Feminist Philosophy

Time, history and the transformation of thought

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Chapter 9
Fantastic Antigones
– The Tragic Legacy of Trans Grief

Fanny Söderbäck

As Trans folks we know there are so many different types of ***Grief*** that go unrecognized within a cis framework.

For trans people know	***Grief***
There is ***Grief***	for the people who will never accept us
There is ***Grief***	for our chosen family that we may outlive
There is ***Grief***	for those we see in newspapers who look like us
There is ***Grief***	for the lies told about our bodies
and ***Grief***	that is held within our flesh

For trans people who know ***Grief***, let this be a moment to breathe out all the grief you are carrying. The ***Grief*** you did/do not deserve. The ***Grief*** you are a master at forgetting.

– J Mase III[1]

[1] J Mase III, *And Then I Got Fired: One Transqueer's Reflections on Grief, Unemployment & Inappropriate Jokes About Death* (Lulu: 2019), pp. 29–30.

> It is a challenge to one's stamina to follow the traces of this 2,500-year-young Theban princess, who looks younger every day. She is indefatigable, as all the undead seem to be. […] By the nineteenth century, she had made numerous transoceanic voyages to visit places she had never heard of or dreamt of visiting, where she shared the drama of the political theft that had incited her own anger back home. Her geographic range expanded dramatically in the twentieth century, especially after the great European wars, and the invitations she received around the world enticed her to new dialogues, taught her new ideas, offered her new outfits, opened new ways of linking her ancient drama to the modern undead.
>
> – Moira Fradinger, "Nomadic Antigone"[2]

The Timeliness of an Ancient Drama: Resurrected Antigones

The ancient Greek figure of Antigone is stubbornly reborn. Fueling stories and narratives across the globe, she rises from the dead, time and again, and appears in times of oppression and injustice wherever the need arises for dissidence and resistance. In their volume *The Returns of Antigone*, Tina Chanter and Sean D. Kirkland succinctly ask: "What, then, are we to make of the ostensible death of tragedy on the one hand, and Antigone's refusal to attend her own funeral on the other?"[3] They speak of her "persisting capacity to illuminate our world," which has spurred a "continued appeal today for thinkers, poets, and activists of every stripe."[4] As the title of George Steiner's now classic book suggests: there is not one, but many Antigones, and while she may have first appeared on the ancient Greek stage, her journey by no means ends there.[5]

[2] Moira Fradinger, "Prologue: Nomadic Antigone," in Fanny Söderbäck (Ed.), *Feminist Readings of Antigone* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), p. 15.
[3] Tina Chanter & Sean D. Kirkland, *The Returns of Antigone: Interdisciplinary Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 1.
[4] Chanter & Kirkland, *The Returns of Antigone*, p. 2.
[5] George Steiner, *Antigones: How the Antigone Legend Has Endured in Western Literature, Art, and* Thought (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1996).

From Argentina to Turkey, via Australia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Ghana, Greece, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Mexico, Nigeria, Palestine, Poland, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Spain, and beyond – is there any country in the world she has not visited in one of her many guises? Whenever and wherever civil liberties are endangered, when the rights or existence of indigenous peoples are threatened, when revolutions are underway, when injustices take place – wherever she is needed, Antigone appears. A shapeshifter of sorts, her name varies depending on where she emerges on the modern stage: Antígona Vélez, Mariana, Antígona Pérez, Akwele, Odale, Clara Luz, Antígona Furiosa, Sofia, Melissa, Anita, Tègònni…

Antigone is, in other words, a figure from the past who helps us grapple with the tragic conditions of our present. Indeed, despite her coming to us from an ancient Greek context marked by misogyny and authoritarian power, she has been viewed, especially by feminist scholars and activists, as someone who can inspire transformation in our own time. Throughout my work – and most systematically in my book *Revolutionary Time* – I have insisted on the need for continuous return to the past to make possible a more dynamic-embodied present as well as a future that avoids both repetition and teleological closure.[6] But it is essential of course that our return to the past – including past figures and texts – not serve to determine the present or the future, but rather open them up to new and unforeseen imaginaries and possibilities. As Catherine A. Holland cautions in an essay that examines the historical legacy of Antigone for feminist thought:

> whenever we mine past texts as resources for evaluating contemporary concerns, the danger is that the 'persistent and contemporaneous influence' of those texts can limit our political vision and thus narrow our political horizons, a danger

[6] See Fanny Söderbäck, *Revolutionary Time: On Time and Difference in Kristeva and Irigaray* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).

> that the past will overfill the present, shrinking rather than expanding the space of political possibility.[7]

To be sure, if we are to productively engage Antigone in our present, we need to do so by insisting not only on similarities but also on the distance between our times and hers. If Antigone herself has been firmly situated as a European cis woman celebrated by male philosophers and cis feminists alike, her global journey and her shape-shifting capacities demand that we reimagine her story in terms that are irreducible to – indeed that might fundamentally challenge – her original context.

Antigone appeared in 2018 at the Classical Theater in Harlem, in a performance directed by Carl Cofield, where the walls of the stage were chalked with graffiti and covered with placards: "RIP Eteocles," "Say His Name," "Black Lives Matter." In a cultural context where Black lives are marked as ungrievable, and where Black folks are navigating grief (and the anticipation of grief through an acute awareness of imminent death and loss) as the ongoing condition of life, the figure of Antigone offers a cultural imaginary for framing that experience. Consider, for example, the response that the author Claudia Rankine received when asking a friend what it is like being the mother of a Black son: "'The condition of black life is one of mourning', she said bluntly. For her, mourning lived in real time inside her and her son's reality: At any moment she might lose her reason for living."[8] It is easy to see how this experience finds a voice in Antigone, whose demand that she be allowed to publicly mourn her dead brother, Polyneices, is rejected by royal decree, and whose own life is marked by looming death and foreclosed dreams. As Creon buries Antigone alive on stage, we hear echoes

[7] Catherine A. Holland, "After Antigone: Women, the Past, and the Future of Feminist Political Thought," in Söderbäck, (Ed.), *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, p. 27. Holland cites Sheldon Wolin's work on theoretical imagination here.

[8] Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 22, 2015. Accessed at https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html on July 7, 2020.

of the "I can't breathe" of our own times, the tragic condition of Black life, or what Denise Ferreira da Silva has described as a kind of temporal suspension that haunts our political present: "That moment […] between the release of the trigger and the fall of another black body, of another brown body, and another."[9]

And yet, of course there is also a distance here, an immense distance, between the Black mothers of our own times whose lives are conditioned by perpetual mourning, and the work of grief that marked the life of Antigone, a Theban princess, for whom slavery was a present reality relegated to the subtext of the play, or, as Tina Chanter has argued, for whom the very insistence on burying her brother is symptomatic of the need to make a distinction between free cultured individuals and barbarian non-Athenian slaves. Consequently, Chanter notes, "the Oedipal model, as inflected through Freud and Lacan, cannot be taken up and applied to colonial issues, as if it constituted an adequate hermeneutical tool that operates independently of those very issues its dominance has helped to eclipse."[10]

In an article from *The Atlantic*, Antigone's story was used as a foil to illustrate the practice of separating children from their parents at the U.S.–Mexico border: "In the family separation described by Sophocles, the brother is not just exiled but dead; the king, Creon, has left his body to rot outside the city walls without a burial," Quinta Jurecic notes, and she goes on to suggest that when the Trump administration "justifies pulling migrant parents away from their children at the U.S. border, it is speaking Creon's language."[11] Here, Antigone is called in as a figure whose story speaks volumes to the cruelty of a legal system that – in the name of security and state power – upholds contingent distinctions between 'friend' and 'enemy' (even when this

[9] Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. xi.

[10] Tina Chanter, *Whose Antigone? The Tragic Marginalization of Slavery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. x.

[11] Quinta Jurecic, "A Choice Between Cruelty and Mercy: A 2,500-year-old play illustrates the emptiness of the administration's arguments about enforcing the law," *The Atlantic*, June 18, 2018. Accessed at https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/06/border-policies-antigone/563126/ on July 7, 2020.

entails tearing families apart) so as to set an example and deter others from trying to cross the borders of the United States. If Creon, by refusing Polyneices' proper burial and by decreeing that he be left to rot outside the city walls, sought to reaffirm "the distinction between whom he wants in his city and whom he doesn't, defining the boundaries of his community," the Trump administration repeated this violent gesture in an attempt to more narrowly restrict who belongs here, and who belongs together. Reading *Antigone* today, Jurecic suggests, might thus serve as "a reminder both of the visceral wrongness of what is happening at the border and of the emptiness of the administration's arguments about law enforcement."[12]

And yet, while Antigone might have served as the constitutive outside of a political order bound to ultimately exclude her, she inevitably also inhabits a vantage point of privilege – she is, after all, King Creon's niece, and he tries his best to make exceptions for her, even as he runs into her stubborn refusal to be saved. Her agency, as much as it is used in the spirit of resistance to the law, is embodied by someone whose kinship ties situate her at the very center of political power (she is, as Sina Kramer puts it, excluded *within*).[13] Her crime is that she ventures outside of the city to bury her brother – not that she desperately tries to make it into a city that refuses her entry.

It nevertheless remains the case that the actions of Antigone, who stubbornly and courageously opposed state law and patriarchal power, come to life in circulating images of contemporary protests and stand-offs between daring women and the male powers that be: Whether in the now famous image of Tess Asplund, who stood up to uniformed demonstrators in a Nazi demonstration in Borlänge, Sweden, in May 2015; or that of Ieshia Evans, protesting the death of Alton Sterling near the headquarters of the Police Department in Baton Rouge, in July

[12] Quinta Jurecic, "A Choice Between Cruelty and Mercy."

[13] For a rich analysis of Antigone's situatedness as illustrative of the kind of exclusion that occurs *within* a political body, according to the logic of constitutive exclusion, see Sina Kramer, *Excluded Within: The (Un)Intelligibility of Radical Political Actors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), especially pp. 133–144.

2016 (later detained by law enforcement); or, finally, that of an unnamed young demonstrator facing down a riot policeman during a pro-democracy protest in Santiago, Chile, in September 2016. Notably, these are all women of color standing up not only to patriarchy but to a racist state apparatus and a police force that has rendered Black and Brown lives criminal by decree.

It is to Chile that I want to turn in this essay, and more specifically, to Sebastián Lelio's 2017 film *A Fantastic Woman* (*Una mujer fantástica*), which won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2018. The film tells the story of a trans woman, Marina, grappling with a double loss: that of her lover and that of her right to grieve. It was well received and much celebrated within the queer community for offering a rich account of trans experience, and for casting a trans actress, Daniela Vega, in the role as Marina. In what follows, I want to suggest that we read Marina as echoing the fate of Antigone, as their lives and stories intersect in myriad ways, the most obvious of which is their shared experience of being refused to publicly mourn and partake in the burial of their loved ones. I will offer a reading of the film through the lens of *Antigone*, as I think about the tragic elements of our own culture as well as the specific ways in which trans experience might activate but also complicate themes from the original Sophoclean drama. Through the figure of Marina, I hope to offer a queer imaginary that both returns us to and moves us beyond the one Antigone herself provided.

A Fantastic Woman, A Fantastic Antigone: On Trans Grief

When Marina's partner Orlando suddenly dies from an aneurism, she finds herself rejected by his family and banned from his funeral. The two have just celebrated her birthday, dining and dancing, and their relationship is presented as one of deep and mutual love. When Orlando wakes up not feeling well, Marina rushes him to the hospital, where he dies within hours, and that

event sets into motion a series of unpleasant encounters with doctors, police officers, Orlando's ex-wife and adult son, and more broadly a social fabric that, unlike Orlando, fails to see Marina for what she is – a truly fantastic woman.

If Antigone was fighting state power embodied in a patriarchal tyrant (Creon), Marina is instead faced with a cascade of micro aggressions and everyday individual and institutional prejudice that serve to question her very existence. The doctor in the hospital insists on using male pronouns, and casts suspicion on Marina because of the bruises and wounds found on Orlando's dead body (resulting from him falling down the stairs as they rushed to the hospital). A police officer called into the hospital demands that she show her ID and refuses to record her chosen name in the report. Another police officer shows up at the restaurant where she works and wants to know if Orlando was paying her for sex. The officer proceeds to require that she come to the police station the following day, without warning her in advance that the purpose of that visit is an intrusive medical examination, where Marina is forced to undress to be photographed (a scene in which the director, thankfully, resists the temptation to make us into complicit voyeurists, by ensuring that the camera remains on her face when she strips naked). And of course, there is the ongoing abuse directed at her from Orlando's family. His son, Bruno, repeatedly trespasses into her home, steals her dog, compares her to an animal, tells her he does not know *what* she is (while stubbornly failing to get her name right), and ultimately gangs up with two friends to force Marina into their car, taping her face tight, and leaving her in an alley, trembling, as she catches a glimpse of herself in a window that reflects the disfigured monster that *they* have been seeing all along.[14] And then there is Sonia, the ex-wife, whose ice-cold penetrating gaze and sharp tongue are aimed at undoing her very existence.

Taken together, these experiences pile up, and the infamous glass ceiling that has prevented women from taking to the sky is

[14] *Una Mujer Fantástica*, directed by Sebastián Lelio (2017), 1.07.15–1.10.20.

here metaphorized through the mighty wind that Marina struggles to tackle as she navigates her way through narrow-minded bigotry and never-ending discrimination.[15] She is simultaneously pathologized and criminalized: her very existence is on trial. And, as Judith Butler remarks about Antigone in the final chapter of *Antigone's Claim*: "She is one for whom open grieving is itself a crime."[16] To be sure, trans folk have a particularly complex relationship with grief, not only because of this societal refusal to acknowledge their relations as legitimate ones, but also because of the manifold ways in which the very process of transitioning tends to be overshadowed by cis-grief (whether it be that of parents 'losing' the child they once had, or partners grieving the 'loss' of the lover they first met).[17] And while important work in trans studies has been undertaken to attend to and complicate our collective response to the loss of trans lives – especially trans of color lives that have been lost to acts of violence – less has been said about what it means to take up the work of grief *as* a trans person.[18]

[15] Lelio, *Una Mujer Fantástica*, 1.00.28–1.01.15.

[16] Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 79.

[17] Sly Sarkisova explains: "Our social spheres online and in real time are deluged with accounts and experiences of parental grief at a transgender child coming out, at a partner's 'loss' of their loved one in the gender they preferred… with accounts of strangers' unsavoury reactions and unsolicited observations that 'so-and-so used to be so…pretty/handsome before…it's such a shame'" (Sly Sarkisova, "On Transgender Grief," November 7, 2014, accessed at https://www.slysarkisovacounselling.com/single-post/2014/11/07/On-Transgender-Grief on July 14, 2020). For an example of a scholarly study of the grief experienced by parents of trans children whose transition is viewed as loss, see Ines Testoni & Manuela Anna Pinducciu, "Grieving those Who Still Live: Loss Experienced by Parents of Transgender Children," *Gender Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2019), pp. 142–162.

[18] For important discussions of our response to and understanding of the loss of trans lives, with particular emphasis on violence against trans women of color, see, for example, Viviane Namaste, "Undoing Theory: The 'Transgender Question' and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo-American Feminist Theory," in McCann, Carole R. & Kim, Seung-Kyung (Eds.), *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives* (New York: Routledge: 2017), pp. 608–621; C. Riley Snorton & Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife," in Stryker, Susan & Aizura, Aren Z. (Eds.), *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*

This underscores the need to establish trans spaces for mourning, for engaging the past and the losses one has experienced on one's own terms. The trans social worker Sly Sarkisova speaks to this need:

> We need our own space to mourn our losses. We need to create that space. A space unknown to people with cis privilege. A space individual to our needs and experiences, and collectively respectful of the common experiences of transphobic erasure. […] For transgender wholeness and realness, maybe we owe it to ourselves to create rituals that honour our grief and uniqueness, that restore and resist and fortify against any other narrative than our own.[19]

Basil Soper echoes these sentiments in a piece on his own grief as a trans person: "Today, I wish for my entire beautiful, resilient trans family throughout the country – and around the world – to be open to the grief we are feeling. Our mourning may well help illuminate the path home, to a place that is safe and peaceful and our own amidst the exhausting work of putting our lives on the line to enact change."[20] The most explicit attempt to offer a

(New York and London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 66–76; and Sarah Lamble, "Retelling Racialized Violence, Remaking White Innocence: The Politics of Interlocking Oppressions in Transgender Day of Remembrance," *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2008), pp. 24–42. For important analysis of collective loss and mourning within the trans community, see Che Gossett, "Silhouettes of Defiance: Memorializing Historical Sites of Queer and Transgender Resistance in an Age of Neoliberal Inclusivity," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, pp. 580–590. Gossett, who draws from Jacques Derrida's work on mourning and the archive for examining our memorialization of events such as the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969 and the Compton's Cafeteria Riot in San Francisco in 1966, asks: "What is the relationship between the memorialization of sites of queer and trans resistance and the politics of loss and mourning?" (588). Gossett's worry is that much historiography and memory work has served to erase the trauma and violence that queer and trans folk experience in the present, by relegating it to the past. They appeal to the concept of "impossible mourning" (588) to describe the condition under which we might grieve trans life in the wake of media's and the state's perpetuation of transphobic deaths.

[19] Sarkisova, "On Transgender Grief."

[20] Basil Soper, "I Am Trans, and Today My Grief Is Visible," *The Advocate*, March 31, 2016. Accessed at https://www.advocate.com/commentary/2016/3/31/i-am-trans-and-

space for collective grief is the Transgender Day of Remembrance, which is celebrated every year on November 20 to memorialize all those who have lost their lives to transphobic violence. But *A Fantastic Woman* offers a welcome alternative imaginary that frames grief in trans terms, while exposing the tragic legacy of trans grief – the societal denial of one's right to mourn *as* a trans person.

Butler's interest in the figure of Antigone stems in part from their own reactions to a cultural moment in which the public ungrievability of certain losses – queer losses – became acutely tangible, namely the AIDS epidemic and the kinship crisis that arose in its wake. Butler asks: "which social arrangements can be recognized as legitimate love, and which human losses can be explicitly grieved as real and consequential losses?"[21] Who gets to grieve and bury whom, and under what conditions? What of life-long partners and lovers who in the eyes of society and the blood kin of those who have died – kin who may have never recognized or approved of their bonds of love and desire in the first place – can have no legitimate or even intelligible claim to sorrow?

For Butler, Antigone embodies pressing contemporary concerns about loss and mourning – ones that reverberate through much of their later work: What lives matter? What lives are grievable? What lives count as properly human? As Marina herself notes, after she has attempted to enter the church during Orlando's wake only to be thrown out by his family: "Saying goodbye to a loved one when he dies is a basic human right, isn't it?"[22] And what do the boundaries we draw when responding to these questions tell us about normativity and the frames for intelligibility? Antigone's – and Marina's – "trespass on the norms of kinship and gender" ultimately "exposes the precarious character of those norms, their sudden and disturbing transferability, and their capacity to be reiterated in contexts and

today-my-grief-visible on July 16, 2020.

[21] Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 24.

[22] Lelio, *Una Mujer Fantástica*, 1.06.40–1.06.44.

in ways that are not fully to be anticipated."[23] As Chanter and Kirkland put it, Antigone is "an aberrant, itinerant, queer, queered, and queering figure."[24] And this marks both our heroines as threats to the social order. They represent "not kinship in its ideal form but its deformation and displacement," which in turn puts "the reigning regimes of representation into crisis" and forces upon us questions that for some might be ground shaking: "What new schemas of intelligibility make our loves legitimate and recognizable, our losses true losses?"[25]

In our present, these questions were again activated in the context of those, mostly queer and trans people of color, who lost their loved ones in the mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Here, the relation between desire and grief – and the capacity of each to both connect us and to displace us – came to the forefront. As Butler, again, reminds us, this time in *Precarious Life*: "We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. This seems so clearly the case with grief, but it can be so only because it was already the case with desire."[26] What this means is that "we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them."[27] And for queer and trans folk – especially queer and trans folk of color – dispossession is an acutely felt lived reality. In queer communities, the nightclub comes to represent a place where dispossession can be felt in the more positive way that Butler appeals to in their work. As Che Gossett remarks in a 2016 blog post about the Orlando shooting: "Queer and/or trans nightlife has always been about survival and creating temporary autonomous and temporary fabulous zones that are as much affective – a structure of queer and trans feeling – as material in its electric choreography of bodies."[28]

[23] Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 24.
[24] Chanter & Kirkland, *The Returns of Antigone*, p. 6.
[25] Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 24.
[26] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso Books, 2006), p. 23.
[27] Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 24.
[28] Che Gossett, "Pulse, Beat, Rhythm, Cry: Orlando and the Queer and Trans Necro-

And so, Marina too seeks out the pulsating rhythms on the dance floor, in the most explicitly campy scene of the film. Here, desire and grief overlap, in the shared figure of the pulsating body, and in the figural sharing of pulsating bodies. Amidst glitter, eyelashes, and sweat, there is the fist in the air, the Antigonean defiance, here staged not in the blazing light outside the city walls, but under the strobe lights of a queer nightclub. And on the dance floor Marina reunites with her Orlando, whose ghost-like appearance reminds us that he, like Polyneices, is undead – not quite living but nevertheless not yet at peace underground. His ghost ultimately helps Marina find his soon-to-be-cremated body, allowing her, at last, to bid her final farewell.

The Tragic Legacy of Sexual Difference: Woman Outsider

It is worth noting that whatever group or interest Antigone is brought in to defend – religious, cultural, or racial minorities; guerilla fighters; spiritual leaders; war-torn people; the economically oppressed – it is always as a *woman* that she appears on stage. Even, as in some contemporary examples (and of course already on the ancient Greek stage), where the cast is all male. In Athol Fugar's *The Island*, set in an unnamed prison based on the one in which Nelson Mandela was held on Robben Island, John and Winston are cellmates who spend their days doing back-breaking labor, and their nights rehearsing Sophocles' *Antigone* to present to their fellow inmates. For Winston, who is cast to play Antigone, the prospect of having to wear female attire (wig and breasts) provokes intense anxiety about his sexual identity, and of having his fellow inmates make him into a laughingstock. "Despite his vociferous protests," Chanter notes, he "ends up playing the role of Antigone after all," and to his relief nobody laughs.[29] While homophobia is rampant in the

politics of Loss and Mourning," Verso Blog (July 5, 2016), Accessed at https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2747-pulse-beat-rhythm-cry-orlando-and-the-queer-and-trans-necropolitics-of-loss-and-mourning on July 7, 2020.

[29] Chanter, *Whose Antigone?*, p. 92.

prison, Winston and John are ultimately willing to put their heteronormative attachments aside, since they can relate so deeply to Antigone's quest for justice. They, like she, are "being punished for what they know to be right," and so they need Antigone to tell their own story.[30]

Sexual difference stood at the center of the original Sophoclean drama, and sexual difference continues to mark Antigone's story as she is stubbornly resurrected. It is *as a woman* that Antigone has a moral duty to bury her kin, and yet it is also *as a woman* that she is barred from a political landscape that seems unable to make sense of her agency on the public scene. Ismene, her sister, tries to prevent her from breaking Creon's law precisely by appealing to their sexual identity: "You ought to realize we are only women / not meant in nature to fight against men."[31] And Creon reveals his own misogynistic anxieties when it dawns on him that it is a woman who has disobeyed his decree. Like Winston, he fears emasculation, and the subsequent risk of being made into a laughingstock. Antigone's transgression, her courageous act, and the heroic death it anticipates, puts his masculinity into question: "We cannot give victory to a woman," Creon exclaims, and "we must not let people say that a woman beat us."[32]

As Cecilia Sjöholm has argued, Antigone, both through her deed and through her death, challenges our most basic presuppositions about masculinity and femininity. She observes the mutuality of this reversal: "It has often been pointed out that Antigone does not act like a woman. It has less often been observed that Creon does not act like a man."[33] We are reminded that binary gender roles are co-dependent – masculinity needs femininity to uphold its own dominant status of active man-

[30] Chanter, *Whose Antigone?*, p. 93.

[31] Sophocles, *Antigone*, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Sophocles I*, transl. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), ll. 61–62.

[32] Sophocles, *Antigone*, ll. 678 and 680.

[33] Cecilia Sjöholm, *The Antigone Complex: Ethics and the Invention of Feminine Desire* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 44.

hood, and femininity needs masculinity to maintain any of its current meaning of passive submission. In an effort to protect and maintain his masculine identity, Creon thus insists on viewing and treating Antigone *as a woman*, and she is repeatedly reminded that she must respect the limitations imposed on her due to her sex – despite the fact that she herself never evinces it.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that the many scattered comments about sexual difference in the text do not, as has commonly been suggested, simply point to the well-known tension between an old (matriarchal) society and a new (patriarchal) one.[34] They point, rather, to something paradoxical about the political order that is being inaugurated within the text, namely Greek democracy. At its very foundation is a feminine subject who is its condition of possibility, and yet, who ultimately must be excluded in order for it to exist at all. In acting, as one who has no right to act, Antigone, in Butler's words, "speaks within the language of entitlement from which she is excluded."[35] She is, indeed, an "everlasting irony" or an "internal enemy," as Hegel famously suggested.[36] She figures as someone who cannot be contained within the boundaries of the polis. Butler draws attention to "the way in which the boundaries of the public and the political spheres were secured through the production of a constitutive outside."[37] Woman – indeed Antigone – is this outside. But as a constitutive outside she simultaneously finds herself at the very heart of what remains inside. The polis would not exist without her. And yet the polis can only exist without her. For Antigone, the question is not – as for one of our modern tragic heroes – whether she should be or not be. What is at stake, for her, is the possibility of belonging or not belonging – to be one of them or not be one of them. And insofar as she does not belong, insofar as she is not one of them, she cannot be at all.

[34] Fanny Söderbäck, "Impossible Mourning: Sophocles Reversed," in *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, pp. 65–82.
[35] Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 82.
[36] G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 288, §475.
[37] Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 82. See also Kramer, *Excluded Within*.

The Tragic Legacy of Trans Exclusion: On Being Recognized as a Woman

Where then does this leave us in terms of Marina? As the title of the film suggests, she is not just a woman, she is a *fantastic* woman. There is something extraordinary about her persistence, her strength, her grace, and, in the final scene, her voice. She is a force of nature who defies forces of nature, such as in the scene when she leans into the mighty wind. And yet, her predicament is that others fail to recognize her as, precisely, a woman. Aretha Franklin's words on the soundtrack notwithstanding ("You make me feel like a natural woman"), Orlando's family fundamentally fails to recognize her as the woman – the fantastic woman – that she is, and this is the seemingly irreconcilable conflict (the tragic tension) that organizes the film.

It is important to note that the decree that Marina stay away from Orlando's wake and funeral – that she be excluded from the rites of burial like Antigone before her had been banned from burying her brother – is pronounced not by a male tyrant, but by Orlando's ex-wife, Sonia, a cis woman who refuses to recognize Marina as a fellow woman. Meeting in a parking garage, to which Marina has been summoned to return Orlando's car, the two women face each other for the first time. In the only scene in the film where Marina is subjected to deadnaming, Sonia forcefully denies her the right to grieve in public. In fact, she denies her the right to be at all. "When I look at you, I don't know what I'm seeing. A chimera, that's what I see," she notes with disdain in her voice.[38]

We hear echoes here of generations of trans exclusionary feminists who – oftentimes under the pretext of protecting women only spaces – have accused trans women of deception. Janice G. Raymond, whose infamous book *The Transsexual Empire* is paradigmatic (although by no means unique) in this regard, charged trans women with engaging in the constant act of raping women's bodies, "by reducing the female form to an

[38] Lelio, *Una Mujer Fantástica*, 0.47.45–0.47.59.

artifact, appropriating the body for themselves" since, she insisted, rape can "be accomplished by deception."[39] The accusation – perhaps most violently articulated by Raymond but still common within and beyond feminist discourse on trans women – tends to be that they have benefited from male privilege prior to their transition, and therefore have no right to claim the category 'woman' (since one's capacity to embody this category authentically, so the argument goes, results from one's particular position within structures of privilege and oppression).[40] This view has been echoed in our own present by women ranging from J. K. Rowling to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. When, in an interview, the latter was asked if trans women are women, she insisted on the fact that trans women are *trans* women, offering an explanation:

> I think if you've lived in the world as a man with the privileges the world accords to men and then sort of change, switch, gender, it's difficult for me to accept that then we can equate your experience with the experience of a woman who has lived from the beginning in the world as a woman, and who has not been accorded those privileges that men are.[41]

[39] Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), p. 104. In "The *Empire* Strikes Back" (oftentimes described as the founding text of trans theory), Sandy Stone – who was the explicit target of Raymond's attack – rebukes these transphobic claims and describes Raymond's project as premised upon the assumption that "transsexuals are constructs of an evil phallocratic empire and were designed to invade women's spaces and appropriate women's power." See Sandy Stone, "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in Paula Treichler, Cartwright, Lisa; & Penley, Constance (Eds.), *The Invisible Woman: Imaging Technologies, Gender and Science* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 288.

[40] Talia Mae Bettcher labels this position "the radical feminist argument" in her historical overview of transgender and intersex theory and politics. See Talia Mae Bettcher, "Intersexuality, Transgender, and Transsexuality," in Disch, Lisa & Hawkesworth, Mary (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 411.

[41] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in an interview on Britain's Channel 4 News, March 4, 2017. Accessed at https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/3/15/14910900/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-transgender-women-comments-apology on July 9, 2020.

The view presented here is flawed not only because it is trans exclusionary, but also because it assumes that feminist solidarity is grounded in a monolithically shared experience of womanhood, and therefore fails to account for the complex manner in which each individual woman's experience of oppression must be understood at the intersection between race, class, geographic location, gender presentation, sexuality, and so on. And while trans feminists like Emi Koyama may be right in suggesting that male privilege in this context should not be *entirely* ignored – trans experience, she argues, must be framed in terms of "a dynamic interaction between male privilege and the disadvantage of being trans" – it seems to me obvious, if we take Marina as an example, that the disadvantages of her being trans far outweighs any potential privileges she might have enjoyed by virtue of her sex assigned at birth.[42] Trans actress Laverne Cox articulates the crux of the matter succinctly: "The irony of my life is that prior to transition I was called a girl and after I am often called a man."[43]

Talia Mae Bettcher has offered the perhaps most systematic analysis of the lived reality – and inherent violence – that results from this view of trans folks as engaging in an act of pretense. She describes trans people as being forced to navigate a double bind between make-believe (through masquerading) and deception (through passing), where the two options available only lead to further marginalization and increased vulnerability to violence. Either "disclose 'who one is' and come out as a pretender or masquerader, or refuse to disclose (be a deceiver) and

[42] Emi Koyama, "The Transfeminist Manifesto," in McCann, Carole R. & Kim, Seung-Kyung (Eds.), *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives* (New York: Routledge: 2017), p. 152. Julia Serano introduced the term *trans-misogyny* to describe forms of discrimination aimed specifically at trans women. See Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007), p. 13. She also speaks of the devaluation of feminine males as "effemimania" (129, 287).

[43] Laverne Cox responding to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Twitter, March 12, 2017. Accessed at https://twitter.com/lavernecox/status/840714224183652354?lang=en on July 10, 2020.

run the risk of forced disclosure, the effect of which is exposure as a liar."[44] She is careful to point out that this "deceiver/pretender bind is part of a larger system of oppression" – one that involves sexual violence against women as well as racial oppression.[45]

The charge of deception, articulated by Raymond and others, reverberates through Sonia's observations when she describes Marina as a chimera, and repeats Bruno's dehumanizing statement: "When I look at you, I don't know what I'm seeing." Both of them consciously use "what" rather than "who" to name Marina, robbing her of her uniqueness and reducing her to a non-human object, a chimera, a monstrous illusion.[46] She is at one and the same time too much of a woman and not enough of a woman, and therefore fails to be recognized as, exactly, a woman. In Koyama's formulation, "every time a group of women previously silenced begins to speak out," other women "are challenged to rethink their idea of who they represent and what they stand for."[47] We are reminded of Sojourner Truth's pressing question, articulated already in 1851 from the vantage point of a Black woman: "Ain't I a Woman?"[48]

If women have always been defined by the male gaze – and as Luce Irigaray has forcefully argued, woman as we know it is nothing but an inferior mirror image of man, not a subject in her own right – then it seems evident that this predicament is

[44] Talia Mae Bettcher, "Evil-Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2007), p. 50.

[45] Bettcher, "Evil-Deceivers and Make-Believers," p. 56.

[46] The distinction I am making here between the 'what' and the 'who' originates in Hannah Arendt's discussion of uniqueness in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 179. It is developed at length in the work of Adriana Cavarero, for whom concrete singularity is embodied in the 'who' while abstract universality is marked by whatness. See, for example, Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, transl. Paul A. Kottman (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 9.

[47] Koyama, "The Transfeminist Manifesto," p. 150.

[48] Sojourner Truth in a speech delivered at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, on May 29, 1851. A transcript of the speech was published in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* on June 21, 1851.

even more acute for trans women, like Marina, whose being in the world is constantly subjected to scrutiny and examination, from cis women and men who frame them as always already outside the very category of the human. This notion is reflected, literally, through the use of mirrors in the film. Time and again, Marina finds herself framed by a mirror, forced to look at herself through the eyes of those around her. We see this as she walks down the street and encounters two men moving a large mirror. As they pass by Marina her flickering image appears in the frame, only to disappear as they continue on their way, leaving nothing but the wall behind the mirror for us to see.

Remember also the monstrous image of Marina's taped face reflected in a window, bearing witness to the extreme forms of violence that trans folk – and especially trans women of color – are subjected to on a regular basis. Or the fear in her eyes as her body parts are reflected in the lens of a camera meant to document her anatomy, reducing it to a genital schema that can register but two options: 'naturally' male or 'naturally' female. And we know, of course, that the approval (or not) of that medical penetrating gaze – and the gatekeeping that ensues – is far from inconsequential for trans folk who are seeking to transition, whether this entails gender affirming surgeries, a name change, access to public bathrooms, or correct use of pronouns. Dean Spade describes this predicament powerfully: "*Even though I don't believe in real, it matters if other people see me as real. If not, I'm a mutilator, an imitator, and worst of all, I can't access surgery.*"[49]

In a scene toward the very end of the film, however, we are presented with a different kind of image, one where, perhaps for the first time, we see Marina, reflected through a mirror, through her own eyes. Lying naked on her bed, a round mirror placed between her legs, Marina lingers on her own reflection. Here the mirror covers over the very body parts that were subject to scrutiny in the medical exam. They no longer matter.

[49] Dean Spade, "Resisting Medicine, Re/modeling Gender," *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 15 (2003), p. 20.

What we see is a woman looking back at us, returning the gaze, and a nudity that signals pleasure and ease rather than objectification and medicalization. The image represents the beginning of another resurrection: Marina refuses to let the gaze of others define her. And she refuses to let others mandate her mourning process.

As we saw earlier, on the dance floor, fist in air, Marina gathers the strength she needs to make her journey to the graveyard, her final journey with and for Orlando before she can move on with her life. Here she comes across his family again, as they are driving home from the cemetery, and her rage is channeled in a forceful stroke of exalted defiance. Marina climbs up on the roof of their car, and proceeds to jump up and down while demanding that Bruno return Diablo – the dog she had shared with Orlando – to her. Hunching inside the car, both Bruno and Sonia begin to crumble, and again we see a glimpse of the final scene in *Antigone*, where Creon stands alone on the battlefield, hunched under the weight of his own hubris, grappling with the losses he has suffered as a result of his failure to recognize Antigone's right to grieve. Except here, in the film, no such moral maturation takes place. While Orlando's family members drive off in fear, the experience has not changed them one bit. They will go on with their prejudiced lives. They will never be able to see Marina as someone worthy of their respect, or as someone Orlando could have actually loved. They will never see her as a woman, as someone whose grief matters. For them, Orlando and Marina's love will always be a perversion, on par with the incestual legacy of Antigone.

But if the Creons of the film fail to accomplish moral emancipation, its Antigone enters upon a more hopeful path than her ancient predecessor. Marina may not be recognized by Orlando's family, but she is not buried alive. She goes on living, in all of her fantasticness. And we are again reminded that, while Antigone might offer a helpful framework for broaching our own political present, she is also at a distance from us, and even more so at a distance from Marina, who is no Theban-European princess but a working-class trans woman in contemporary

Chile. An Antigone-figure of sorts, Marina is also much more than that, and her being trans as well as concretely situated within a Latin-American context renders her irreducible to the legacy of Antigone. The latter, after all, offers only a limited political imaginary, one that can take us only so far as we travel beyond Europe and beyond cis-feminist assumptions about privilege, grief, and what it means to be a "woman." Marina reminds us of the pressing need for queer and trans imaginaries that not only confirm but also resist the Sophoclean political framework, pointing toward a political future where Antigone need not be buried alive but can go on living, despite her transgression.

And if Antigone looks on in silence as her story is reborn, time and again, across the globe, Marina leaves us singing, her voice lifting towards the ceiling, a voice she has worked hard to cultivate in a culture that does all it can to keep her silent. A voice that expresses her singular uniqueness, as a woman, but always also as so much more than just a woman.[50] Creon might say, as he did to Antigone in a famous line from the play: "There is too much of you!"[51] For Creon, Antigone will always be too much woman – a figure of excess. For Sonia, Marina is not woman enough. Perhaps the emphasis on "woman," in both cases, is ultimately misleading. Perhaps what is at stake, in the end, is Marina's capacity to vocalize her singular embodied uniqueness. One inevitably shaped by the mourning process we have witnessed (in all of its complexity and impossibility), but one that is ultimately also irreducible to that process, always in excess of it. Marina, center stage, singing. A voice. A life. A fantastic woman.

[50] Cavarero has offered the most systematic examination of the human voice as a vehicle for uniqueness. See Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, transl. Paul A. Kottman (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005).
[51] Sophokles, *Antigone*, l. 573.