1975, 199). Butler recognizes that today, heteronormativity, the incest taboo, and universalist accounts of kinship all stand in the way of such restructuring, and for this reason she invites us to reconsider the politics of foundations.

Given this conception of politics as that which puts into place conceptions of the universal and the foundational, Butler wisely queries the putatively foundational "division between the psychic or symbolic, on the one hand, and the social, on the other" (2000a, 71). The effect of her critique is to incorporate the psychic or symbolic within the social, and thus to see social variability and malleability as the means through which strategies of control and containment get their grip, and potentially the means through which this can be undone. Structures, even if said to be merely formal (or even vastly malleable), are still structures, Butler says; thus, they domesticate

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5. For one excellent example of this type of political work, see Butler's arguments concerning the *contextually dependent* universality of "human rights" (2004b, 189–90).

"in advance any radical reformulation of kinship" (2000a, 74). To effect serious change in kinship structures thus requires opening them up to cultural contestation.[6]

INCEST, TABOO, HARM

While Butler is attentive to anecdotal accounts of new "family" structures, and sensitive to the dilemmas of neologisms and reinscription, she pays little attention to what the actual language of these new relationships might be, that is, the new terms of kinship that would produce nonheteronormative families/kinship structures and thus intelligibly human subjectivities. If Antigone had not been crushed by the state, which was keen to keep the heteronormative order both intact and in circulation, what could she have called herself and her loved ones? How could she name her desires and their objects? How might she designate the family of her own that she never had? How much language would have to be changed (or simply dismissed as archaic) to foreclose her extreme abjection and suicidal melancholia?

These are practical questions. In turn, they render problematic a great deal of the institutional and legislative structures that support and maintain heteronormativity and the current structures of kinship. At present, most countries have compulsory certification of birth, including parental and sexual identification, and in many countries, there are elaborated procedures for determining these facts of "consanguinity." The intelligibility of "family" language supposedly arises from, but is in turn practically structuring of, these very "facts" through which identities and relationships are mediated. These procedures function both to determine who can and cannot "unite" to found a family, and to institute a hierarchy in terms of next of kin for inheritance or other purposes once a family is founded. Some scholars question whether we need these state-sponsored recording of lineages at all (see Stevens 1999), and within the project of confounding kinship, we might go on to ask other questions — questions about "blood" relations, about the necessity

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6. Butler herself provides examples of this "opening up": She points to those cases in which the so-called perverse demand, even in the face of their own abjection, to be accounted for. For example, she describes those "blended families" in which a child can say "mother" and more than one person might respond, or a family in which "father" might represent both a phantasm and a real person in living memory. These arrangements are something of a commonplace (even if not fully accepted) in liberal societies, as are shared parenting arrangements in which genetic "relatedness" is ignored, or sometimes even obscured (Blasius 1994; Weeks et al. 2001; Weston 1991).

of marriage, about the future of the incest taboo. As Rubin (1975) shows, these kinship rules may once have served external purposes, but now seemed designed only to regulate kinship itself — and for reasons that are less than clear. Here we elaborate Butler's troubling of kinship by looking briefly at current political and scientific debates on precisely these issues.

In the current social-scientific and therapeutic literatures, and in many media and popular culture sources, incest is almost immediately contextualized as child abuse, or simply sexual abuse without regard to age — most particularly in father–daughter cases. This framing of incest renders the incest-born as unintelligible: If incest is always and already an act of extreme abuse, then nothing human could arise from the act of incest. Indeed, the question of the incest-born is almost never raised, precisely because the category of the incest-born hardly exists; it is only intelligible as somehow less than human. If incest is nothing more than an event so inhuman (occurring only in a space "outside the human") as to be unspeakable, then the act of incest must be prohibited, and if it should nonetheless occur, forgotten and erased.

Antigone offers a provocative case of incest, then, since there the issues are mother–son and sister–brother and all parties are over the age of consent. With Antigone, then, we do not have a potential case of child abuse. Moreover, sexual abuse as such is not an issue, because the mother–son incest arises through mistaken identity, and the sister–brother incest arises as a feeling in only one party, if that. Neither case includes overt aggression or violence, whether psychological or physical. Thus, any presumed identity between incest (as heterosexual activity between "close" relations) and scenarios of sexual abuse is undermined; the horror and trauma that result from incest in the tragedy follow exclusively from the taboo itself.

Butler's critique of the heteronormativity of the kinship system and her call for attentiveness to the problem of (un)intelligibility both focus her critical sights on the incest taboo. "The question," she asks, "is whether the incest taboo has also been mobilized to *establish* certain forms of kinship as the only intelligible and livable ones" (Butler 2000a, 70). Building indirectly from Rubin's claim that the incest taboo always serves a function *other* than the mere prohibition of "close genetic matings," Butler suggests here that the taboo works in the services of heteronormativity. As Rubin (1975, 180) stated succinctly years before Butler made the argument more famous in *Gender Trouble*: "the incest taboo presupposes a prior, less articulate taboo on homosexuality."

The popular construction and understanding of incest contribute in their own way to the production of the unintelligibility of the incest born—that is, as a "natural" and universal law — but it may therefore come as a surprise to many to learn that the concept of incest proves far more ambiguous, variable, and controversial than might at first be assumed. The question of which relationships fall on which side of which boundary is culturally and legally variable, and occasionally even contradictory, for example, the marriage of widows to brothers-in-law — *required* in some religious systems, *prohibited* in others (Arens 1997; Bittles et al. 2001, 68–71). Not only is incest defined differently, and differently defied, in various cultures, but the supposed relation to "blood" is sometimes even blatantly metaphorical, for example, in cases of alleged incest involving family-members-by-adoption or even in-laws who are unrelated through normal kinship rules of "blood."[7]

Scientifically, a significant link between "defects" in offspring and "inbreeding" among successive generations of parents is in fact less than obvious. Instead, the purported "links" prove to be fraught with cross-causalities, ambiguous comparisons, and indeterminacy in individual cases (Bittles et al. 2001, 71–76). "Defective" genes are not caused by inbreeding, although they can segregate in a limited gene pool. However, gene segregation already occurs, even in a large pool, and is today the occasion for voluntary genetic counseling, rather than proscription (or enforced sterilization, which was often the case in the past). Indeed, in animal breeding, the reverse prejudice is generally true: Inbreeding is standardly understood to produce good results, and humans routinely organize compulsory inbreeding. Bittles et al. (2001, 71) come to this conclusion:

> In Western societies there is a strong belief that the progeny of close-kin unions will exhibit elevated levels of physical and/or mental defect, the implication being that these adverse outcomes are caused by the expression of detrimental recessive genes which have accumulated in the kindred and/or community because of inbreeding . . . . The evidence produced to support this contention often has been vague and largely anecdotal in nature, with little or no proof that the claimed pattern(s) of ill health stemmed specifically from the expression of specific recessive genes. An opposite and ultimately beneficial genetic perspective on consanguinity also has been advanced, suggesting that in communities

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7. For example, UK legislation forbidding in-law marriages was struck down by the European Court of Human Rights in September 2005 and is therefore currently under revision (Kennedy 2005).

in which close-kin unions were traditionally preferential there would have been a gradual but significant elimination of detrimental recessive genes from the gene pool.

In any case, inbreeding (endogamy) and outbreeding (exogamy) are in themselves *eugenic* arguments applied both to individuals and to "the species." Intriguingly, these arguments work both ways, and each is discredited in reputable practice — if not entirely in popular consciousness. Some individual characteristics can be linked to limited gene pools, but these can be evaluated positively for any number of reasons (e.g., dark skin in hotter climes, or blond hair and blue eyes as a sign of beauty) or, rather negatively (e.g., albinism, pygmyism), at least to the point of figuring in the advice offered by counselors. A mixed gene pool is said to promote genetic variation and selective adaptation and therefore to be good for "the species," but at the same time the species is supposed to be defended against "inferior stock" to preserve the "fittest" genes from dilution. Over eons of time, and in constantly changing circumstances, natural selection works with such a variety of reproductive strategies and produces such speculative and indeterminate outcomes that inbreeding/outbreeding has no causal purchase in the general theory, notwithstanding "Darwinian" attempts to naturalize one particular model in "progressive" accounts of human social groups (Agar 2004; Bittles 2001; Fausto-Sterling 2000).[8]

Although a fictional family, it is notable that Antigone and her three siblings have no obvious "defects." Of course, some contemporary royal families are notably "inbred," and mistaken and deliberately consensual unions between siblings and half-siblings do, in fact, occur. It should be less than shocking to note, then, the existence of political groups advocating reform or abolition of incest laws.[9] In short, incest is a discursive artifact with an "excess," and in Western culture it has been used as a taboo, through disciplinary strategies of naturalization that have no necessary functional or other validity in individual, social, or biological terms (Bittles et al. 2001).

8. Cases of egg and sperm donation between siblings for technologically assisted conception raise an interesting issue: "incest" may take place entirely apart from bodies or sexual feelings (as opposed to nonsexual feelings of closeness and care) (Edwards 2004). Rather than inscribing a naturalized taboo and setting the stage for abjection, genetic and family counselors are generally advised to provide reassurance to both the incest-born in order to help them cope with stigma and to those in consanguineous marriages (typically first cousins, double first cousins, and uncle–niece) (Bittles et al. 1988).

9. See, for example, http://www.consang.net, and other Internet sources.

This brief survey of the recent scientific literature on incest elaborates on the point already articulated by Rubin: The incest taboo serves other purposes. It also helps to support a point made, or at least consistently raised, by Butler: Incest may not always be the violation we take it to be. Indeed, in *Undoing Gender*, Butler frequently uses the phrase "when incest is a violation" in order to suggest two points simultaneously. First, sometimes incest is *not* a violation. We cannot assume the functional universality of the taboo; we may need to inquire, instead, into the role that the taboo plays in supporting heteronormativity. This means comprehending the incest taboo as a mechanism for producing unintelligibility. But, second, the phrase also suggests to us that sometimes incest *is* a violation, and no critique of the political effects of the incest taboo can overlook this fact. Butler's argument thereby raises the question of how we decide when incest is and is not a violation.

Indeed, Butler frames this question directly: "[H]ow do we account for the more or less general persistence of the incest taboo and its traumatic consequences as part of the differentiation process that paves the way for adult sexuality *without demeaning the claims made about incestuous practices that clearly are traumatic in nonnecessary and unacceptable ways*?" (2004b, 154; emphasis added). Butler will not give a specific answer to this question, nor will she provide a metric designed to measure and determine each and every case that comes up. However, she does provide a way to *approach* crucial questions such as this one, and such an approach depends precisely on refusing to decide the issue in advance. Butler returns to the so-called foundations of culture in the form of the incest taboo in order to demonstrate that such "foundations" always prove to be political constructions. We must decide the question of violation in incest through the work of politics: through a rigorous and careful assessment of what counts as "universal" and why, through a genuine engagement with questions concerning who counts as human, and through an understanding of the future as always unpredictable and contingent. This is one more reason why Butler's theoretico-political project exceeds the framework of liberalism.

TOWARD A LIVABLE LIFE

Butler states her goal directly, and perhaps more succinctly and clearly than some readers might at first imagine. That goal is to make a livable life *possible*. And, she passionately asserts, "possibility is not a luxury; *it is*

as crucial as bread" (Butler 2004b, 29; emphasis added). To make a livable life possible means to challenge normative violence and the heteronormative structures of kinship in such a way as to render the previously unintelligible intelligible. In other words, Butler's project centers on an effort to open up spaces for the "human" to exist, possibly to thrive. Many readers might see the concept of the "livable life" as too vague to be of much use, too singular to offer political hope. Butler sees things differently: "[O]ne might wonder what use 'opening up [gender] possibilities' finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is 'impossible,' illegible, unrealizable, unreal and illegitimate is likely to pose that question" (1999, viii). The question of (un)intelligibility cannot be dismissed as politically meaningless, and it cannot be rejected as philosophically abstract. It takes concrete shape in relation to kinship structures and heteronormative practices — political, legal, constitutional, and international. In other words, for some, unintelligibility is the most meaningful issue of all.[10]

Examples could include both transgender people who have no intelligible place in a system of binary sex and gender (even if that system affords equal rights to lesbians and gays), and those whose sexual practices will remain criminalized and only be further stigmatized by the legalization of gay marriage. The politics of the livable life demands a struggle against the norms that produce unintelligibility (thereby rendering lives unlivable). This politics need not eschew the legal arena, but it will apply caution when entering. Thus, certain kinship structures find themselves rescripted within same-sex partnerships and marriage, such that the terms "husband" and "wife" make no sense, and where "mother" and "father" may apply in various ways to any number of parenting adults. These practices can alter norms, can make space for livable lives, and can do so even without state sanction. Butler herself cites the example of "the 'buddy' system set up by Gay Men's Health Crisis and other AIDS service organizations to fulfill the social and medical needs of its patients" (1997c, 17). In addition, these discursive shifts can also challenge heteronormativity and rework kinship *through* political and legal processes (Josephson 2005; Petchesky 2001; Wilson 1995). One can

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10. Though clearly outside the scope of our work here, another way to specify this line of thinking (aside from the examples we offer) could be through ideal or even utopian theory that articulates a system of family relations (including inheritance, adoption, and other legal benefits) outside or against the terms of heteronormative kinship structures (see Lehr 1999; Stevens 1999). Butler herself remains cautious about utopian visions (1997c, 17), but this does not make her project, nor ours, incompatible with efforts to imagine new kinship relations (see Rubin 1997, 92–94).

cite analogous historical examples as well: The alleged moral and scientific grounds for anti-miscegenation laws have notably succumbed to contrary views in recent history. The politics of gender equalization, same-sex marriage, human reproductive and sexual rights, and an anti-eugenic backlash all have the potential to "trouble" heteronormative kinship at its very foundations in the incest taboo (Carver 2007; Goodenough 2004).

Within a politics of the livable life, however, the focus must always remain on challenging the norms that make some lives unlivable, and this entails a necessary vigilance concerning legal remedies. Demanding rights from the state is not always the answer when doing so may also tend to reify certain heterosexual norms. Thus, legal strategies have their limits and "gay marriage" is no panacea (Butler, Laclau, and Zizek 2000; Warner 1999) Moreover, rights, once attained, *can* be lost and *must* be defended (see Chambers 2003b). Butler's politics, that is, sees the future as untimely: Past victories are not guarantees of what is to come, and what is to come remains unpredictable. Butler contends that we must remain *open* to this future, and her politics therefore demands a continuous reassessment of our conceptions of universality, of norms, even of what constitutes politics itself.

To provide examples such as those here is not to reduce the argument to rights-based individualism, since Butler's theorizing of intelligibility applies broadly to the politics of norms (1987b, 1989). This is why her political project will not boil down to a claim for lesbian and gay rights. Butler certainly does not stand "against" lesbian and gay rights, but she conceives of politics both more broadly and more radically. She seeks to open spaces in which we might critically question, and sometimes challenge, the norms (and practices of disciplinary normalization) that render some lives intelligible and some lives unintelligible. Thus, in recent texts, Butler maintains continual concern for precisely those who are rendered unintelligible by the very framework of "lesbian and gay rights." In certain cases and contexts, the claim for identity-based rights can reinforce norms that render other lives unlivable; marriage provides but one obvious example.

We contend that it would be a mistake to take the critique of heteronormativity as merely the politics of tiny minorities, having little effect on the vast majority. And that is why, as we have maintained throughout, it would be seriously misleading to read Butler's politics as one of mere inclusion or simple multicultural recognition. Our effort here has been to elaborate the politics of heteronormativity through Butler's troubling of kinship. Her novel reading of Antigone/*Antigone*,

in calling attention to the unintelligibility within the "human" of the incest-born person, subverts the structures of kinship typically taken for granted and implicitly universalized. In our reading of Butler's work, we argue that she does much more than point out the "constructed" character of sex and gender. She does a great deal more than call for an "end to oppression" of the marginalized (Chambers and Carver 2008). In making kinship trouble, she opens up the politics of heteronormativity beyond a narrow, liberal framework of inclusion/exclusion and policies of toleration. By demonstrating how the incest taboo both produces and sustains heteronormativity, Butler makes a robust contribution to what Rubin named as the goal of feminism: to effect a revolution in kinship.

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