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## Historicizing Subjectivities: Antigone, Rosemarie Beck and a Lesbian New Yorker

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Ross, Jamie P., "Historicizing Subjectivities: Antigone, Rosemarie Beck and a Lesbian New Yorker" (2015). *Lyric Truth: Rosemarie Beck*. 8.

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February 13, 2015

[Lyric Truth: Paintings, Drawings and Embroideries by Rosemarie Beck](#)

“Historicizing Subjectivities: Antigone, Rosemarie Beck and a Lesbian New Yorker”

Joan Scott, in her highly acclaimed piece from 1992, “The Evidence of Experience” suggests that *political* actions entail a shared social consciousness. In this sense, Rosemarie Beck could not *help* being a part of the shared social consciousness during the part of her life in New York City in the 1960’s. Whether her politics extended to identifying herself as a *feminist* during this time of the rise of the second wave of feminism can be debated. However living as a part of that social consciousness in New York City, I imagine, could hardly be avoided.

So, I cannot help but to examine Rosemarie’s development, as a woman and artist as part of the larger social/body politic of the time. Her sense of self as an individual, her individual acts, whether or not she participated in consciousness raising sessions and equal rights marches, perhaps are not as important as her historicized experiences; the creation of her subjectivity, as Scott would say. Her experiences

were part of a constructed process as a subject embedded in a political consciousness.

If one's subjectivity entails parts of a shared social consciousness what are and how are Rosemarie's experiences indicative of 1960's New York? My commentary here is conjecture and an interpretation of the few facts I have. Nevertheless, since I too was a part of this time, I will play historian and literary critic. Although both are out of my comfort zone in philosophy, I get to play with the veracity and interpretation of evidence, which *is* within my area of expertise and my passion. Since "... evidence only counts as evidence and is only recognized as such in relation to a potential narrative, ... the narrative [that I offer] can be said to determine the evidence as much as the evidence determines the narrative (Scott 776)". Thus I begin with your indulgence and patience as I tell a story about Antigone the woman and Sophocles' Greek tragedy in relation to 1960's New York City and perhaps Rosemarie Beck.

Both Oedipal daughters, Ismene's and Antigone's experiences, when historicized must be taken as ambiguous facts. Their subjectivities cannot be taken as foundational. Rather, they should be taken as "differing properties of the representational medium – the motion of light in water" as Samuel Delany states in his contemporary book of that name (Scott 794). Ismene embodies the objectification and obedience, i.e., silent passivity expected of her gender and status. Antigone was born to question the social implication of both (Wilkinson, 4)."

Perhaps we can view them as encompassing different women's continuous struggle for expression and social reform. *Many* interpretations believe me, have been offered for the relevance of the sisters' relationship. For example, given these two disparate female representations, the sisters have been interpreted as having "no sense of comradery or shared experience," which from a psycho/social point of view has been interpreted as indicating their society's complete failure to support female ego development (Wilkinson, 6). Antigone, nevertheless, has also been interpreted as encompassing a completely *mature* person giving voice by speaking her crime (Wilkinson, 12). Alternatively political economists suggest that Antigone's actions are an effort to seek validation as a full citizen. Or, using a popular culture lens, Antigone may very well have fallen victim to the constraints of her own clothing by hanging herself in the cave with her own scarf, given that clothes have been taken to be our womanly signifiers. Alas, this is indicative of the myriad of ways women's actions have been interpreted as participating in the body politic with and without sacrificing their own bodies. Come play with me in 1964 New York City.

Antigone was the hero of *many* young feminists in New York City in the 1960's, myself included. I may have been singing to Barbara Streisand's *Funny Girl* album, a pastime that seemed to totally occupy my teenage mind when I wasn't playing Peter, Paul and Mary songs on my guitar. Antigone called truth to power. And she called truth to power in a manner that I see the likes of many women having done: Lydia Maria Francis Child inspired in 1833 when she demanded that we pay attention to our prejudices against people of color; Sojourner Truth, proclaimed in 1851 "Ain't I

a Woman”; Anna Cooper in 1852 wrote, “Woman Versus the Indian;” Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote in 1912 that women have brains too (in in her piece, “Our Brains and What Ails Them”); Sa Zit Kala recounted in 1921 of her oppression as a Native American; and Emma Goldman helped to radicalize our women’s movement in 1969 in her piece, “Anarchism: What It Really Stands For.” Antigone was my feminist. I made her mine in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The flexibility of interpretation allowed me to take her as such. I am not sure if she was or frankly, who she was for *Rosemarie Beck*, but Beck painted and embroidered Antigone repeatedly.

What I do know is that Rosemarie was not *necessarily* a feminist, though in her diary at one point, at least, she wonders to herself whether she is. (reference on Bonheur at the Met galleries). Antigone may have been a heroine for her but perhaps not in all the same ways *I* thought of Antigone at JHS 104 on East 12th Street in Manhattan where my radical feminism was ravenously mixed with pizza slices and cherry vanilla ice cream cones around the corner for \$.25. Nor perhaps was Rosemarie a feminist in the way my mother was, who left the house weekly for her consciousness raising group meetings. Rosemarie’s subjectivity of the time was told in *her* artistic stories, not in the stories and drawings of hand held mirrors mapping the contours of our labia as fellow artist Betty Dodson did at the time.

### First Thought: Beck and Moral Order

Rosemarie tried to make sense of her art as both a passion *and a vocation, not necessarily as a politic*. Passion like vocation is difficult to live out. Rosemarie says in an interview around 1979, “Things are so fraught with meaning that it [art] isn’t as easy.” Her subjective power required a narrative and embodied subject matter, not as a vocal feminist but as a woman whose *stories* nevertheless needed to be told. In the same interview Rosemarie confesses that she paints best when she is *unhappy* and consequently unhappiness may have been her access to stories that needed to be told.

Too obvious a connection to Greek tragedy? Antigone tells *her* story best when she was in full mourning; Ismene, her sister most *loyal* when she is distraught at the prospect of losing her sister; Creon, the king, is at his best, rehabilitated self when he is most unhappy finding his dead son; the Chorus, most *profound* when it concludes that Creon is “one of the living dead”; Tiresias, the prophet, at the height of his strength when he turns away from the Creon’s deafness and *sadly* announces that the entire matter is now out of Creon’s hands. That’s enough unhappiness for anyone motivated by sadness to create. Is Rosemarie’s *creativity* motivated by unhappiness? *She* says, “I’m distrustful of the bromides prevailing regarding our duty – or right – to be happy, well adjusted, self-fulfilling. In fact, from my own experience, the tragic view is the only tenable one. I’m an enthusiastic pessimist . . . . a moral lecturer.” Ah, I feel pretty comfortable suggesting that Antigone as a *moral lecturer* may have inspired Beck.

Rosemarie is not an artist set out to please and satisfy. Yet neither is she a tragic figure; just secretive. She has the “personal, the idiosyncratic and the private” to give, she says. Perhaps the artistic narrative stories protect her from the two extremes, i.e., the dangers of moral passion and the *instability* of outdoor political action.

Indeed, Rosemarie says that she has “a nostalgia for *order* . . . for a total world, no matter how subjective or personal, whose morality is *still going all the way* (my emphasis)(Levin, ).” Perhaps the disruption that feminism wrought in NY *thwarted* the stability that Beck sought. Yet *Antigone* goes the whole way, not only to her own death, but also by invoking the omnipotent morality of the Gods; not Creon’s construction and limited morality. Antigone’s convictions are within the world order of loyalty to the Gods and the morality of love. Could that be what Rosemarie found compelled to represent in her work?

#### Second Thought: Feminist Reason and Beck

Despite the Chorus’ initial debasement of *Antigone*’s character as a woman as well as her ontological status as the immoral product of Oedipus, her father’s incestuous relationship with his own mother, [“You were harsh and daring, child. You went too far and fell broken against the lofty pedestal of Justice. Perhaps, though, you are paying for some ancestral failing (Braun 54).” ] Antigone *convinces the mighty Chorus*, one would think a deed more difficult to accomplish than swaying the king,

that Creon's ethics are not even a *reflection* of the Divine. In doing so, Antigone is successful at overriding her inferior and emotive female relationship to reason. The chorus' moral authority ultimately condemns the *king* beyond their prior epistemological and ontological condemnation of Antigone, given her masculine relation to reason and her perverse provenance.

When the king finally asks for help, the Chorus recommends that he embrace love (a divine ethic) not passion (a human failure of love in extremis) over hate, by figuratively if not literally embracing Antigone and Haimon, her fiancé, as love's moral representative. Ok, maybe Rosemarie's admiration of Antigone is not her feminist *triumph over* reason and emotion, as mine is, nor Antigone's going-all-the-way-morality. Maybe she admired the Aristotelian "golden mean," love; a balance between passion and hate. Perhaps she viewed Antigone's rebellion as an effort to *reestablish* balance. Perhaps what she admires about Antigone is her *balance* of masculine reason and emotive femininity. Beck does make the claim, "All the creative men I have known have worked out of their femininity, the female in their nature." Haimon's character is appealing for *that* reason. *He* uses an *emotive* rationality with which to appeal to Creon. Yet, like contemporary bromances, Creon's "gendered invective (Miller)" uses Haemon's love as weakness, which Creon says, diminishes Haemon's masculinity. "Don't father me," he says. "You're no man. You're a slave. Property of a woman." But isn't the balance of reason and emotion what the Chorus demands of Creon?



“The systematic devaluing of Haemon through gendered language indicates the relative value which Creon attaches to ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as well as the assimilation of his own ideology with a normative role in the construction of gender (Miller 165)”.

### Third Thought: Sublimation and Beck

Could Rosemarie compare herself to Ismene, Antigone’s sister, the one who refuses to violate the royal dictate regardless of her opposing view of Creon’s edict?

Rosemarie says that she wishes she herself were “courageous, adventuresome . . . with a privilege of a healthy selfishness [but] I haven’t had them.” Rather, she is moved by a focused life.

How can we look at Rosemarie’s legacy and think she did not have a life dedicated to “lifetime’s arduous business to recover fullness in formality, not merely idiosyncrasy and personality,” which is what she demands. Yet she says *of herself*, “I can only say that sublimation has been the source of my greatest – I don’t want to say power and strength – but its most galvanic factor.” Maybe Antigone is not *only* her moral lecturer, but also indicative of a total world where *morality* “go[es] all the way.” In the presence of *order* Rosemarie *also* appreciates the “[J]oyful mode of improvisation rather than the serious mode of discovery,” this said in regard to her embroideries. Even though she is a little suspicious of the “even tempo of embroidery,” she says, “It’s nice and even.” Rosemarie finds embroidery “pleasant.” Rosemarie is not without joy. She just doesn’t consider joy akin to happiness. She

considers joy the process of “informing and vitalizing” her work not the impetus of her work.

#### Last Thought: Beck and the Unintelligible

Rosemarie’s public self is expressed in private. Her *art* is an avenue into the public sphere. To this end, my understanding is that Rosemarie provided the main source of income during her marriage with the sale of her artwork. She was thereby successful at supporting both a public and private realm. She was successful in her vocation as an artist and contributed to a public economy; she counted in national income data. In so doing, she contributed to one of the core political initiatives of 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism - an economic platform that allowed women’s work, and moreover, women artists’ work to avoid the status of the unpaid, subsistence sector, an informal sector that along with domestic and volunteer work were and to a great extent *are still* not counted as contributing to current economic policy. Perhaps in Rosemarie’s marriage there was a willingness to stand in contrast to traditional economic and other types of relationships.

Antigone, the product of a non-traditional, incestuous relationship, certainly has come to represent a challenge to traditional “more **propri**etorial partnerships (McRobbie, 129).” Was Rosemarie’s relationship with her husband a “symbol of the unimaginable and unintelligible in culture (130)” as was Antigone’s character at the time. The “unimaginable and unintelligible” in my mother’s life occurred when she divorced my father in 1963, also unthinkable and as a result was confronted with

the reality of not being able to get a credit card in her own name let alone custody of her children having broken the law as a “mother abandoning her family” a law not applied to fathers at the time. Perhaps Antigone is a model of some kind of brave behavior for Rosemarie and my mother, let alone myself as a lesbian, perhaps its own form of unimaginable and unintelligible relationship to many still. These are all relationships in the face of public and private condemnation that stands in contrast to those necessarily boundaried by convention and/or law.

### Conclusion

Whether Beck yearned nostalgia for a moral order, a desire for balance between reason and emotion or a more public and private challenge to the unconventional, she *loved* like Antigone *loved*. “Sometimes,” she says, “the artist’s relation to the world is like the lover who cannot believe he is loved in return but yearns to be. Like the lover, he makes a big point of rejecting and rejecting, hoping it need not be; maybe in the end, he will lift his eyes to discover that he counted after all (diary entry, March 24, 1954).” Beck’s efforts count.

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