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“I did the deed, if she agrees”: Ismene and Performative Allyship

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Declaration: This submission is my own work. Any quotation from, or description of, the work of others is acknowledged herein by reference to the sources, whether published or unpublished.

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ABSTRACT

In the seemingly inexhaustible range of adaptations of Sophocles' *Antigone*, as well as in relevant scholarship, Ismene's narrative presence is consistently overlooked, for she is (mis)taken to be a character lacking in political agency. In this dissertation I examine Ismene's sociopolitical dimensions, as mediated by her fixed or chosen identities, aiming to showcase that, in her deliberate (in)actions, Ismene emerges as a political subject that becomes paradigmatic of the 'performative ally.' Comparing the classical Ismene to two contemporary reconfigurations of the Ismene-figure, namely Bryan Doerries' *Antigone in Ferguson* (2016) and Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni: an African Antigone* (1999), one can recognise an unchangeable, static version of Ismene versus a complete reimagining of her political potentiality. Through a parallel analysis of Ismene and performative allyship, I argue that her articulation of an alternative politics to that of Antigone is instructive for those who consider themselves 'allies' or 'allied to' a political cause, since—finding one's own reflection in Ismene—one can potentially identify, and hopefully evolve past, performative allyship in one's own political existence.

Keywords: Ismene, performative allyship, Sophocles, social justice, activism, ally

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INTRODUCTION

And you your crooked thumbs
 lie tucked to their palms useless. I thought
 better of you, sister. But no matter.

—Lee Peterson, “Antigone to Ismene,” 15-17

I would rather be the brave sister,
 The one found in the cave
 Cold and silent as stone.
 I would rather have been my brother Eteocles,
 Defender of the city, bravely driven to
 Extinguish the horror of his birth.
 I would be Polyneices, unable to accept the status
 Of outsider, despite its familiarity,
 And lie forsaken on the bloody dirt.
 But I would rather not be
 This other daughter of Oedipus,
 Weaker, alone, full of regret,
 Abandoned even by the poet
 Who forgot to close my fate,
 My story as open as indifference.

—Tracy Tensen, “I Am Ismene”

Why not Ismene?

As if condemned to perpetually remain in the shadow of her notorious older sister, Ismene has maintained the backseat in the striking majority of rewrites of the most iconic Sophoclean tragedy. Both in dramatic performances and in relevant criticism, there seems to be a widely—though not universally—held assumption that Ismene, as she appears in the original text, is a less compelling or a more one-dimensional character than the title heroine. On the contrary, Antigone has proven to be a sort of shapeshifter, as well as a malleable symbol of resistance to the status quo, generating a seemingly inexhaustible range of adaptations to fit the multifarious contexts to which her agon can be seen as relevant. Antigone the dramatis persona is both a victim of fate who fulfills her tragic destiny, as Ancient Greek tragedy

demands, and a subversive political actor¹ who paves her own path and has to face the consequences of her own actions. Whether one ultimately concurs with her course of action or not, Antigone has earned, if not the admiration, then certainly the esteem and attention of readers and critics for nearly two and a half millennia. Her revolutionary act, while simplistic in terms of its planning and execution, is sophisticated in terms of its intent and reasoning, cutting through multiple axes of our existence as ‘political animals’ (Aristotle) with distinct political stances.

Assuming that it is not merely the act of burying Polyneices, but the causes and effects of Antigone’s civil disobedience (in the same way that it is not merely Creon’s decree but his treatment of the unruly political subject) that have captured collective imagination, I propose that it is worth granting Ismene’s narrative presence and its respective causes and effects the same degree of speculation and experimentation—in criticism and in adaptation/dramaturgy alike. The enduring fascination with the text has bred creative reconfigurations and theoretical analyses across academic fields that are focused primarily on the ostensible binary opposition between Antigone, the noble dissenter, and Creon, the hubristic ruler. In more recent critical readings that transcend or challenge this binary, Antigone’s future spouse and Creon’s son, Haemon, is often read as a mediator between the two foes, embodying a par excellence democratic subject.² Haemon’s opposition to and reasoning against his father’s despotism is clearly articulated within the play (635-765);³ thus, he is given a chance to not only publicly challenge Creon’s edicts, but, through “questioning his father’s capacity to exercise *phronesis*,” to present his own political perspective (Walker 203).⁴ Haemon is also significant in terms of the plot progression of the play, since it is his, and by extension Eurydice’s, suicide that sets into motion Creon’s tisis and triggers the lysis

¹ The critical debate over whether Antigone’s actions are political or apolitical is vast and ongoing. Especially with reference to perhaps the most influential critique of Sophocles’s *Antigone* by Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, who introduces the binary opposition between family/polis and positions Antigone as an apolitical actor, with her interests and motivations lying within the sphere of kinship. Judith Butler (2000) and Slavoj Žižek (1989 and elsewhere) theorised a much commented-upon political Antigone, leaving Ismene almost entirely outside their analysis. Atkinson (2016) posits that Antigone and Creon both “represent laws that are distinctly apolitical” [219], viewing the chorus as political subjects par excellence, and Ismene and Haemon as dialectical political actors, a notion also presented by Kathryn Walker, who claims that “[t]he secondary characters in *Antigone* suggest that a struggle between two conceptions of the self—and, from these two perspectives, what constitutes ethically good behaviour—is at the heart of the play. The Guard and Tiresias/the Chorus occupy opposing extremes, and Ismene, Haemon, and Creon represent the more complex middle ground” (Walker 211).

² For a Haemon-centered analysis, see Derek W M Barker, *Tragedy and Citizenship: Conflict, Reconciliation, and Democracy from Haemon to Hegel*, SUNY Press, 2009.

³ Unless otherwise specified, all citations from the original text and translation will refer to Loeb Classical Library’s 1994 edition, *Sophocles* (vol. II), translated and edited by Hugh Lloyd-Jones.

⁴ Patricia J. Johnson, in her article “Woman’s Third Face: A Psycho/Social Reconsideration of Sophocles’ *Antigone*,” also pairs Ismene with Haemon in terms of their psychoanalytic profiles, arguing that “Ismene’s and Haemon’s prominent roles in the tragedy gain new importance as symbolic advocates of a normal resolution of the oedipal conflict: Ismene as the voice of reason, arguing for a more moderate if problematic approach to their brother’s fate, and Haemon as the appropriate parental replacement” (Johnson 375).

of the tragedy.

That said, there is a voice besides Haemon's that attempts to bridge the ideological and practical chasm between what Antigone and Creon represent and do. Ismene's non-confrontational figure withholds the potentiality for a renegotiation of the rights and duties of the citizen and the complex and interdependent relationship between public and private life; a possibility that is nonetheless neither ventured in the classical text nor explored in the vast majority of its rewritings. It is true that

Ismene is usually criticized for several failures, among them an inability to discern the moral problem in Antigone's terms, a lack of confidence in her own view, a tendency to change her mind and move too easily from one position to another. (Eifrig 188)

However, contrary to popular belief, Ismene does not just passively resign to her fate but, much like her sister, makes her own personal and political choices, as an equally sophisticated subject/agent—with distinct and clearly articulated priorities, motivations, desires, and fears—albeit a less polemical and inspirational voice. Tempting as it might be to forgo Ismene's contributions both in the dramatic action and in the philosophical bearings of the play, since when compared to her fiery, audacious, and resolute sister, Ismene appears idle, meek, and wavering, the often blatant disregard toward her meaning-making presence cannot but beg the question: what is it about Ismene, that has sentenced her to be viewed with indifference, condescension, or even derision by most of her audience? And what are the implications of the tendency to ignore Ismene's political position? Is it true that “silencing Ismene is itself a revealing and worrying political gesture” (Goldhill, *Sophocles* 235) and under which prism do we concur to or oppose this gesture? Considering the numerous Antigones borne across time and space and their ever-negotiable symbolic significance, it is worth interrogating whether the respective Ismenes could be said to hold equal symbolic potential. Ismene as we know her can be said to be a proponent of Martin Luther King's concept of “negative peace” (as will be discussed extensively in Chapter 2), but is she actually more than that if we examine her contradictory behaviour throughout the play?

This dissertation sets out to address these questions, by placing Ismene instead of Antigone at the center stage and attempting to sketch the portrait(s) of Ismene the political actor. Interesting though a psychoanalytical or characterological analysis of Ismene might be, my intention in this study is to re-read through and between Ismene's lines and uncover a significant and diachronically relevant political symbolism behind her performance(s). The axis of my analysis will connect the two pivotal points in Ismene's character development:

the moment she (privately) refuses to participate in Polyneices' 'unlawful' burial and the moment she (publicly) claims to have done "the deed." Each of these two acts has drawn critical attention and has been rigorously studied—but always in contradistinction to Antigone's respective conduct by which Ismene's is completely overshadowed. Indeed the most thorough (and most charitable) interpretation of Ismene as a fully fledged individual has been Bonnie Honig's reading in *Antigone, Interrupted*, which has Ismene be Antigone's secret accomplice, the aid to Antigone's abetting. Although a fascinating read and not completely implausible a concept, it is interesting that the richest published academic analysis of Ismene's character would have her deviate from her canonical standpoint and commit an act she (according to the general consensus) did not actually do, as if this could be the only way to redeem her and elevate her to a more momentous role in the tragedy. Returning to the question posed above, it is as if the original Ismene is not 'enough,' even though she is "the figure with which we can identify . . .—kind, considerate, sensitive, prepared to give way and compromise, pathetic, 'human' in contrast to Antigone, who goes to the limits" (Žižek 131). One of the possible answers, as this work will contend, is that Ismene has been immortalised as the lesser sibling precisely because she reminds one of a more realistic and less romantic political existence. Hence, Ismene can, in fact, emerge as an equally as powerful and enduring symbol as her sister—not of defiance toward and direct action against State Law and Order, but of performative allyship.

What is performative allyship?

Though being a familiar term in (digital or physical) activist spaces, performative allyship is a concept so far neither concisely nor categorically defined in academia. Descriptions of (and directives against) performative allyship as a sociopolitical stance abound online, both in informal and formal fora, with the term having massively gained in popularity in the wake of George Floyd's extrajudicial execution by Minnesota police in May 2020, which triggered a massive global response largely propagated and organised through social media.⁵ The concept which is today associated with performative allyship has been articulated in 2018, when Latham Thomas appears to have coined the term 'optical allyship'

⁵ Some indicative sources readily available online that propagate the term are (in chronological order): "Performative Allyship Is Deadly (And What to Do Instead)" (*Forge*, May 2020); "Performative allyship: Do you want to prove you're not racist or are you willing to self-reflect?" (*The Gryphon*, June 2020); "What Is Performative Allyship? Making Sure Anti-Racism Efforts Are Helpful" (*Elle Australia*, June 2020); "Who are the black squares and cutesy illustrations really for?" (*Vox*, June 2020); "What performative allyship looks like in the workplace" (*Fortune*, June 2020); "Performative Allyship: What Are The Signs And Why Leaders Get Exposed" (*Forbes*, November 2020); "Beware Performative Allyship: 3 Signs to Look For" (*Catalyst*, January 2021); "How do you distinguish effective allyship from performative allyship" (*Penn State Law*, February 2021).

to describe “allyship that only serves at the surface level to platform the ‘ally,’ [that] makes a statement but doesn’t go beneath the surface and is not aimed at breaking away from the systems of power that oppress.”⁶ Another articulation of performative allyship as such comes from Luanda Yasmin in her 2020 Youtube video entitled “Performative allyship is not enough.” In the video’s caption, performative allyship is presented as “‘faux allyship’ for personal gratification instead of allyship for the progression of the movement,” while Yasmin further explains during the video:

With allyship comes accountability; the two go hand in hand. One without the other is merely a performative attempt to be painted as progressive. And performative allyship does more for the fake ally’s ego than it does for the cause they claim to support. [...] You have to be willing to be an ally when no one is watching, you have to be willing to be an ally for no reward. You have to be willing to stand up when no one else is standing with you. Because it is easy to be a performative ally, but it is much harder and much more necessary to be an active one. (Yasmin 1:12-1:28, 2:02-2:24, my transcription)⁷

Arianna Ngnomire, on her YouTube channel thereelarianna, sees performative allyship as potentially “damaging to good work,” defining it as

typically, an act on social media or the media at large that convinces viewers that an individual is an ally to whatever cause that they are posting about, [...] something that they can show and literally perform as an ally, without having to do the nitty gritty work. Typically this is also without any recognition of the problems at hand, [...] doesn’t start a conversation [...] does not help the people that they are claiming to be an ally of. (Ngnomire 2:12-3:50, my transcription)⁸

These are definitions which come from Black women who are on the ‘receiving’ end of ‘allyship,’ thus are the voices who should set the tone for the symptomatic reading attempted here that will allow us to identify convergences and contradictions in both cases of allyship as

⁶ The quotation comes from Thomas’ Instagram post caption, which further reads: “I’m not interested in OPTICAL ALLYSHIP. [...] True allyship is about building trust, being consistent, standing up, speaking up, recognizing the struggle and carrying some of the weight, it’s using your God-given sense to figure some of this stuff out and not waiting for folks to tell you. It’s knowing that your voice is powerful alongside marginalized voices - not in front [sic] of or instead of marginalized ones. [...] It’s becoming a great listener and recognizing that just because you’re new to the work, doesn’t mean it’s new. Know that folks have been working all along and you’re stepping into something already in play. [...] It doesn’t happen on its own- you have to constantly engage and challenge yourself- this is a lifelong commitment, not a popular one. Also, why not let other folks recognize you as an ally or label you an activist. [...] please consider if you are really an activist or calling yourself one for the optics.” Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BiPDZkbFJFY/>. Accessed 20 Feb 2021.

⁷ Luanda Yasmin, “Performative allyship is not enough,” *YouTube*, 11 June 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_JkivBzwTQ.

⁸ Arianna Ngnomire (thereelarianna), “Performative Allyship | Reel Talk,” *YouTube*, 12 June 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDkBaTCqiWM. Accessed 20 Feb 2021.

presented in the classical and contemporary texts examined. The only retrievable definition published in an institutional journal presents the point of view of the ally, and views performative allyship as “professing support and solidarity with a marginalized group, but in a way that is not helpful ... [while] the allyship is done in a way that may actually be harmful to ‘the cause’” (Kalina 478).⁹ Performative allyship is closely associated with the also popular term “virtue signalling,” which already has its own entry in the Oxford English Dictionary, defined as “the action or practice of expressing one's views or acting in a way thought to be motivated primarily by a wish to exhibit good character, social conscience, political convictions, etc., or to garner recognition and approval”—a description that reminds one of Antigone as well as Ismene.

Perhaps the reason performative allyship has so far evaded a dictionary, ‘official,’ generally accepted definition is because there are inherent contradictions in how one may understand and interpret the individual words ‘performative’ and ‘ally(ship).’ It is telling that ‘Performative Activism’ has been used in scholarship with a positive connotation to describe activism expressed through the realm of performance arts,¹⁰ while at the same time the past few decades have seen wide theoretical discussion about the concept of performativity far beyond the realm of J. L. Austin’s Speech Acts Theory, and even Butler’s Gender Theory.¹¹ In terms of its political function, “there is a sense of ambivalence attached to the meaning of allyship within social justice movements, on social media, and within the broader scholarly discourse” (Vosloo 2), and questions keep being raised as to a) when, why, and by whom it can be claimed and b) what it actually *does* for social justice movements—in other words, its motivations, potentialities, repercussions.

In order, therefore, to reach a working definition of performative allyship, for the purposes of this study at least, I have chosen to reckon with the depreciative, almost pejorative, sense the term has acquired in recent popular discourse, thus aligning my understanding of the term with Yasmin’s and Ngnomire’s definitions cited above, but also noting that there is an interesting semantic versatility to the term ‘performative’ which could be explored more, for there could be a difference between optical and performative allyship. With Ismene as a point of reference for the performative ally, this study views performative

⁹ For another highly informative video essay on the subject of performative allyship, with a focus on LGBTQ+ issues and a dialectical analysis of ‘rainbow capitalism,’ see Ashton Daniel, “performative ‘allyship’ | patches & parley,” *YouTube*, 5 July 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cobk2AmXlcQ. Accessed 20 Feb 2021.

¹⁰ Barbara Green B., *Spectacular Confessions: Autobiography, Performative Activism, and the Sites of Suffrage Hardcover*, Palgrave MacMillan, 1997.

¹¹ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, Harvard University Press, 1962; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, 1990; Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, Routledge, 1997.

allyship as the support professed publicly for an individual activist or an activist movement that is articulated outside the temporal/situational framework within which it could substantially help said activist/movement and is performed through spasmodic, impromptu actions, resulting from either a) the ally's unstudied or belated sense of response-ability, b) the ally's need to feel contributory without transgressing their comfort zone, or c) the ally's ego-driven need to associate themselves with said activist/movement due to guilt and/or for social capital. Having arrived at this definition with both the fictitious Ismene and real-life, contemporary performative allies in mind (including myself among them), I will attempt to showcase how privileged subjects can see themselves reflected in various reconfigurations of the character of Ismene and, through this reflection and realisation, arrive to a teachable moment about our own political existence.

Why Ismene now

The chapters that follow will examine Ismene's performative allyship to Antigone as presented in three distinct sociopolitical and dramatic contexts. In the first chapter, I will analyse the original tragedy's Ismene in terms of how the Sophoclean text set the stage for her to be read as a paradigmatic performative ally. I will explore five subject positions of Ismene that form part of her fixed or adopted identity (citizen, daughter, sister, culprit, and survivor), arguing that the conceptual mapping of each of these positionalities in relation to 'performing allyship' can contribute to the articulation of a retrievable hidden politics, which is re-presented in its latent form in contemporary reconfigurations of *Antigone*. The contemporary text that this thesis will analyse alongside the original tragedy, in the second Chapter, is the 2016 production of Theatre of War, *Antigone in Ferguson*. This particular adaptation was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, this is an instance of re-staging rather than re-writing the original text, therefore the nuances of Ismene's character are preserved in their original dimensions, albeit presented within a radically different sociohistorical context. Secondly, the impetus and context of *Antigone in Ferguson* (the murder of Black teenager Michael Brown by an officer of the Ferguson P.D.) is directly correlated to the topic of this examination, since the Black Lives Matter movement and racial justice is perhaps the most popular site of performative allyship in contemporary times. The figure of Ismene read by a 21st century global city-subject can illuminate unexamined areas of one's own political presence and become instructive in terms of what subject positions and institutional forces shape one's conception of viable political praxis. In the third Chapter, I briefly discuss Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni*, a rewrite of *Antigone* where Ismene's figure is erased and replaced by a

gendered and racialised alliance, seeing sisterhood transform into sorority and allyship to coalition.

Since the Sophoclean original, every dramatic representation of the *Antigone* is not only a political play, but in and of itself a political act reflective of its sociohistorical, ethnic, cultural, and political environment, with the potential to be infused with overt or covert political implications and symbolical messages. Therefore, one's focus should arguably lie in "what the productions do (theatre as verb) rather than at what the dramatic literature means (play as noun), because productions—particularly productions of *Antigone*—are actions, not things" (Mee and Foley 13). Director Bryan Doerries applies this notion to Ancient Greek tragedy in general, stating that "tragedy is less a literary form than a blueprint for a felt experience[, and when p]erformed live, in the presence of an audience, tragedy accomplishes what it was designed to do" (Doerries 26). My aim therefore is to examine what Ismene as a figure *does* for the audience, what "felt experience" she embodies, and ultimately how these texts "blueprint" and elaborate the concept of performative allyship through the eyes of their respective Ismenes.

CHAPTER 1

ISMENE IN THEBES

1.1 Citizen

My examination of Ismene begins at her origin point: Thebes. Ismene's *polis* and her status as a *politis*¹² of Thebes is, as will be shown, the *topos* of her subjectivity as she herself perceives and performs it, the point of reference that informs (and is informed by) all the other subject positions she embodies. Her inherent bond and kinship ties with her native homeland are evident in her name, which echoes the name of the Theban river (H)ismenus and "seems to connote 'native of Thebes'" (Griffith 132).¹³ It becomes clear from the opening dialogue between the sisters that Ismene *assumes* her place in Theban society in a dual sense, since she does not question nor challenge her position, at least not at first sight. By refusing to conspire¹⁴ with Antigone, Ismene performs and perpetuates her powerlessness as an obedient woman-subject of the city while trying to deter Antigone from defying Creon's decree. When Antigone invites her sister to join her in "a politics of counter-sovereignty" (Honig *Interrupted* 2), Ismene's retorts reveal more than weakness, cowardice, or lack of agency, as most readings of the text have so far argued; with her stance, Ismene proposes an alternative value system, an alternative politics. Leaving aside ruminations about their predestination and cursed family line, the three main axes of Ismene's political argument appear to be:

(a) women are second-class citizens, therefore it is senseless to defy male rulers;

¹² *Polis* is here understood as both the site (*where*) that hosts a human community and the people (*who*) comprising the community itself. In the same vein, I use the Greek term *politis* in this first mention of Ismene's citizen status in order to highlight the multilayered sense of the word. For an illuminating insight into the complex connotations of the term *polis* in the *Antigone* and in the play's critical reception, see Stuart Elden, "The Place of The Polis: Political Blindness in Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim*" *Theory & Event*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2005.

¹³ The etymological connotation(s) and significance of the names of all other characters in Sophocles's *Antigone* besides Ismene have long been canonised and are now easily accessible to the broad public, not merely in the field of the Classics. Ismene's name is the only one whose etymology is still disputed—if examined at all—by critics; more than that, her name does not show up in major Ancient Greek dictionaries, nor in a wide array of relevant scholarship studied for the purposes of this thesis. Her name could derive from Hismenus, the one of the two major rivers of Thebes, the river "from which the water for the bridegroom's ritual bath was taken" (Plutarch, *On Exile*, vol. VII of the Loeb Classical Library edition, 1959, note of the editor no.147). Another interpretation of Ismene's name would have it mean "knowledgable/insightful," since the prefix ισμ- is related to the verb οἶδω, which means to know something in depth. An abundance of potential etymological interpretations of Ismene could derive from breaking the name into two compounds: ἰς, ἥ, n. fem., force, power, nerve | muscle | neck, cervix, and μῆνη (ἡ μῆν) n. fem., the moon. Considering that naming is more often than not significant in Ancient Greek drama, it is in itself telling that Ismene's name is not paid attention to by almost all modern scholarship, for it could highlight aspects of her persona which, while potentially obvious to a 400 B.C.E. audience, elude our understanding.

¹⁴ For an alternative view on Antigone and Ismene's conspiracy, as already mentioned, see Honig 2011; 2013.

(b) a citizen must (always already) not only respect but also abide by the laws of the state, no matter how authoritarian they may be;¹⁵ and

(c) there is a hierarchy between the living and the dead (and between living and *dying*), which favours the living.¹⁶ These three points are manifested in the following exchange between the two sisters:

ISMENE

[...] Why, we must remember that we are women, who cannot fight against men, and then that we are ruled by those whose power is greater, so that *we must consent to this* and to other things even more painful. So I shall beg those beneath the earth to *be understanding*, since I act *under constraint*, but I shall obey those in authority; for there is no sense in actions that exceed our powers.

ANTIGONE

I would not tell you to do it, and even if you were willing to act after all I would not be content for you to act with me! Do you be the kind of person you decided to be, but I shall bury him! [...] As for you, if it is your pleasure, dishonour what the gods honour!

ISMENE

I am not dishonouring them, but I do not have it in me to act *against the will of the people of the city*. (58-79, my emphasis)

Of my outlining of Ismene's argumentation, perhaps the more controversial or objectionable assertion is (b), whereby I argue that Ismene determines her action on the presupposition of the absolute identification of the will of the (legally appointed but unelected) ruler and the will of the people. Given the fact that in the first few lines of the text Ismene appears to be ignorant of the decree, and despite Antigone's polemic against the ethical and political value and validity of Creon's decree when juxtaposed with the unwritten law of gods, Ismene automatically jumps to the conclusion that leaving Polyneices' body unburied is the will of the *people* in the polis; she thus aligns the force of law (νόμου βίη, 59) with the force of citizens (βίη πολιτῶν, 79). In this context, Ismene not only reasserts that she recognises no room for dissent ("to begin with it is wrong to hunt for what is impossible,"

¹⁵ Cf. and contrast with this line from Oedipus at Colonus: "ANTIGONE Father, we should share the concerns of the citizens, giving way and *obeying when we must*" (OAC 171-2, my emphasis). Here Antigone acknowledges the power of the will of the people but also implicitly recognises that there may be occasions when one needn't uncritically obey to vertically or even horizontally imposed rules. This and all following citations from *Oedipus at Colonus* refer to Loeb Classical Library's 1994 edition, *Sophocles* (vol. II), translated and edited by Hugh Lloyd-Jones.

¹⁶ See Mary Rawlinson, "Beyond Antigone: Ismene, gender and the right to life" in *The Returns of Antigone: Interdisciplinary Essays*, edited by Tina Chanter and Sean D. Kirkland, SUNY Press, 2014, pp. 101-124.

92), but also implicitly casts out her sister, whose opposition to the decree should be considered as constitutive of the “people’s will,” as Antigone too is one of the “citizens.” Ismene, however, does not take this contradiction into consideration.

It is possible that the Sophoclean Ismene also casts herself out of the group of citizens who have any say in the affairs of the polis and draws this parallel solely on the basis of gender; for it is, after all, only the male representatives of the polis who partake in its politics. But even if that is the case, Ismene fails to envision a potentiality for dissent among the enfranchised *polites*, represented in the play by a) the Chorus, who are characteristically swayable and often contradictory in their endorsement or disapproval of Creon, b) the guard, who is only concerned with self-preservation in his following of Creon’s orders, and c) Haemon, who publicly voices his opposition to his father’s autocracy. In this way, the “juridico-political delegitimization that fashions [Antigone] into a removable life to be forcibly expelled from the city” begins with Ismene, who implicitly foreshadows (*προοικονομεί*¹⁷) that her sister “is being prepared for deportation,” thus in turn preparing the both of them (and the audience) for the outcome of Antigone’s disobedience (Gsoels-Lorensen 112).¹⁸

Ismene, thus, emerges as a political subject who has been interpellated in a manner than differentiates her from her sister. In lieu of Antigone’s “long absence from the *polis* and its regulations” (Johnson 385), we can only assume that Ismene has had explicit and implicit training in how to be a proper (i.e. agreeable) citizen. At first glance, the sisters appear to be on equal sociopolitical standing—judging from their shared fixed identities, “ready vessels from their birth for renewed symmetry” (Tyrell and Bennett 4). However, the chasm between their political choices hints at an unexamined power dynamic between them; Ismene has had a life of privilege in the city of her birth while Antigone has also experienced her father’s

¹⁷ The Greek verb meaning to foreshadow is *προοικονομώ*, a compound word that contains two of the most semantically rich words of the Greek language, *οἶκος* (*oikos*) and *νόμος* (*nomos*). Both these words have often been retained as such in scholarship, since they are not easily translatable, much like the word *polis*. *Oikos* loosely refers to home/the affairs of the home and *nomos* means the law. I chose to highlight the word *prooikonomei* in this instance, because there is an interesting semantic dynamic in the claim that Ismene *pro-oiko-nomei* (i.e. prefigures the law of the home) for Antigone. In this sense, Ismene does not only hint at/predict but also prepares/incepts Antigone’s castigation. *Prooikonomia* (foreshadowing) is one of the most popular narrative techniques in the Homeric epic poetry, as well as later ancient Greek literature, tragedy included.

¹⁸ Aside from Jutta Gsoels-Lorensen’s compelling “Antigone, Deportee,” another useful analysis of the contradistinction between Ismene’s and Antigone’s status of citizenship is Patricia J. Johnson’s “Woman’s Third Face: A Psycho/Social Reconsideration of Sophocles’ Antigone.” I agree with Johnson in that Antigone’s self-willed exile with Oedipus has direct repercussions in her later behaviour, since “[t]he length and severity of her absence prevent her from truly reaching maturity as defined by the *polis* ... sharply contrasted with Ismene’s life in the city, where Ismene acts as her father’s eyes and ears but apparently leads a normal life” (Johnson 384-5). See also Valerie Reed, “Bringing Antigone Home?” *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2008, pp. 316-340 and Andrés F. H. Castro, “Antigone Claimed: ‘I Am a Stranger!’ Political Theory and the Figure of the Stranger,” *Hypatia*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2013, pp. 307-322.

exile and dispossession. The one sister's attachments to the city have not been disrupted in the way that the other's have. Hence, Antigone is more likely to seek an accomplice to break and challenge the degree, when all Ismene can offer her is allyship.¹⁹

This study cannot fit an extensive analysis of this specific, preexisting political strain of Antigone's dispossession; nevertheless, as Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler note, "dispossessing oneself as a life" by way of resisting against injustice can simultaneously result in the radical challenge and possibly displacement of "the coercive and privative force of ... power" (Athanasiou and Butler 146)—something that was an implicit goal Antigone pursues, albeit counterintuitively, and a calamity Ismene wishes to avoid, as she sees it as a direct attack on the will of the people. Even if Antigone's impetus is purely ethical, she must be aware that in order to champion her cause she must either elude or openly 'dispossess,' even momentarily, sovereign power; she chooses the second. Conversely, even if Ismene's moral compass aligns with Antigone's, she seems convinced that attempting to dispossess sovereign power is not only futile, but also politically counterproductive, therefore she tries to find the less detrimental path forward. When Antigone solicits her active help, Ismene refuses to act as an accomplice and instead tries to persuade Antigone against fulfilling her intentions. When Antigone is not swayed, Ismene resorts to offering her quasi-participatory silence as a form of allyship ("tell no one of this act beforehand, but keep it secret, and so shall I" [84-5])—which is also rebuked and rejected by Antigone ("I shall hate you far more if you remain silent!" [86-7]). This is the first of the two instances where "Ismene's attempt to share in *logos* with Antigone fails as Antigone's attempt to share in *ergon* with her sister failed" (Tyrell and Bennett 7). This process will be repeated in the sisters' final interaction, when Ismene claims that "[she is] not *ashamed* to make [her]self a fellow voyager in [Antigone's] suffering" (540-1, my emphasis).

The choice of the verb 'I'm not ashamed' (οὐκ αἰσχύνομαι), instead of perhaps 'not afraid' or 'not hesitant' which would appear more fitting to the occasion, seems out of place. Ismene ostensibly agrees that, in burying Polyneices, Antigone earns *kleos* (heroic glory), judging from her admission that "in [her] going [Antigone is] foolish but truly dear (or a proper friend, ὁρθῶς φίλη) to those who are [her] own" (98-9, my addition); why then would Ismene introduce—in order to decry—the notion of being *ashamed* of partaking in her sister's act? Three potential explanations arise:

¹⁹ More on the power dynamic between the sister that privileges Ismene in Chapter 1.4; more on the difference between 'ally' and 'accomplice' will be elaborated in Chapter 2 and the Conclusion.

- i. Ismene recognises that, alongside being granted *kleos* and sympathy by the gods and the dead, Antigone is concurrently stigmatised by shame within the polis of Thebes, for she went against the law of the polis, and if she joins her she will receive the same judgment (shamed and ostracised by the polis);
- ii. Ismene regrets not helping Antigone in the first place and recognises that this last-minute intervention is not only inconsequential to her sister's fate, but rather enrages her (shamed and hated by Antigone);
- iii. Ismene anticipates feeling ashamed when she meets her family in Hades for having stayed uninvolved with her brother's burial (shamed and dishonourable to her dead kin).

If the first hypothesis is true, the dual implication entailed would be that Ismene once again valorises the weight of performing the role of an agreeable citizen-subject as higher than performing her role as a subject of ethics, therefore it is in her forfeiting her citizenship for performing allyship to her sister that she would feel shame; at the same time, she would not be ashamed for going against her former (better?) judgment, for she did not in fact 'betray' her proper place or transgress her ethical/political comfort zone. If the second or third hypothesis holds water, Ismene also becomes a paradigm of the performative ally: motivated by guilt and shame, and the fear of not belonging once Antigone is gone, she spasmodically engages in a futile attempt at self-sacrifice in an effort to salvage her honourable image or match the honourable image of Antigone, in the world of the dead or the living (which according to axis [c] of her argument, she values and/or adheres to more firmly).

In any case, Antigone rejects Ismene anew because "[she does] not tolerate a loved one [or a friend (φίλην)] who shows her love [friendship (φιλοῦσαν)] only in words" (543, my additions). Antigone simultaneously dispossesses herself of a faux "fellow voyager," dispossesses Ismene of her chance to "share [Antigone's] death" (554), and, crucially, exposes Ismene's allyship as performative.²⁰ Furthermore, when Antigone makes the absurd and objectively false claim that she is "the last of the royal family line" (τὴν βασιλειδῶν μούνην λειπὴν, 941, my translation), she dispossesses Ismene of her own birthright. Thus, Antigone superimposes on Ismene the Hegelian binary opposition of polis/law vs. kin/ethics and allows room for only one allegiance, implying that Ismene's attempt for simultaneous attachment to both citizenship and familial ties (daughter, sister) renders her overdue offer for allyship moot, performative, invalid. In any case, Ismene's political deviation from Antigone

²⁰ For further support for this claim, as well as a more thorough analysis of Antigone's particular utterance and the surrounding dialogue between the sisters, see Chapter 1.4.

and her individual conceptualisation of citizenship showcases how one's fixed identity may predetermine one's sociopolitical status, but does not also predicate one's political will, stance, and action(s).

1.2 Daughter

The text that provides us with the fullest portrait of Ismene as a daughter is Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, preceding *Antigone* in dramatic time but following it in its time of authorship. In a parallel reading, the two tragedies shed light both onto Ismene's character traits and value system, which informs her political existence, and onto the evolution of the relationship dynamic between her and *Antigone*, which allows us to see their respective political praxis as equally sophisticated and complex.

Oedipus at Colonus finds *Antigone* in exile, a guide and carer to her old, blind father, who has been forcibly ousted from Thebes (by order of his brother-in-law, later king, Creon) in order to salvage the polis from his miasmic presence.

While in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Oedipus'* expressions of feeling for both Ismene and *Antigone* are depicted as unusually strong, *Antigone's* life diverges from her sister's during the exile with *Oedipus* that culminates in *Oedipus at Colonus*; she emerges as his right hand in adversity and his fellow exile from Thebes. (Johnson 374)

During this time, as discussed above, Ismene remains in Thebes, but not without "concern" (331) for her father and sister. Once context is established in the play, Ismene urgently, secretly, and "not without trouble for [her]" (328) arrives at Colonus to meet *Antigone* and *Oedipus* and inform them about the latest prophecies and oracles, and, by extension, the machinations of the Cadmeans who wanted to control *Oedipus'* body for strategic reasons. Ismene propels the narrative forward, enters into conspiracy with her father and sister; she offers an active, discursive conspiracy and not an enabling pact of silence. *Oedipus* informs the audience that Ismene has acted as his and *Antigone's* informant in another instance in the past (349-354), therefore Ismene's allyship here appears more committed, methodical and planned—not reactionary but participatory. A case in point is Ismene's offer to perform the supplication to the Eumenides in her father's place: "I will go and carry out the right!" (503). However agonistic this slightly younger Ismene of *OAC* may seem, at least in comparison to the one we encounter in *Antigone*, she does not undertake her mission with rashness nor does she appear to view her (extra)political actions with the pride and valor that *Antigone* does. She solicits instruction from the Athenian chorus ("We have listened, and do you instruct us

as to what to do!” [494] and “But I wish to be told where I must perform the duty!” [504]) proving once again that Ismene is reverent toward the institution of the polis (represented here by the chorus and later Theseus) in and of itself and not ad hoc in *Antigone*. Ismene emerges as a subject who wishes to operate within the set rules and frameworks unless forced not to; indeed the only times she breaks the rules (leaving Thebes and becoming Oedipus’ informant) is for the benefit of her father (and only indirectly her sister), making deliberate exceptions that she appears both to abide by and resent (“when one takes trouble for a parent, one must not remember that it is trouble!” (509).

And yet, time and again Ismene laments her and her family’s fate (331, 333, 365, 369, 372, 383-4, 394) and her own sufferings (324-6, 361-5, 420, 509), which she appears to mention performatively: either in order to publicly dismiss their importance when compared to her duty to her father or in order to explicitly consort herself (and her troubles) beside (those of) her kin:

OEDIPUS

Ah, children, sisters!

ISMENE

Ah, unhappy state!

OEDIPUS

Do you mean hers and mine?

ISMENE

Yes, and my own [*third*], unhappy as I am! (δυσμόρου τ’ἐμοῦ *τρίτης*)

OEDIPUS

Child, why have you come?

ISMENE

Out of concern for you, father!

...

OEDIPUS

But where are the young men, your brothers, to take their share of trouble?

ISMENE

They are where they are; things are now grim for them.

OEDIPUS

... those who ought to perform this labour sit at home and *keep the house like maidens*, and you two in their place bear the burdens of you unhappy father’s sorrows. (330-344, my addition/emphasis)

Oedipus here reminds Ismene of what she already knows: it is not her place to be there—neither is her sister's, Antigone's, who admittedly suffers more so than herself. And yet, Ismene does not share in Oedipus' vocal and heavily gendered castigation of her brothers, and instead seems to feel sorry for them and in their absence of help takes the role on herself. Apparently, as long as the sisters are separated by space, they seem to act with more concordance—not only because they share a fundamental goal, taking care of and honouring their father, but also because they have both assumed the roles and responsibilities of their brothers.

Ismene's concern for her kin is much more tangibly expressed in *Oedipus at Colonus* than in *Antigone*; Ismene is in possession of indispensable information unbeknownst to Oedipus and Antigone, and determined to remove herself from the safety and legibility of the polis in order to help them. Both Oedipus and Antigone have no way of accessing their (former) community besides Ismene and are therefore left in the dark without her. This observation elucidates a reversal of roles between Antigone and Ismene in terms of their shifted positions concerning their access to knowledge (given that knowledge is power, and knowing means having the authority to inform others and consequently to act on principle) versus ignorance (which condemns a subject to suspension until they become informed).²¹

ISMENE

... I have come to tell you of the evils that now afflict your two unhappy sons. At first they agreed that the throne should be left to Creon and pollution of the city avoided, considering the nature of the ancient ruin of the family that oppressed your miserable home. But now by the action of one of the gods and of their own accursed minds there has come upon the thrice-unhappy ones an evil rivalry to grasp at dominion and at royal power. [...] *This is not a mere heap of words, father, but terrible actions*; and when the gods will take pity on your sorrows I cannot discover. (365-384)

...

OEDIPUS

Will they ever shroud my body in Theban soil?

ISMENE

But the shedding of kindred blood does not *allow it*, father!

²¹ Cf. the first 25 lines of *Antigone*, where the title heroine addresses Ismene from a place of knowing (about Creon's decree), therefore a place of authority, whereas Ismene responds from a place of ignorance.

OEDIPUS

Then they shall never gain power over me!

ISMENE

Then that will weigh heavily on the Cadmeans! (406-409, my emphasis)

In her report, Ismene demonstrates not only awareness of factual events, but proves that she is a savvy citizen: not only is she well-versed in her brothers' fight over the throne, which she clearly condemns; not only does she acknowledge *and argue for* the practical rules and regulations that do not permit her father's return (as much as she herself might desire it); but she also anticipates the course of action of her community. As we have seen, "[t]hough Ismene's devotion to Oedipus is proven by her supportive appearance in this play, it is limited in much the same way that her devotion to Polynices will be in *Antigone*, by her association with the *polis*" (Johnson 385-6). But most importantly, with regard to the topic of this study, Ismene here clearly acknowledges the different impact and the hierarchy of words versus actions (*OAC* 382-3).

So far in *Oedipus at Colonus*, we encounter a (re)configuration of Ismene who, in her fatalism and desperation, is still an adept, participatory, active agent and ally. Yet, as soon as one makes this observation, we find out that Ismene has been abducted (off-stage) when Creon and his guards abduct Antigone in front of Oedipus and the chorus; though both sisters are rescued and returned to Oedipus by king Theseus, Sophocles seems to have only retrieved Antigone's voice. Ismene does not partake in the reunion with her father, nor does she speak at all when Polyneices comes to seek Oedipus' help; even when she is hailed by her father or brother (always paired with Antigone as "my daughters/my children" or "my sisters/you two"), or all other characters' lines continually reference *both* sisters, Antigone is always the one to respond. All in all, Ismene is erased from *spoken* action for 1180 lines though stage directions clearly indicate that she is very much still on the scene.²² Thus, within the same text, Ismene is transformed from active ally to passive observer. It is important to note which three pivotal scenes Ismene silently observes: first, the overly dramatic reunion of Oedipus and Antigone (wherein it is highlighted that these two are their own pair since Ismene is not addressed directly by her father); second, the aggressive confrontation of Oedipus with Polyneices (during which Ismene witnesses her brother's conniving attempt to exploit their

²² For reference: (509) *Exit ISMENE*. - (1194) *Enter ANTIGONE with ISMENE and THESEUS*. - (1555) *Exeunt OEDIPUS and his daughters*. - (1669) *Enter ANTIGONE and ISMENE*. Ismene speaks again at line 1689, to lament her dead father and wish she could join him in Hades. Also note that the only lines marked as missing from the original text are Ismene's (1717-8, 1733-4).

father for the sake of attacking her homeland victoriously and her father's total and unequivocal rejection and condemnation of his son); and third, the dialogue between Antigone and Polyneices (during which Antigone attempts to persuade Polyneices to be sensible and not attack Thebes, but he is unrelenting in his mortalism).²³ During all this, Ismene is silent, but present, therefore we have all reason to assume that she is experiencing the Oedipus-Polyneices and Antigone-Polyneices exchanges as traumatic but also instructive moments.

Ismene is also present but quiet for another pivotal moment in the play: the Oedipal curse.²⁴ According to the Messenger who narrates the events to the Chorus, before Oedipus sent his daughters away in order to end his life only by the presence of Theseus, as divinely ordained, the man proclaimed to his daughters:

MESSENGER

“... no longer shall you have the irksome task of caring for me. It was hard, I know, my daughters; but a single word dissolves all these hardships. From none did you have love more than from this man, without whom you will now spend the remainder of your lives” (1617–19)

According to Bonnie Honig, “[t]he curse has an impact on Ismene as well. She also extends herself to one who cannot reciprocate: Antigone. She loves one who cannot or will not return her love” (Honig *Antigone-Effect* 47). To this interpretation I add that Ismene is doubly “cursed,” since, contrary to Antigone (who is deeply loved by Ismene and Haemon, and chooses to reject them), Ismene does not receive love from anyone after Oedipus dies, since even Antigone's love for her is apparently conditional.

Overall, the events that transpire in *Oedipus at Colonus* happen during a formative and critical period in Ismene's life and should, thus, re-contextualise our interpretation of her stance. Indulging the heterochronicity of the tragedies' authorship, we could say that this text directly shapes and mediates Ismene's political consciousness and political (in)actions as observed in *Antigone*. While in the polis of Thebes, Ismene *learns* how the polis treats ‘polluted’ or ‘unruly’ subjects²⁵ (even kings) and is interpellated into anticipating and legitimising “νόμου βίᾱ” (the rule of law, *Antigone* 59, my translation) and “βίᾱ πολιτῶν”

²³ In section 1.3, I argue that Antigone's confrontation with Polyneices is the most consequential of the scenes that Ismene silently witnesses, since it mirrors the sisters' confrontation in *Antigone*. One explanation for the complete absence of Ismene's voice during this exchange could be that, since *Oedipus at Colonus* was written after *Antigone*, the total focus on the Antigone-Polyneices sibling dynamic and relationship would allow for a re-contextualisation and/or justification of Antigone's erratic behaviour in the titular tragedy.

²⁴ See Bonnie Honig, “The Antigone-Effect and the Oedipal Curse: Toward a Promiscuous Natality,” *philoSOPHIA*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2015, pp. 41–49.

²⁵ For a modern understanding of ‘unruliness,’ see Chapter 2.2 of the present study.

(the rule of the citizens, *Antigone* 79, my translation); while away from the polis, she *witnesses* the exiled subjects, her loved ones, suffer the consequences of ostracisation and she is terrorised by the “precarious living” and state of “vulnerability” of a subject who has forfeited citizenship.²⁶ Synchronously, Antigone *experiences* first-hand this reality that Ismene only learns by association; unavoidably, even if—for the sake of argument—Oedipus’ daughters were characterologically identical, their living circumstances would induce the formulation of two distinct political consciousnesses, which eventually transform into political (pro)positions and ultimately clash in *Antigone*, when both girls are no longer daughters, and when all that is left of their natal family is each other.

1.3 Sister

As Polyneices solicits his father’s allyship in *Oedipus at Colonus*, so does Antigone do with Ismene in *Antigone* since both Polyneices and Antigone embark on an effort to challenge what they see as tyrannical and unjust appropriation of power (Eteocles’ usurpation and Creon’s exceptionalist decree, respectively). Of course their motives, means, and ends differ substantially, but we could say that both are fighting for their right to political agency—which, when their kin denies them allyship, they decide to pursue anyway, facing the moment alone.²⁷ However, while Polyneices is violently and disgracefully rejected by his father who exposes him as a hypocrite and calls him his “murderer” (*OAC* 1361), Ismene attempts to reason with Antigone and persuade her to not embark on the burial at all, before she eventually refuses to help her *do the act* and offers secrecy instead. Ismene’s effort to convince Antigone echoes Antigone’s own dialogue with Polyneices in *Oedipus at Colonus*:

²⁶ I borrow these terms from Athanasiou & Butler’s discussion titled “Responsiveness as responsibility” (Athanasiou and Butler 105-122), recognising that these contemporary articulations possibly

²⁷ Polyneices of course is granted the material, strategic allyship of six other kings for the civil war he is preparing. However, he knows that his fight is doomed without Oedipus on his side, therefore he forfeits the substantial ally that he needed most. This illuminates further nuances as to the kind of allyship (both corporeal and spiritual) that Antigone asks from Ismene.

ANTIGONE Turn back your army at once to Argos, and do not destroy yourself and the city! POLYNEICES Why, that cannot be! For how could I bring the army back again, when I had once shown cowardice? ANTIGONE Why must you be angry brother? What profit do you gain by the ruin of your country? POLYNEICES To run away is shameful, and it is shameful for me, the senior, to be mocked like this by my brother! * ANTIGONE Then is your mind made up after this fashion, brother? POLYNEICES Yes, and do not delay me! My work shall be to see to this march, ill-fated and evil as it has been made by my father here and his Erinyes. But to you may Zeus give good fortune, if you discharge the duties I have asked for me [in death, since you will not be able to in life]. But now let go of me and farewell! For you will never again see me living! * ANTIGONE And who would not weep for you brother, seeing you setting out for certain death? POLYNEICES I shall die if I must! ANTIGONE Never, but do as I wish! POLYNEICES Do not try to persuade me when you must not! ANTIGONE Then woe is me indeed if I am to be deprived of you! POLYNEICES These things depend on fate, to go one way or the other. Well, I pray to the gods that you two may never meet with evil; for all men know that you do not deserve misfortune. (OAC 1420-1443)	ISMENE Are you thinking of burying him? When it has been forbidden to the city? ANTIGONE Well, I will bury my brother, and yours, if you will not; I will not be caught betraying him! ISMENE Reckless one, when Creon has forbidden it? ANTIGONE But he has no right to keep me from my own! * ISMENE Alas, how I fear for you, poor creature! ANTIGONE Have no fears for me! Make your own course go straight! * ISMENE Your heart is fiery in a matter that is chilling. ANTIGONE Why, I know that I am giving pleasure to those I must please most. ISMENE If you have the strength! But you are in love with the impossible. ANTIGONE Then when my strength fails I shall be at rest. ISMENE But to begin with it is wrong to hunt for what is impossible. ANTIGONE If you say that you will be hated by me, and you will justly incur the hatred of the dead man. Let me and my rashness suffer this awful thing! I shall suffer nothing so dire that my death will not be one of honour! ISMENE Well, if you wish to, go! But know this much, that in your going you are foolish, but truly dear to those who are your own. (Antigone 44-99)
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In this parallel reading, both Antigone and Ismene emerge as sisters who, while they have valid points, are not invested in being right, but rather in protecting their sibling. Polyneices and Antigone, on the other hand, emerge as unyielding, stubborn, and patronising. In both cases, “far from re-presenting an integral self with which to identify, the sibling hinders the illusions of both autonomy and integrity” (Engelstein 42). In this sense, Ismene’s lack of counter-sovereignty mobilisation is due to more than merely an absolutist respect for the rule of law or merely fatalist dejection; as I have argued in the previous section (1.2), Ismene is an attentive, not apathetic, observer and she acquires valuable empirical knowledge from her witnessing. It is perhaps for this reason, too, that she reminds Antigone of their family’s terrible history and “[o]nly after this detailed recollection of their common lot and the repeated appeals to the bond that has united them so far, does Ismene finally declare herself incapable of taking part in the political action that Antigone has proposed” (Hahnemann 7). That is, Ismene hints at the fact that Antigone has been in her shoes before, arguing against a headstrong sibling’s disastrous path, to no avail. Even realising that she is fighting a lost cause, Ismene “wishes to preserve the bond that connects her to her sister in spite of their disagreement. Antigone, however, will have none of this” (Hahnemann 8).²⁸

The crucial difference between the two sibling confrontations is that Antigone has no way of helping Polyneices commit the transgressive act with which she disagreed (aside, perhaps, of trying to convince Oedipus to help him). Ismene, on the other hand, ostensibly has a viable opportunity to help, and she chooses not to. This speaks to the fact that Antigone is excessively harsh and degrading toward Ismene, while Polyneices is dismissive toward his sister's concerns but does not insult or resent her. Antigone and Polyneices’ exchange also explains the fierce dedication and loyalty with which the former insists on burying the latter: Polyneices explicitly requests *from both his sisters* to not “dishonour [him], but place [him] in [his] tomb with funeral rites,” twice (*OAC* 1405-1413, 1435-6). Neither of the sisters has promised to fulfill this wish, but both were present when it was requested and both were charged with the duty of executing it. Ismene’s abstinence from allyship is thus twofold, therefore her shame (as discussed in 1.1) is presumably double.²⁹ Ismene cries “constraint”/compulsion/force (“βιάζομαι τᾶδε,” 66) by the polis/law as her reason for not

²⁸ For an extensive dramaturgical/linguistic breakdown of the sisters’ confrontation, which underscores their separation, see Hahnemann and Goldhill 2009; 2012, ch. 9. For the opposite view, that is that there are implicit linguistic cues that unite Antigone and Ismene in conspiracy, see Honig 2011, ch. 3.

²⁹ It is important to note again that *Oedipus at Colonus* was written decades after *Antigone*, and the latter text contains no reference to Polyneices’ explicit request from his sisters, therefore this nuanced claim is not canonically valid.

burying Polyneices, going as far as to claim that the burial act is an excessive and nonsensical act (“περισσά πράσσειν οὐκ ἔχει νοῦν οὐδένα,” 68, my translation), but then jumps to share the blame for the act wanting to “share [Antigone’s] death” (“κάμπλάκω τοῦ σοῦ μόρου,” 554). This blatant contradiction appears to align with Ismene’s conscious choice of favouring the living over the dead, as discussed already, but her point is rendered moot since Creon tells Ismene that Antigone “no longer exists” (567). Thus, considering that

Antigone’s decision to sacrifice herself for Polyneices cannot be seen as an ecstatic attachment to the pure form of siblinghood but becomes in the course of the play the elevation of one sibling above another, of Polyneices over Ismene, and hence the expression of particular choice (Engelstein 43),

one could say that Ismene exalts Antigone over Polyneices in that she seems willing to die for her sister’s sake but not for her brother’s honour. However, it would be false to presume that Ismene is willing to die *for* Antigone; it appears, rather, that when Ismene realises that she will be left completely alone if Antigone is killed, she offers to die *with* her. Thus,

[m]ore than anything else, Ismene desires the continuation of relationship with her sister, the living link between the past (however terrible) and the future (however unimaginable). Though perhaps incapable of imagining that future in specific terms, Ismene does see life as preferable to death, and life together, as some remnant of family, as preferable to separation. (Eifrig 188)

If then we conclude that the reason for Ismene’s claim to joint death is that she sees no point in carrying on without Antigone and comparing her behaviour with that of Eurydice, Creon’s wife and Haemon’s mother, who quietly commits suicide when she learns about her son’s self-inflicted death, one stumbles upon a grim but pertinent question: Wherefore does Ismene end up the only woman of the royal family to not die by suicide?³⁰ And, more importantly, why does she—exercising her own death drive—speak out to claim a role (that of the culprit) that she did not show up for when it would be of use?

1.4 Culprit

When Creon is first informed that Antigone has been caught in the act of covering Polyneices’ body with dust, he is dumbfounded and incredulous; he triple checks the validity of this allegation—twice with the guard and then confirming with Antigone herself. Moreover, he offers Antigone the opportunity to lie and plead quasi-innocent since he specifically asks if she was aware of his proclamation. Antigone publicly defends her act, as

³⁰ For a thorough analysis of female death in Sophoclean tragedy see Loraux 1987.

she foreshadowed when she mocked and rejected Ismene's vow to secrecy, and her ensuing altercation with Creon becomes the most emblematic and widely discussed part of the tragedy.³¹ In his passionate condemnation, Creon sweepingly accuses Ismene of having co-organised the burial and proclaims her "equally guilty" without giving her the benefit of the doubt that he initially granted Antigone—hedging his baseless accusation on the fact that he observed Ismene being upset, "raving, having lost control of her wits" (488-494). Once he has confirmed that one of the sisters has defied him, he assumes the other has, too; once one woman proves the ability to break the rules (an unimaginable thus far concept for Creon), so must the other have broken them—an oversight that speaks to the king's "deep-rooted belief that women can have no political agency and that they are interchangeable" (Hahnemann 11). In the middle of their confrontation, and as soon as the first hint that Creon is going to send Antigone to "go below and love those friends" for "while [he] live[s] a woman shall not rule" (524-5), the Chorus announce the arrival of a weeping Ismene. Creon immediately attacks her:

CREON

You, *whom I never noticed* as like a viper *hiding* in the house you sucked my blood—nor did I know that I was rearing up *two plagues and two subverters* of the throne—come, tell me, do you *admit being a party* to this burial, or will you swear that you *know* nothing? (531-535, my emphasis)

Creon's first address to Ismene contains a couple of interesting presuppositions and implicatures. First of all, Creon admits that Ismene has not thus far given him any reason to worry about her behaviour, much less to doubt her allegiance to sovereign rule, making her an imperceptible presence in the palace—implying therefore that Antigone was not as agreeable a princess.³² What is more, Creon claims that Ismene was "hiding" her true feelings and true nature, implying again a contradistinction to Antigone, who is 'credited' with being doubly insolent in being open about her transgression. Another possible implicature of Creon is found in the repetition and emphasis of "two" (plagues and subverters); did Creon only anticipate one? And was that one Antigone? Finally, Creon's choice of wording in his question to Ismene contains a notable presupposition: Ismene must have *participated* in the

³¹ For a discussion of the ambiguity and performativity of Antigone's burial act, see Carol Jacobs, "Dusting Antigone," *MLN Comparative Literature Issue*, vol. 111, no. 5, 1996, pp. 889-917.

³² As Nicole Loraux observes, "[s]ilence is the adornment of women. Sophocles said so and Aristotle repeated it" (Loraux 21). Ismene is therefore an ideal female subject up to this point. Seeing as Antigone was written earlier than OAC, it should not be alarming that Ismene has apparently been forgiven for leaving the polis in secret to go help her father in exile and meddled with the men's machinations. If we however see the two texts as

burial by *knowing* something—otherwise the king would have no reason not to ask her “will you swear you *did* nothing?” instead.

And yet, Ismene uses this precise active verb when she responds with the following statement—the one that triggered my choice of this specific topic:

ISMENE

I *did* the deed, if she agrees, and I *take* and *bear* my share of the blame.
(536-7)

In identifying herself as co-culprit of the crime, Ismene is being performative on multiple levels. Firstly, on a linguistic level, according to J. L. Austin’s Speech Acts Theory, Ismene’s statement contains three performatives: two illocutionary (I did, I take) and one perlocutionary (I bear) speech acts.³³ Saying that she has done (δέδρακα) the deed has an immediate effect (though instantly contradicted by her hedge “if she agrees”), as does saying that she takes the blame; saying that she also bears the responsibility, she performs a speech act whose full effect is situated in the future, when she actually faces the consequences. However, though Ismene “publicly stands with Antigone, hoping to receive punishment by her side” (Kirkpatrick 402), she undermines her own performance by leaving room to Antigone to either agree or disagree, thus her speech acts themselves are rendered what Sara Ahmed calls ‘nonperformatives,’ in that they are uttered in substitution of the action they proclaim, “they function to hinder rather than enable action.” (Ahmed, *Nonperformativity* 110).³⁴

Antigone furiously exposes her sister as a liar and scorns Ismene’s belated grandstanding, invoking Justice as her witness that “will not allow” Ismene to “try to share [Antigone’s] death, [nor] to claim as her own something [she] never put a hand to” (538, 546-7). In other words,

[t]he only way that the doer is attached to the deed is through the linguistic assertion of the connection. Ismene claims that she will say that she did the deed, if Antigone will allow it, and Antigone refuses to allow it. (Butler *Antigone’s Claim* 7)

³³ “Austin distinguishes ‘illocutionary’ from ‘perlocutionary’ speech acts: the former are speech acts that, in saying do what they say, and do it in the moment of that saying; the latter are speech acts that produce certain effects as their consequence; by saying something, a certain effect follows. The illocutionary speech act is itself the deed that it effects; the perlocutionary merely leads to certain effects that are not the same as the speech act itself.” (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 3)

³⁴ Nonperformative speech acts are a concept theorised by Sara Ahmed. “In my model of the “nonperformative”, the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance, but it is actually what the speech act is doing. In other words, the nonperformative does not ‘fail to act’ because of conditions that are external to the speech act: rather, it ‘works’ because it fails to bring about what it names” (Ahmed *Nonperformativity* 105)

The reasons for Antigone's persistence in the rejection of her pleading sister can and have been a matter of speculation; for some it is due to Antigone's having erased her sister as kin the moment the latter refused to partake in the burial, for others it encapsulates Antigone's own self-congratulatory urge to have singular claim at *kleos*, and others yet think it is a benevolent attempt to spare her sister's life disguised in hostility.³⁵ Whichever the case, Antigone here utters a phrase most relevant to this study:

ANTIGONE

Hades and those below know to whom the deed belongs! *And I do not tolerate a loved one [friend] who shows her love [friendship] only in words.* (543)

Antigone here articulates a rudimentary, primordial definition of what has today come to be known as performative allyship. Returning to the definitions provided in the Introduction, we can identify the *essence* of what Antigone perceives in her sister's behaviour:

With allyship comes accountability; the two go hand in hand. One without the other is merely a performative attempt to be painted as progressive. (Yasmin 1:12-1:28)

Ismene solicits a share in accountability ("Why, our offence is equal! [558]), without having primarily engaged in allyship. Simultaneously, Ismene claims her act is one of allyship to Antigone and Polyneices ("Sister, do not so dishonour me as to not let me die with you and grant the dead man the proper rites!" [544-5]), without having born her share of accountability for fulfilling Polyneices' request that his body be properly honoured in burial.

Before seeing this exchange as an archetypal instance of performative allyship, an important qualification should be made: allyship was an existent term and an already nuanced concept in classical Greece, used primarily in war or war-like contexts. When we talk about sociopolitical allyship today, we are referring to "now chiefly *spec.* the state or condition of being a person who supports the rights of a minority or marginalized group without being a member of it" (*OED*). This clarification complicates the association of Ismene with contemporary political jargon in a fruitful way, which, I argue, illuminates a novel outlook on both the classical text and our current conception of allyship in social justice activism.

At first glance, the modern definition seems inapplicable to the sisters, since their fixed identities are shared (Labdacid daughters, sisters). However, a power dynamic is revealed between them in light of their chosen identities. As discussed in the previous sections, there are multiple textual cues as to Antigone's relative inferiority contra Ismene in terms of their place in the polis, which are perpetuated both by the Chorus and Creon—the de

³⁵ See Hahnemann 2019, Goldhill 2012, and Honig 2013, respectively.

facto figures of authority—who ascribe a natal, inherent depravity to Antigone for no apparent reason:

CHORUS

It is clear, the nature of the girl is savage and she does not know how to bend before her troubles. (471-2)

*

CREON

I say that one of these girls has *only now* been revealed as mad, but the other has been so *from birth*.

ISMENE

Yes, king, those who are miserable *lose* even such sense as they have; it leaves them.

CREON

It left you, when you chose to do evil *with evildoers*! (561-565)

This accusation of a natal flaw in Antigone is not even challenged by her ostensibly supportive sister, Ismene, since she concurs with Creon and only justifies her own descent into madness due to misery. The sisters' separation becomes even more evident when, having had her performative allyship shut down, Ismene shifts back to pro-*polis* rhetoric: knowing that her word holds more weight with Creon and the Chorus, she hinges her plea for Antigone's life on her sister's already debased place as a *politis*, as a constitutive member of the Theban sociopolitical community, as Haemon's wife and her own sister. It is no wonder, therefore, that "[Antigone's] coalition with her brother [Polyneices] was not primarily biological but political" (Castro 316) and that is the reason why Antigone defends it to the death and why she laments dying "unwept, friendless" (876), "lamented by no friend" (882).³⁶

Whereas Ismene is in a relatively privileged position, she fails to show up for her persecuted sister and to be her "friend," her ally, in an adequate and expedient manner. Though one has no reason to doubt the sincerity of her intention to save her sister's life, it becomes apparent in Ismene's words that her spasmodic and frantic efforts are a result of a belated sense of response-ability, her need to feel contributory even at the last minute, her

³⁶ A counter-argument to Castro, and my own, position is that "Antigone, in her report of the decree, makes no mention at all of its underlying political rationale, thus showing once more that she views Eteocles and Polyneices exclusively as brothers and not as political agents" (Hahnemann 6). However, unless one subscribes to the view that for some reason Antigone only values her male kin (something which the *Oedipus at Colonus* text would refute) then the question remains of why Antigone would side with Polyneices and feel hostile toward Ismene. Castro answers this question brilliantly, in my opinion.

guilt and shame toward both her sister and her polis, and/or her ego-driven fear of losing her last family member and staying alone.

1.5 Survivor

As already mentioned, Ismene is not just the only Labdacid but the only woman left alive in the Sophoclean trilogy. Thus, Ismene challenges the norm in Greek tragedy whereby “[i]t is by men that women meet their death, and it is for men, usually, that they kill themselves” (Loraux 23) on two fronts: firstly, she survives and, secondly, she offers to sacrifice herself in order to die with her sister (another woman). According to the view that *Antigone* is “a text dealing with the removal of all three of the ‘remaining’ Oedipus children (the number includes the unburied Polynices) for the sake of founding Creon’s sovereignty over Thebes” (Gsoels-Lorensen 113), Ismene’s survival could be seen as subversive. Indeed, Creon would not have spared her, even after Antigone’s rejection of complicity, had it not been for the interjection of the Chorus.

CREON

But he [Haemon] shall not save those two girls from death!

CHORUS

Then have you a mind to kill both of them?

CREON

Not the one that did not touch the corpse; you are right!

According to Simon Goldhill, “Ismene’s unwillingness to act in any direction ... leads to her survival as well as her failure to influence the course of action at all” clarifying in a footnote: “Ismene’s hesitation is nuanced, but not contradicted, either by her willingness to take responsibility for Antigone’s action after the event (536), which Antigone rejects; or by Creon’s initial willingness to punish both girls (789), an option that he rejects shortly afterwards” (Goldhill, *Undoing* 31). This chapter has argued that Ismene does in fact act, just not in the ‘desirable’ direction, and she does influence the course of action since her choices of acting/abstaining from action are not as arbitrary as they may seem. More importantly, through studying Ismene within the distinct frameworks of five (fixed or elective) identities she adopts as her own, namely, that of citizen, daughter, sister, culprit, and survivor, I have probed at and explored these nuances—mentioned but not elaborated on by Goldhill—and hopefully showcased that Ismene’s narrative presence substantially influences the political and philosophical bearings of the Sophoclean tragedy. As we have seen, it is not merely her “wish to avoid a similar fate to the rest of her family that leads her not to join Antigone in the

burial” (Elden 1), but also her individual solid conceptualisation of civic and civil duty; in the same vein, it is not only her desperation that pushes her to belatedly and vacuously co-sign her sister’s “suicidal scheme to defy public authority” (Hahnemann 1), but also her fragmented and untrained sense of political response-ability that drives her toward embodying an archetypal kind of performative allyship.

Thus, Ismene’s civic (in)action, hastily interpreted by idealists as moral deficiency, idleness, or betrayal and by pragmatists as acquiescence, prudence, or desperation, offers an equally powerful alternative to the “protagonist’s abundant political promise” (Honig *Interrupted* xiii). Ismene is more than a non-visionary or a(n a)pathetic, apolitical subject; her trajectory could be seen as epitomising a *presence* of a dialectically forged, fluid, flawed political perspective rather than a *lack* thereof. As the following chapters will showcase, as Antigone’s agon has been appropriated by a wide array of political movements, so is Ismene’s political (counter-)narrative resonant transhistorically and transculturally, withholding the potential of being especially relevant and instructive in contemporary discourses about political allyship. Ismene survives, not only because she is not killed off by Sophocles, but also because what her character symbolises (i.e. performative allyship as a non-teleological politics that substitutes an agonistic, polemical, confrontational politics) survives in rewritings of the tragedy—and demands our attention.

CHAPTER 2

ISMENE IN FERGUSON

2.1 Chorus, Choir, Church

August 9th, 2014. Eighteen-year-old Michael Brown Jr. is shot—six out of the twelve bullets fired hit his body—and killed by the hand of a Ferguson, MI police officer, Darren Wilson. Following his murder, “Michael Brown’s body [is] left lying in the street for an unprecedented length of time while Darren Wilson return[s] to the police precinct” (Stewart and Bryan 68). After news has spread, protests spark in Ferguson and proliferate throughout the country, lasting for weeks and fuelling the Black Lives Matter movement. Slogans like “Hands up, don’t shoot” and “No justice, no peace” become symbolic of the ongoing fight against extrajudicial executions carried out by the U.S. police force, afflicting mainly people of colour, particularly Black boys and men. Militarised police respond to the protestors violently, reports of rioting and looting abound, and chaos ensues in the city of Ferguson as well as in other major U.S. cities that have joined in the protests. When, several weeks later, the case is brought to the judicial system, some witnesses—including Michael Brown’s friend, Dorian Johnson, who was with him when he was killed—testify that Brown died while surrendering, unarmed and unthreatening, while a number of other witnesses and officer Wilson himself claim that the latter was acting in self-defense, positing that Brown was the aggressor.³⁷

Antigone in Ferguson was first performed in September 2016 at Normandy High School, Michael Brown’s alma mater, where he had graduated from merely eight days before his death. Put together by the Theater of War Productions and the Ferguson community, the project was conceived as a response to Michael Brown’s death.³⁸ Sophocles’s *Antigone* was chosen as the blueprint for this performance not only because it is the most enduring dramatic instance of individual will and conviction challenging state law and power, but also because it is, according to Doerries, an instance where every character is convinced they are in the right,

³⁷ For records of the witnesses’ and Darren Wilson’s accounts on the incident, see *The New York Times* archive, found at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/11/25/us/evidence-released-in-michael-brown-case.html>. Accessed 20 Feb 2021.

³⁸ In their own words, “Theater of War Productions works with leading film, theater, and television actors to present dramatic readings of seminal plays—from classical Greek tragedies to modern and contemporary works—followed by town hall-style discussions designed to confront social issues by drawing out raw and personal reactions to themes highlighted in the plays. The guided discussions underscore how the plays resonate with contemporary audiences and invite audience members to share their perspectives and experiences, and, helping to break down stigmas, foster empathy, compassion, and a deeper understanding of complex issues.” Source: theaterofwar.com/about. Accessed 20 Feb 2021.

they are ‘justified’ in their actions.³⁹ The play’s clearly stated aim was to engage with the Ferguson community in light of this highly contested and traumatic event in hopes of providing a space for reflection, discussion, and insight, but also grief, understanding, and a possibility for healing. To that end, *Antigone in Ferguson* has been staged multiple times, primarily in atypical venues, such as churches and schools and even basketball courts—taking the performance and the conversation *to* the community and inciting dialogue in a ‘safe’ and familiar environment.

Antigone in Ferguson is split into two equally important parts: the dramatic performance itself and the post-performance discussion between a select panel and the audience. As pertains to the first section, it consists of a dramatic reading of Sophocles’s *Antigone*, translated and adapted by classicist scholar and dramatist Bryan Doerries, with a rotating cast of four (at times, five) professional actors playing the roles of Antigone, Ismene, Creon, Haemon, the guard, Euridice, and Tiresias. Arguably the most notable departure from the original, besides the static nature of the acting which is in itself a significant choice, is the transfiguration of *chorus* into *choir*. The choral parts from the original are adapted into gospel songs, set to music by Phillip Woodmore, and sung by an all-Black choir composed of members of Michael Brown’s community, such as teachers, social workers, and, importantly, police officers. The ancient chorus, as the modern choir, is comprised by multiple individuals who unify their voices into one, therefore appear to share one singular point of view, entering in dialogue only with the play’s characters and not with other members in their midst. Similarly, a church choir shares one voice in expressing their uniform faith, although faith is as personal a matter as one’s point of view. Thus, the rendering of chorus in choir highlights the cultural significance of the gospel for the Black American community, while also retaining the “plural subjectivity inherent in the tragic form of the chorus, in which voices speaking in unison represent the intricately intertwined polis” (Engelstein 39). The creation of a communal ‘whole’ as a *church*, echoes and symbolically represents the commons or *demos* of the polis (ἐκκλησία του δήμου).⁴⁰ Constituting this church by the coexistence of the

³⁹ A valuable source for writing this chapter has been the mini documentary on *Antigone in Ferguson* available online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=oahSo9P5rgw. This video will be cited henceforth as (AiF mini-doc minute:second). In this documentary, Bryan Doerries explains his perception on why *Antigone* was chosen for this project as follows: “If the play by Sophocles is done right, then everyone in the play is right. And if not right, then they feel justified in what they’re doing. And so the question we are trying to ask in this community is if we step outside of our own shoes, we see it from the other’s perspective, we can acknowledge that we’re all human beings and we’re all playing roles, then can we create a space where we work together to end the violence. That’s the hope” (AiF mini-doc 4:04-4:34).

⁴⁰ I owe this insight to my supervisor, Dr. Mina Karavanta. Note that ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*) was the civic assembly/congregation in Athens, instituted by Solon in 594 A.D. In modern greek the term literally means church. Bryan Doerries, as a classicist and translator, might have had this allusion in mind.

choir, the actors, and the audience was an explicit aim of the dramatists, as explained by Doerries himself during his foreword to the performance (*AiF* 2016 1:29-1:49).⁴¹

The choice to incorporate people who share a core aspect of their identity (i.e. blackness) but come from diverse professional/vocational backgrounds in the cast/choir and, more than that, claim a church environment that includes the mixed audience of the play speaks to the fact that *Antigone in Ferguson* seeks to foreground multiple, conflicting perspectives. Those different perspectives however, following the original play, are grouped into pre-established forms that are slightly altered (chorus to choir, acting to dramatic reading, audience to church), in an effort to create a sense of community among the diverse crowd, create a space for consonance among a group of people with dissonant opinions, political and personal beliefs. To some extent, this could be seen as an ambitious but controversial effort, given the fact that the movement which responded to Michael Brown's killing was more often than not infused with anti-police sentiments, calls for radical reform, and demands from State and Federal administration to divest from the systemically racist institution of policing.

Furthermore, the choir in this adaptation mirrors the classical Chorus in another significant way, since

[a]s sensible as the Chorus might be, there is no indication that they have the courage or will to resist gross injustice. They do not provide us with a model for thinking about radical deviation from the collective or its leadership, nor do they help us to think about what to do when entire communities perpetuate injustice for the sake of some collectively agreed upon good. (Atkinson 235)

This task of making the audience “think about what to do” is in this case taken up by the post-performance panel-audience discussion, which at least invites one to publicly engage with the play's political implications. This dramaturgically constructed church inherently alludes to some kind of alliance, on the basis of a shared belief, sentiment, or goal. The people in the audience who have the privilege of not being directly (physically) threatened by the systemic conditions that brought about Michael Brown's murder would presumably engage in this discussion in good faith, perhaps even considering themselves as already ‘allies,’ or ‘allies-in-the-making.’ It is worth enquiring, therefore: How does this

⁴¹ As already mentioned, this production has been staged multiple times, in multiple different venues, and its format makes it more malleable than theatrical productions usually are—not the same show every time. For the purposes of this chapter, and for lack of a print edition of the play, my citations will refer to the two recorded stagings that are available online: a 2016 performance posted by Onassis Foundation at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7DtwZU0ID0> and a 2017 performance posted by Stavros Niarchos Foundation at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_E8EMcj4lw. The former will be cited as (*AiF* 2016 minute:second) and the latter as (*AiF* 2017 minute:second). Accessed 20 Feb 2021.

semi-interactive theatrical piece reinforce or challenge its audience's notions of allyship? And who are the spectators ultimately encouraged to identify with?

A central axis of my analysis in this Chapter will consider the interplay between *Antigone in Ferguson* inadvertently making a 'political statement' while also trying to remain as impartial and non-confrontational as possible with its explicit political messaging, thus mirroring classical Ismene's oscillation between her fixed role as a subject and chosen subjectivities. This adaptation is also especially pertinent to this thesis' examination of Ismene's diachronically symbolic impact, because the Sophoclean tragedy is trans-lated almost intact, with only slight paraphrasing, the benefit of poetic license, mostly noticeable in the performance's choral songs. *Antigone in Ferguson* is a testament to the fact that the same text can yield different interpretations when transposed to a different sociohistorical context; this 'Sophoclean-American' Ismene, infused with our contemporary technoscientific (and commodified) understanding of social justice activism, sees all the auspices of performative allyship as political praxis, which I have traced in the original text, acquire new dimensions.

2.2 'State fantasies' of 'the unruly'

In her 2009 book *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race*, Falguni Sheth delineates a theory of racialization as political tool and posits that race should not be seen as either a biological category or a social construct, but one should instead comprehend how race is a type of "technology" (Sheth 8): how it has been, and is still being, used as "a mode or vehicle of division, separation, hierarchy, exploitation, rather than a descriptive modifier[, since,] even beyond the discourse of social construction, race is fundamentally instantiated through a range of laws and social policies" (Sheth 4). According to her view, the technology of race is used by sovereign power⁴² in order to manage and control those deemed as 'unruly' populations through the process of racialization. In other words, besides its sociological and cultural significance, race also has a crucial and calculated impact on the way the State is self-preserved through its political and judicial systems; race is used as a vital tool for perpetuating the status quo. Since Sheth talks specifically about so-called Liberal Societies, her theory is directly relevant to the killing of Michael Brown, the legal case formed, its progression and its aftermath—thus, by extension, to *Antigone in Ferguson* as a cultural

⁴² Sheth borrows a lot of her terminology and theoretical frameworks from Foucault, whose political analysis she combines with Critical Race Theory, as delineated by the author herself in the Introduction to her book: "Foucault's brilliant account of disciplinary and regulatory power does, at least implicitly, account for the power involved in 'rules' exercised by sovereign power. But his discussion, which offers an exacting account of the way power quietly, 'neutrally,' and ubiquitously underlies the race wars of modern society, appears to neglect the way sovereign authority still operates directly to create racial divisions, on the grounds that in contemporary society sovereign power operates in a more diffuse manner" (Sheth 19).

artefact. However, Sheth's analysis is arguably also indirectly relevant to the ancient Sophoclean tragedy and can problematise the selection of *Antigone* by Theater of War Productions to talk about racial politics in the contemporary United States.

Antigone deals with unruliness on a dual front: despite their distinct motives, both Polyneices and Antigone are punished for disobeying State Law, for opposing sovereign power. Their acts are unforgivable not only because they pose a personal affront to power (the ruler), but also because they threaten the basis upon which the status quo is built (the rules), thus the fabric of the "country" (polis) itself. By virtue of the State's fundamental purpose to preserve itself, "the need by political authorities to respond or placate its constituencies in order to remain in power" (Sheth 3), Polyneices and Antigone must be removed from its citizenry, paradigmatically excluded from its benefits, with their public punishment functioning as a warning to other potential dissenters.

CREON A leader is someone who always chooses his country over his friends.

Our country is the ship on which we sail! She must remain upright and steady for us to go safely into harbor. (*AiF* 2016 13:02-13:10)

What is more, the siblings' 'unruly' actions are also contextualised and mediated by their pre-established identity and sociopolitical status in the Sophoclean play, and *Antigone in Ferguson* does not challenge this scheme; however allegorical the use of the Sophoclean tragedy may be, and however 'universal' the issues it touches upon are, this contemporary play undergirds a highly problematic and completely unchallenged⁴³ correlation between Michael Brown and Polyneices, and a less problematic but equally lacking in nuance correlation between BLM protesters and Antigone.⁴⁴ Polyneices is not de facto *constructed* as unruly, he actively chooses to be; and he does not choose unruliness as a politics of counter-sovereignty, but as a means of establishing a new (his own) sovereignty; his violent attack on the State is very much a product of his own thirst for revenge and power. Thus, even though "the description of the scene of Brown's death recalls Sophocles" (Honig *Antigone-Effect* 48), there is no other grounds on which to link a real-life brutal murder of a

⁴³ Completely unchallenged as pertains to the performance part of *Antigone in Ferguson* (again, there were no deviations from or reappraisals of the original tragedy's plot), as well as the snippets of panelists' speeches delivered during the post-performance discussion that are available to the public through video footage. There is scarcely any footage available of the audience feedback and/or challenges that might have been posed, so I cannot claim that this problematic parallel that the play introduces was not challenged at all.

⁴⁴ Polyneices receives the ultimate dishonour as his dead body is left unburied; a once distinguished citizen and *figure of authority* becomes an Othered and disposable body, a *prospective ruler* is turned into an unruly subject, due to his *betrayal to the State* of Thebes and his *coalition with enemy forces* to attack the city. Thus, Polyneices has forfeited his citizenship before being biopolitically condemned to "rot unburied on stony ground, a five course meal for vultures" (*AiF* 2016 13:38-13:45). When delineated this way, Polyneices's trajectory (including his death) seems increasingly impertinent to speak to/about the murder of Michael Brown.

Black teenager in Ferguson by a police officer with the double-murder of Eteocles and Polyneices in battle-to-the-death for the Theban throne.⁴⁵

In contrast to her brother, Antigone's punished body is incarcerated, thus removed from public view as soon as her sentence is decided, but not before she is given a forum to voice her reasons for repudiating and disobeying the law. Her decision to bury Polynices "'is a violation of law as well as the ground upon which law arises'—a dialectical poietic desire that bears the full range of poetic violence necessary to an autonomous society's self-alteration" (Gourgouris 127). As a character who intentionally becomes an outlaw in order to preserve her own and her kin's integrity through fulfilling her duty to divine law and justice, Antigone could be associated with activists who demand justice for the unjustly persecuted and harmed. The main difference between them is that Antigone is a solitary disruptive agent, who "fails because she chooses to exercise [her passion for autonomy] without the *polis*" (Gourgouris 155). As Antigone's defiant act in the face of legitimised violence was met with doubled-down state-sanctioned violence in Thebes, so were protesters in the streets of Ferguson who demanded justice for Michael Brown repressed with police violence, "an armed response that revealed the extent to which local police departments have been equipped with military arms, military technology, military training" (Davis 21). In both cases, State aggression was self-indulgently framed as legitimate, whereas the civilians' act(s) of dissent as illegitimate and inexcusable. As a result of the spontaneous 'disorder' and damaged property stemming from people's outrage, the conversation was effectively derailed, as it often is, from the initial *cause* for the protests to the *manner* of protesting, even though "history shows that this violence is the inevitable consequence of challenging the racial status quo" (Sebastian 14).

Drawing such a seemingly direct but hasty and unmediated parallel between Athenian tragedy and U.S. reality, *Antigone in Ferguson* certainly runs the risk of de-historicising, obscuring and/or naturalising the complexities of the sociopolitical issue it aims to tackle, namely, police brutality, law enforcement's judicial immunity, and the disposability of the

⁴⁵ That being said, Michael Brown's former teacher Duane Brown asserts that the major issue *Antigone in Ferguson* deals with is "people forget[ting] about the total, blatant disrespect of that boy laying in the ground because people were trying to figure out what to do." [Source: PBS NewsHour, "A play that speaks to Ferguson's tragedy and lets the audience speak back" 3:40-3:50 www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhiKbZ2JfmI.] "As that man [Polynices] laid there for hours, because something was going on with the law, so did Mike Brown lay there for hours, in the burning sun. And it was that disrespect that incited the anger." [Source: Antigone in Ferguson Trailer 0:32-0:51 www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyxOa8mgGmw.] Choir member and pastor of Wellspring Church, finds this project to be "appropriate, particularly in a community—and in a time— where folks are at a loss for the how-to." Choir members and panelists Latricia Allen and Alicia Parker, both Black women police officers, propose that there needs to be a stronger presence of "good police officers to be able to root out the bad ones," and NYPD officer Kevin Williams encourages the audience to "engage with their police department ... and hold them accountable" (*AiF mini-doc* 7:05-7:55).

Black body in the U.S. In this sense, the play itself becomes a sort of Ismene-figure: though ostensibly morally aligned with the protesters in Ferguson and around the U.S., it avoids to openly support their confrontational resistance politics or to address the systemic, root problems at hand (i.e. U.S. police as an inherently violent and racist institution).⁴⁶ Similar to how Ismene offers her silence to Antigone as a means of support and then abruptly commits her life itself to standing by her sister when she is sentenced for her crime, *Antigone in Ferguson* offers the displacement of (Black American) collective trauma to an ancient past, and then abruptly reiterates its audience to the present moment, inviting them to participate in a public forum “discussing” Michael Brown’s death which, for the ones not directly affected, felt like a “perform your humanity” exercise. It is left up to the audience to correlate the two parts of their play and draw their own conclusions about what *Antigone* is actually doing in *Ferguson*.

Froma Zeitlin (1990) discussed Sophocles’ Theban plays in terms of their “ideological function [as a] rehearsal of the collapse and reinstitution of civilization” that permitted “the Athenian polis [to] interrogat[e] itself, and its radical democracy” by juxtaposing Athens with its “anti-polis,” Thebes (Goff and Simpson 19-20). In this vein, *Antigone in Ferguson* appropriates the prestigious genre of ancient Greek tragedy, which alludes to ancient Athens—a *topos* vividly painted in U.S. collective unconscious as the

⁴⁶ In the less than five years that have passed since the first staging of *Antigone in Ferguson*, the catalogue of unarmed Black people’s extrajudicial executions by U.S. police has kept growing and the police killers in most cases have either never been prosecuted or they were let loose after posting bail to avoid even their minor sentences. The global propagation of this ongoing U.S. reality, largely through social media, reached its peak after Breonna Taylor and George Floyd were brutally murdered in May 2020. Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives has become a worldwide phenomenon, sparking global protests, and introducing to mainstream discourse progressive social justice/political propositions that were so far deemed too radical to platform, such as Defund the Police, or even Abolish the Police and Abolish the Prison Industrial Complex. In her fascinating though controversial article, “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish The Police,” published in the New York Times (June 2020), Mariame Kaba writes: “[E]fforts to solve police violence through liberal reforms like these have failed for nearly a century. Enough. We can’t reform the police. The only way to diminish police violence is to reduce contact between the public and the police. There is not a single era in United States history in which the police were not a force of violence against black people. Policing in the South emerged from the slave patrols in the 1700 and 1800s that caught and returned runaway slaves. In the North, the first municipal police departments in the mid-1800s helped quash labor strikes and riots against the rich. Everywhere, they have suppressed marginalized populations to protect the status quo. So when you see a police officer pressing his knee into a black man’s neck until he dies, that’s the logical result of policing in America. When a police officer brutalizes a black person, he is doing what he sees as his job. [...] The surest way of reducing police violence is to reduce the power of the police, by cutting budgets and the number of officers. But don’t get me wrong. We are not abandoning our communities to violence. We don’t want to just close police departments. We want to make them obsolete.” In another article titled “We Should Still Defund the Police,” published in the New Yorker (August 2020), written by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, the proposition to defund the police is approached as follows: “Bottoming out police budgets will not, on its own, create the resources necessary to build communities anew. But it would shift the balance away from the decades-long orientation on law and order toward treatment and care. The abolition of policing may seem farfetched to some, but, in effect, the racist batter of the police has already been baked. We cannot go back now and decide to take out this or that thing. The whole cake has to be discarded, starting with its most vile ingredient—the presumption of Black criminality and guilt. The reimagining of a just society has inevitably come into conflict with the racist barbarism of American police. We must begin again.” (Full bibliographical information for both articles can be found in the Works Cited section.)

birthplace of democracy and civilisation, implicitly comparing and contrasting two wildly different historical contexts to identify common core. This modern adaptation, then, whether intentionally or accidentally, becomes a “dramatiz[ation of] the hypocrisy of [neo]colonial cultures that historically identified themselves as Athenians but behaved in their imperial dimension as Thebans” (Goff and Simpson 20). Thus, avoiding like the proverbial Ismene to unambiguously take sides, this piece addresses the community in allegorical terms, making an ultimately deficient linkage between the ancient text and current reality.⁴⁷ In order for this allegory to work, it would have to find purchase in the audience’s social imaginary. This, I argue, is achieved through an appeal to what Jacqueline Rose calls ‘states of fantasy.’⁴⁸

As explained in Donald Pease’s *The New American Exceptionalism*,

despite the efforts of political theorists to suppress them, the state depend[s] upon its subjects’ affective investments in fantasy for its legitimation. [...] The state cannot get into rationally purposive action that the individual citizen can logically explain—it can only do so in terms of the inner meaning it holds for citizens or the subjective beliefs they attach to it. (Pease 2)

Pease’s analysis revolves around the U.S. State’s legitimisation of the Patriot Act, the War on Terror and its aftermath; however, since it describes the citizenry of the modern American State that *Antigone in Ferguson* addresses, this inquiry into the makings of a state fantasy is highly relevant to this study. The ‘Sophoclean-American’ Ismene embodies the paradigm of the citizen subject that is invested in the State’s fantasy to the degree that she is rendered incapable of envisioning, much less participating in, an extra-political (in that it does not adhere to the polis’ rules, regulations, and/or, if existent, institutionalised procedures for expressing disagreement with state policy) or counter-sovereignty protest. Ismene in Ferguson is the natural evolution of Ismene in Thebes, as I have read her in Chapter 1, adjusted to the so-called Liberal Democracy of the U.S., in which State apparatuses function

⁴⁷ Aside from the problematic association of Michael Brown’s body with Polyneices’s body, there is another important shortcoming in this allegory: that of the accountability of the leader and/or executioner. The stages of Creon’s agon (*hubris*, *ate*, *nemesis*, and *tisis*) are fully fledged in the Sophoclean tragedy, which ends with a failed ruler who takes responsibility for being inadequate, is morally and practically destroyed, full of regret for his actions and hunted by the Furies. No State official was charged with the Officer Darren Wilson (as most law enforcement agents who have committed similar crimes) was not indicted, nor did he appear to experience any remorse over the incident. In stark contrast to Creon’s lament and haunting by the Furies, “Wilson’s words seem to indicate that he is not emotionally connected to the killing when he states, ‘I don’t think it’s a haunting ... It’s always going to be something that happened’” (Stewart and Bryan 73). Even though the vicarious experience of ancient Greek tragedy in the contemporary world opens up new ways for political subjects to reflect on their place, responsibility, and role in society and even though Antigone speaks to and problematises timeless issues that challenge both the individual citizen and the polis as a whole, “[d]ue to its injustice,” systemic racism and police brutality “is not a topic that tragedy can purify through its artistic presentation”; instead, it is “Poetry [that] must be purified of the ugliness and barbarism that must be tolerated in life” (Chanter 65).

⁴⁸ See Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

in an infinitely more complicated manner than simply enforcing decrees, and in which “real authority [is] no longer vested in the person of the ruler, it [has] disembodied itself” (Pease 3).

On the one hand, the choice to stage *Antigone* in and of itself argues against seeing the law as the ultimate arbitrator of right and wrong. Antigone, as opposed to Ismene, differentiates between morality and legality in a manner that openly favours the first despite the consequences, an act which can lend itself to politically radical interpretations. On the other hand, since “[t]he issue posed by the *Antigone* (as opposed to by Antigone, the character) is not whether to lament the dead but rather how to do so, ... [given that] lamentation stands for certain forms of life, social orders, ontologies, and histories” (Honig *Interrupted* 2), this adaptation arriving in its particular historical circumstances seems to be promoting what Bonnie Honig calls a ‘lamentation of politics,’ anchored on a ‘mortalist humanism,’ rather than an intervention on the level of the ‘politics of lamentation,’ procured by ‘agonistic humanism,’ understood as “a commitment to agonistically engage the human, which needs such engagement because of its tendency to fall out of politics. Agonism is a commitment always to repoliticize, to render contestable that which has come to seem incontestable, and also to affirm, care for, and defend cherished ideals that support agonism in its efforts” (Honig *Antigone-Effect* 45).⁴⁹

According to its director, the play was meant to assuage the “divisive” climate and mediate the heated public dialogue that follows each Black person’s death at the hands of law enforcement.⁵⁰ From the handful of remarks made during this discussion that are available to us in video snippets or reviews, it is demonstrable that the production team’s priority was to

⁴⁹ These terms (lamentation of politics vs. politics of lamentation and mortalist vs. agonistic humanism) appear regularly all over Honig’s body of work on *Antigone*. I use them here in the context of *Antigone in Ferguson* because the following quote describes precisely what I read this play as: “Mourning together, people may find their way to something new. But in privileging or essentializing mourning as the site of such efforts, we neglect others equally important and much-needed to offset the limitations of mourning as a politics: one such limitation, in particular, is its tendency to turn, in the hands of mortalist humanists, from a politics of lamentation into a lamentation of politics. To respond politically to the calls issued by the many such bodies in the road, we need the natal and not just the mortal. Or, better, we need to work the interval between them to demand more: not just justice after violence (so many victims, so many marches) but a restructuring of the order that insistently treats each such case as a single, local, case. Instead, we must insist that each such case is part of a pattern of life in this country, structured by ‘unwritten laws’ that are both “aberrant” and deliberate ‘transmissions’ of the curse of American racism and race-thinking, passed on from one generation to the next. [...] Public grief is itself a stepping out of line in this context but [...] it needs to be partnered with natal action lest the politics of lamentation devolve into the lamentation of politics that is despair.” (Honig *Antigone-Effect* 46-7, note 6)

⁵⁰ Bryan Doerries explains how this project was not purely a product of his own, or Theater of War’s, reflexes as a theatre group, but rather that it was directly requested of them to create a performance that would address the Ferguson community in light of Michael Brown’s killing: “Someone who attended the church that Michael Brown’s memorial took place at read about us in Harper’s magazine and they called and they said ‘Do you have a play that can help our community come together across desperate lines and through this tension?’ And frankly we were, as a company, intimidated by that question, given how charged things have gotten in our country, given how divisive things have become in our political discourse.” (*AiF* 2016 0:50-1:13)

create a forum where everyone could be heard rather than to reach a general consensus and/or propose an action plan. In this sense, this modern restaging-sans-rewriting of *Antigone* is not, in itself, nuanced enough to tackle what happened in Ferguson, neither can it measure up to the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement. However, the church that convenes for two hours in each staging of *Antigone in Ferguson* is a mirror held up to the community that experienced Michael Brown's murder and the judicial case that followed it. And aside from bringing "all the various stakeholders" together in a liturgy that "acknowledges raw, fallible human beings," as Doerries idealistically proclaims, *Antigone in Ferguson* inadvertently showcases that not "all sides" actually have an equal amount of "skin in the game."⁵¹

2.3 Black Lives, White 'Allies'⁵²

In the 2017 production of *Antigone in Ferguson*, the cast is, perhaps intentionally, colour-coded, with the only characters played by white actors being Creon and Ismene. By virtue of this (conscious or incidental) choice, the connection between ancient tragedy and modern American racial politics becomes more pronounced. Apart from the more obvious symbolism of a white man as the head of an unjust law enforcement apparatus who nevertheless feels justified in his actions, a white Ismene next to a Black Antigone creates a loaded image. The opening dialogue between the two sisters (*AiF* 2017 0:45-2:21) provides an opportunity for the audience to identify in Ismene the "white moderate" that Martin Luther King Jr. poignantly criticises in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963):

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action." (King 1)

As we have already seen, it is not merely that Ismene is hesitant to challenge the status quo due to fear and/or weakness; the logic behind her (in)actions is supported by her belief (justified or not, it is up to individual opinion) that the establishment is and should be the

⁵¹ The full quote referenced here: "There's something about watching the play unfold with a diverse audience that includes all the various stakeholders—Law Enforcement, BLM activists, the Faith Community, Michael Brown's teachers, people who have skin in the game, all sides ... that gives us an opportunity to acknowledge raw, fallible human beings" (*AiF* mini-doc 8:50-9:00).

⁵² This subtitle alludes to Franz Fanon's epitomical work on anti-racist and anti-colonial resistance politics, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967).

ultimate arbitrator for public conduct, since it is representative of the public opinion. In other words,

Ismene represents the rule which proves Antigone the exception; Ismene is the “normal” Greek girl living within the limits and laws of the *polis*, while Antigone is the abnormal, extra-political entity. [...] If Antigone and Oedipus are “other” for the Athenian audience, Ismene is marked as “same” by her association with the polis and its values. (Johnson 385-6)

This conceptualisation is even more relevant to *Antigone in Ferguson*, since Ismene here is a constituent of a ‘liberal democracy,’ thought of as the par excellence representative regime. Considering Ismene’s reluctance to participate in an anti-establishment alliance with her sister despite acknowledging the reasons behind Antigone’s anti-establishment sentiments, the younger sister can be seen as an analogy for the liberal citizen who is against police brutality and racism, but also against dismantling the systemic factors which perpetuate these conditions. Thus, Ismene’s opposition to Antigone and/or her alternative politics hinges on the maintenance and perpetuation of her ‘state fantasy.’

Ismene is transformed from the ‘white moderate’ to the ‘white ally’ when she lays claim to her sister’s act seeking to be held accountable for it. This action can be seen as an instance of performative allyship, as explained in Chapter 1. That said, there is an important qualification to be made that distinguishes classical Ismene from the profile of the contemporary performative ally (see Introduction p. 9-10) that pertains to the platform/forum on which allyship is claimed. Being completely deprived of the right to a public opinion as a woman-subject, Ismene’s only resort is to perform her allyship to her sister directly in the face of the State—that is Creon and the Chorus. Thus, although her intention was not to challenge Creon’s rulership, but to save her sister’s life, her action is in itself radical, especially compared to contemporary performative allies for whom the stakes are extremely low, who either voice their dissent on relatively safe spaces (such as social media) whereby they cannot be persecuted for their support of activist movements, however radical their claims may be. The accessibility of a private-but-public platform that social media provided to the vast majority of privileged subjects, allows them, to put it simply, to talk the talk without walking the walk. This way, people who might be shocked or even outraged at the fact that their State recurrently becomes the topos for such incidents as Michael Brown’s murder, so-called ‘regural citizens’ who might even be sympathetic to the fight of anti-racism or would like the idea of a demilitarised/defunded police force, for example, have the option

to virtually align themselves with said movements without actually and tangibly contributing toward the fulfillment of their aims. As Holiday Phillips explains,

I am not overlooking the fact that public allyship can help spur positive change. Voices can be heard, and some small version of justice may even be served as a result. But we must also not be lulled into believing that this kind of allyship is enough to dismantle the conditions that made it possible for an innocent black man to be lynched in broad daylight. And we must not let the kind of performative allyship that begins and ends with hashtags take center stage in the quest for equality. ... [T]he problem with performative allyship is not that it in itself damages, but that it excuses. It excuses privileged people from making the personal sacrifices necessary to touch the depth of the systemic issues it claims to address. (5-7)

Classical Ismene exploits Creon's guilt-by-association process and does not challenge his distorted view of the sisters as a homogeneous threat to power that was enough to temporarily cast them both as criminals, because in that specific moment she desires to be accused along with her sister. But, ultimately, her relative privilege (see 1.4 and 1.5) compared to Antigone, as well as her provable non-participation in the burial, is what prompts the representatives of public opinion (the Chorus) to convince Creon to let her off the hook. In her dialectic relationship with both sides of the binary opposition (Creon and Antigone), the 'Sophoclean-American' Ismene can become an indicator of the discontinuous evolution of the concepts that drive the two foes' confrontation; in her failure to substantially alter the course of events, she can showcase the limitations of 'both-sides' discourse and of performative allyship. Thus, she becomes a dynamic character that withholds valuable insight into the blindspots of political activism in the present moment.

Antigone in Ferguson was a highly regarded and well received production and one of Theater of War's longest running projects. Its success speaks to the fact that a society that is daily confronted with *hubris* and *ate* on multiple fronts will be captivated by the enduring and universal themes of Greek tragedy, as it remains a testament to the impact of choices, fate, and loss on human nature. Despite its title, Sophocles's *Antigone*, does not tell the story of a single individual; nor does it offer a final resolution and the restitution of justice and peace for Thebes. As Angela Davis has pointed out about Ferguson,

it is a mistake to assume that these issues can be resolved on an individual level. It is a mistake to assume that all we have to do is guarantee the

prosecution of the cop who killed Michael Brown. The major challenge of this period is to infuse a consciousness of the structural character of state violence into the movements that spontaneously arise. (22)

Antigone in Ferguson does not directly and openly challenge this structural character nor does it align itself with the dismantling of the institutions that perpetuate an unjust status quo; its dynamic statement remains hazy and ambiguous, insofar as the play depends on foregrounding multiple conflicting perspectives at once and it designates radical empathy (and not radical action for structural/institutional reform) as its Sunday sermon. In any case, this modern reconfiguration of *Antigone* encodes a very important and urgent message, if one actively looks for it: however benevolent in nature, performative allyship coupled with practical inaction can harm activist causes, and, by centering the performative ally it can actually derail the conversation from where it needs to be.

Thus, as empathy can be both a reconciliatory and a revolutionary state of mind, the play is versatile enough to be what each audience member wants it to be: a painful but cathartic experience, a mobiliser for people already inclined to take action against injustice, or a sort of tranquiliser for those who sought to reckon with or understand a real-life tragedy via a dramatic transportation to ancient Thebes—and not in their own country's streets. In my reading of the play (which is undoubtedly mediated by my being a white European student with a removed and privileged perspective on both the performance and the state-sanctioned murder it was created to respond to), *Antigone in Ferguson* entails the bitter reminder that what Black people have been fighting for for centuries is not their divine right to bury, to “cover” their brother, as the Sophoclean heroine did, but their right to not have any more brothers and sisters die at the hands of law enforcement, to “uncover” and dismantle the racist institutions that make their daily “unyielding realities” be irreducible to any one dramatic performance.⁵³

⁵³ The quotations here are taken from August Wilson's iconic speech, “The Ground on Which I Stand.” The full quote in reference reads as follows: “I believe in the American Theater. I believe in its power to inform about the human condition. I believe in its power to heal. To hold the mirror as it were up to nature. To the truths we uncover to the truths we wrestle from uncertain and sometimes unyielding realities” (Wilson 503).

CHAPTER 3

TRANSFORMING ISMENE

Ismene, Erased

Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni, an African Antigone* was first produced at Emory University of Atlanta, GA, as part of the Theatre Departments "Brave New Works" project.⁵⁴ The play reincarnates an Antigone-figure (Tegonni) in nineteenth century Nigeria under British colonial rule, while also transposing the original Antigone as a meta-theatrical character into the setting. The classical Antigone with her 'crew' of souls/actors becomes a metaphorical reference point for the lineage of dispossession,

ANTIGONE: Antigone belongs to several incarnations (26)

*

ANTIGONE'S CREW: We're metaphors. We always come in the colour
and the shape of your imagination (27),

as well as an orchestrator of the repetition of patterns of dispossession across time and space, at times "identif[ying] herself with the most negative aspects of the colonizers' coercive power" (Goff and Simpson 343):

ANTIGONE: It's not our story, we're from other times. It's just history about
to repeat itself again.

2ND SOL: With us, as African soldiers?

ANTIGONE: Mercenaries, in the pay of the British. And, remember, here, the
soldiers obey their white commanders blindly, and ask no questions.

3RD SOL: Right then, let's get started. Tegonni's coming to bury her brother,
and we have to stop her.

ANTIGONE: Exactly. You know what to do, you've been well rehearsed.
(28-9)

The titular character's agon echoes the one of the classical Antigone, while at the same time the play embarks on an effort "to coordinate what cannot, with what can, be imagined differently" (Goff and Simpson 324). *Tegonni, an African Antigone* recontextualises the perennial philosophical and political questions tackled in the Sophoclean original (right to soil, burial rites, individual versus communal ethics, civil versus unwritten law, kinship ties, the politics of dissent) in a colonial setting. Tegonni's violent clash with General Carter-Ross

⁵⁴ See Osofisan, p. 6.

(the imperial Governor), the Creon-figure, in light of her prospective marriage to Captain Allan Jones, the Haemon-figure. The Yoruba princess becomes a beacon and vindicator for the ‘unruly’ (see 2.2) colonial subjects and a dangerous agent provocateur for the assimilated colonial subjects; thus, Osofisan creates a ‘trialecticity’⁵⁵ comprising the ancient tragedy, his own country’s colonial history, and late 20th century regimes in Africa, where “rule by bullet and by brutal coercion, often by small, well-armed cliques, sustained by foreign multinational business interests” prevailed (Osofisan 8).

In relation to this study of allyship through the eyes of Ismene, the most crucial disjunction between *Tegonni* and the original tragedy is the complete erasure of Ismene’s figure from the text. Tegonni is indeed “the last of the royal line” after both of her brothers (Adeloro, the Eteocles-figure, and Oyekunle, the Polyneices-figure) are killed; but, in the absence of blood ties, Osofisan presents Tegonni’s kinship ties with her community as the crucial element that helps “release the Antigone-figure into the comedy of a happy ending” (Goff and Simpson 324). The sisterhood that the Sophoclean Ismene offers to Antigone is here substituted by what Honig calls “agonistic sorority.” Assuming for the sake of this analysis that Ismene’s character is replaced by/split into Tegonni’s three friends/spiritual sisters, Kunbi, Yemisi, and Faderera, it is surely interesting that the most radical reimagining of Ismene has her either entirely written off the text or transfigured into a kinship coalition comprised by subjectivities who do not recall the original Ismene at all. Tegonni’s three friends form a double, gendered and racial, alliance to fight against the colonisers’ totalitarian abuse as well as the endemic rigidity and constraints of gender roles in their own native community. Kunbi, Yemisi, and Faderera appear even more willing than Tegonni herself to go to extremes in order to secure and promote an agonistic resistance politics; as they demand that justice is served at any cost and commit to sacrificing even their lives for the cause, their powerful rhetoric is unified into ‘WOMEN’ as a speaking role in the text.

KUNBI: Love is nothing, my sister, unless you have power on your side.

That’s what we all have to learn.

FADERERA: We’ve buried our prince. That’s all that matters. Let us die for it if we must.

KUNBI: Or of what use is life anyway, without honor? Are we here just to breed children, and children who would be cowards too?

⁵⁵ The term is used here schematically, although there is potential resonance between the concept of trialectics in spatial philosophy, theorized by Henry Lefebvre and Edward Soja, and the triple spatiality and temporality this play introduces. For more on Trialectics, see Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, 1996.

WOMEN: We are all with you, Tegonni! (79)

*

They are all shouting, "NO! NEVER! SHE 'WILL NEVER APOLOGISE! GET LOST WHITE GHOST! GET BACK TO HELL, WHERE YOU CAME FROM!" etc.

ISOKUN, BAYO, ELDERS: Tegonni!

TEGONNI: No! I will never accept!

WOMEN: Never! Let us all die!

GOV: You see what I mean? You see!

The women laugh cheerily at their triumph, and congratulate TEGONNI.
(88-9)

*

KUNBI: What will happen to our sister?

ADC: What do you think? Go away now!

ISOKUN: My daughters—

FADERERA: We're going nowhere! We won't leave here without her!

[...]

KUNBI: Kill us! Oh yes, kill all of us! But we're not going anywhere!

FADERERA: Either free us all, or kill us! [...] Kill us all! (102-3)

The female coalition formed between Tegonni and her 'sisters' is not based on kinship alone, but also on a clearly articulated political alliance toward a common goal. Thus, another distinction with the original Ismene emerges: even when she expresses a sacrificial wish to share Antigone's death, taking a share of the blame that did not rightfully belong to her, that spontaneous act of allyship was not a product of Ismene having re-examined or changed her original politics. Conversely, in Tegonni we see the members of the sisterhood articulating and defending a very clear political position that is openly defiant and hostile toward the colonisers and openly critical and dismissive of the Elders of Oke-Osun. The non-confrontational and complacent dimensions of Ismene are thus displaced to and performed by these Elders of the community, namely, Bayo and Isokun.⁵⁶

TEGONNI: You saw what they wanted to do? These old men—

⁵⁶ "Bayo and Isokun in particular join the Elders to plead with Carter-Ross for her life, and try later on to save her by persuading her to make a public apology for her brother's burial. At some level these men play the role of Ismene, identifying sympathetically with the protagonist but trying to modify her behaviour. Although Tegonni eventually agrees with her 'father' Isokun that she should make the public apology, she initially takes his intervention as a form of betrayal, as does the Greek Antigone with Ismene." (Goff and Simpson 337-8)

KUNBI: Incredible! After surrendering our land, they want to surrender our spirit too into the bargain!

FADERERA: Is that not what they are always doing, the men we call our fathers and our husbands!

TEGONNI: My friends, let's be sober for a minute though. I want all of you to think again about this seriously. You don't really have to stay with me, if you wish. I was the one who started it, and I am ready to pay alone. So any of you who—

KUNBI: Enough, don't even go further, Tegon. We are all in this together now, by our choice. Let them kill us if they wish.

YEMISI: Yes! Let them know, as Faderera said just now, let these white men know that they may have conquered our land, but they've not conquered our souls!

TEGONNI: We don't all have to die—

KUNBI: Rubbish! We'll go together, Tegon! (90)

*

KUNBI: No more, with all due respects, baba! That's how we've been trusting you men all along, and see what you've made of our land!

YEMISI: Turned us all into slaves!

FADERERA: While the white bastards plunder our land! (103)

In these passages, Kunbi in particular emerges as an extremely vocal political subject, that possesses remarkably concrete and distilled political judgment:

ANTIGONE: Gomina has ordered that arrangements be made for Adelor to be buried in pomp and pageantry, as befits a king!

[...]

KUNBI: You see now, my friends! This is the drama of our defeat as a people! Adelor will be buried well. The one who licked the Governor's boots shall be allowed to go to the grave with honour. But the one who opposed him, who stood for his rights, will be fed to the dogs... (92-3)

Kunbi here does something the original Antigone, much less Ismene, did not attempt: She openly politicises the burial(s) and contextualises the dis/honouring with the chosen subjectivities of the dead brothers ('bootlicker' versus 'dissenter'), who are criticised and evaluated for their political choices. Adelor, the Eteocles-figure, here a compliant and

collaborative colonial subject who aspires via this collaboration with the ‘master’ to elevate himself over his own people, is rewarded in death—a death, no less, procured by the fact that he was a collaborator of the oppressive, colonial force that failed to protect him. Oyekunle, Oke-Osun’s rightful heir, who saw at least part of Oke-Osun’s natives rejecting him as king and his throne usurped by his brother’s coalition with the imperial enemy, dies in his effort to revolt and his body is brought to town with the sole purpose of ridiculing and dishonouring him.

Thus, though “in general Osofisan’s women are equal to his men in terms of their commitment to political and social liberation” (Goff and Simpson 340), in *Tegonni* the coalition of women that emerges as a result of the blurred distinctions and active allyship between the Antigone-figure(s) and the Ismene-figure(s) of the play, is repeatedly presented both as more politically savvy and more politically effective than their male counterparts. The women of *Tegonni* become a testament to what Butler’s “promiscuous disobedience” would look like, in a colonial setting, since Tegonni’s coalition with her sisters encompasses both axes of promiscuous disobedience as outlined by Honig: “agency in the context of constraint” and “responsiveness and calls for openness to the other” (Honig *Antigone-Effect* 43). Whereas the Sophoclean Antigone “represents the limits of the communal self and, as a figure of independence and solitude, invokes an individualistic understanding of a self not dependent upon or attached to a community” (Walker 213), Tegonni and her sororal coalition transcend their individual subjectivities and enter into a dialectic relationship of mutual understanding, respect, support, and cooperation in order to enlist in a fight that they are willing to see be defeated as long as it stays agonistic and politically honest; in other words, they are aware that “without [each other], [they] cannot conceive of [their] own struggle as a social and political struggle” (Athanasίου and Butler 116).

Ismene, Reclaimed

My analysis of *Tegonni*’s coalition of ‘unruly’ women so far begs the question: Why would we see Kunbi, Yemisi, and Faderera⁵⁷ as Ismene-figures and not as members of a sisterhood of African Antigones, since none of these women reminds one of the original

⁵⁷ Since in the first chapter I examined what Ismene’s name signifies, it is appropriate that I do it here as well, especially considering the Yoruba have a long and rich tradition in naming as a meaning-making practice. Therefore, it is very interesting to examine what Ismene (the ‘native of Thebes,’ the ‘knowledgable,’ or the ‘powerful moon’—see fn. 13) is substituted by, or else what she is split into: Kúnbi (kún: fill, add to - ìbi: birth): A shortened form of “Adékúnbi”: adds to birth. Yémisí (yé...sí: honour, celebrate - mi: me): Honours me. Fádérera (fi: use - adé: crown - re: soothe - ara: body): One who uses the crown to calm her soul. [Source: yorubaname.com]

Ismene at all? While it is true that there is no explicit textual evidence—besides the fact of their ‘sisterhood’ and their willingness to sacrifice themselves along with Tegonni—that would allow one to claim with certainty that Kunbi, Yemisi, and Faderera are indeed reconfigurations of Ismene, there is ample evidence that they are not, in fact, Antigone figures. The title itself of the play prepares us to receive Tegonni, *an* African Antigone as the protagonist. The meta-theatrical spectre of classical Antigone identifies her counterpart in Tegonni, not simply because their life stories are paralleled, but also because she is a unique, trail-blazing female figure, the first woman bronze caster and sculptor, labeled a witch by the most conservative members of her community, cast out not only because of her prospective marriage to a white man but because of her holistic dismantling of restrictive, set social roles. The final scene of the play epitomises Tegonni’s unique claim to the role of Antigone’s descendant, since she succeeds in passing the test Antigone puts her through that confirms that she is indeed devoted to justice, and dedicated to her cause until the end. Kunbi, Yemisi, and Faderera, on the other hand, remain apprehensive toward the spectral Antigone throughout the play, but show complete devotion to their chosen sister, their ‘Story-teller,’ as Kunbi calls Tegonni (93). Acting as mediators always advocating in favour of Tegonni’s disruptive actions to the male elders but also participating in these actions when they can, these women are a counterwriting of Ismene that retains some of her core elements, while bringing into completion and expounding on Ismene’s allyship politics and thus preparing the path for new communal forms of resistance and struggle against the colonial administration. The solidarity Ismene only professes to Antigone finds here its promise for a ‘shared blame’ fulfilled, since the resistance politics adopted by the Ismene-figures in this play “model a productive politics for contemporary societies as well as for Oke-Osun” (Goff and Simpson 341).

Ultimately, *Tegonni* employs ancient myth and tragedy as ‘allies’ in order for this new (his)story to find resonance within the framework of agonistic literature. The Sophoclean tragedy, thus, inspired the creation of a counter-narrative that would respond to the pressing political issues that permeate both the dramatic action and the real-life context within which Osofisan wrote the play. As the playwright himself states,

the valiant story of Antigone [...] would help [him] add [his] voice to the millions of other small voices in Africa, all shouting unheard and pleading to be set free—voices that are waiting desperately for help from friends in the free world. (Osofisan 10)

Tegonni is thus in itself a call for allyship with the politics of “an old tragedy, a classical text,” reconstellated in the postcolonial present and addressed as “a powerful resource for the present and for a political activism in which the theater is directly engaged” (Foley and Howard 619). And since “[a]lliance building ... begins with owning and learning from moments of failure” (McIntosh and Hobson 14), it is possible that these African Ismenes, as Osofisan imagined them, learned from their mythical ancestor’s limitations and decided to do more and do better this time around.

CONCLUSION: FROM ‘ALLY’ TO ‘ACCOMPLICE’

Discourse on the multiformity, potentiality, and limitations of allyship within political activism has perhaps never been as nuanced and polyphonic as during the past decade. Given the increasingly global and immediate access to information and the weaponisation of social media as political platforms, it is also easier than ever to virtually get behind a social justice cause, e.g. through a post on one’s social media account, without actually supporting said cause in other—tangible—aspects of one’s life. Although this conceptualisation of a weak, or faux, allyship “only in words” (*Antigone* 543) but not in actions, has existed at least as long as the *Antigone* has, ‘performative allyship’ is a contemporary coinage. This specific term has recently been used either to discredit ‘performative allies’ as self-serving, dishonest political actors who claim allyship for the wrong reasons, or in order to warn prospective allies of this bad practice (see fn.5), because “allies can harm instead of help” (Ghabra and Calafell 46). At the same time, questions are continuously being raised as to how useful a “dichotomous, stable and simplistic categorisations into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ allies, and an overly narrow understanding of ally support” may be (Vosloo 121). In fact, the notion itself of ‘allyship’ has been challenged by some activists who are “skeptical that contemporary allyship and solidarity discourses circulating in today’s social movement arenas will achieve transformative change because these discourses are imbricated in hegemonic European whiteness” (Lee 15). Indigenous critics have indicted the commodification of allyship through the so-called “ally industrial complex,” contending that

Where struggle is commodity, allyship is currency.

Ally has also become an identity, disembodied from any real mutual understanding of support.

The term ally has been rendered ineffective and meaningless. (Indigenous Action Media 7)

This thesis was inspired by the conjecture that what drives Antigone’s notorious final and unequivocal rejection of Ismene is the former’s recognition and disavowal of the latter as a performative ally; according to Antigone, Ismene’s refusal to actively participate in Polyneices’ burial makes her ignoble and hateful, but Ismene’s claim to have “done the deed” is no longer a personal failing, but an affront to Justice itself. Combining this assertion with the observation that Ismene has, more often than not, been dispossessed of a substantial voice

in rewritings or critical analyses of the Sophoclean tragedy, I began an inquiry into the potential reason why readers tend to align with Antigone's rejection of her sister, even while recognising other shortcomings and blindspots in Antigone's perspective. Thus, my hypothesis when embarking on this dissertation was that Ismene is the paradigmatic figure of the performative ally, a *topos* of ally theatrics that is repudiated by those who consider ourselves progressive but also much easier to pinpoint in others than in oneself. It is this precise—subconscious or conscious—identification of many readers with Ismene's well-intentioned but poorly executed and belated attempt to rise to the occasion set by Antigone's confrontational resistance politics, I argue, that makes her a widely unlikable character. That being said, as this study has hopefully showcased, Ismene is a complex and intricately written character, whose intersecting and often conflicting subject positions inform and shape her own sophisticated, though unfulfilled, politics.

Returning then to the assertion made in the Introduction of this work, namely that Ismene's enduring symbolic value recontextualised in contemporary times can lead privileged subjects to a teachable moment about our own political existence, I argue that Ismene urges us to reexamine our affinity ties with power, our complicity in removing ourselves from action while claiming allyship, and our willingness to replace espousing 'ally' as an identifier with being 'accomplices' in political praxis,⁵⁸ because

[m]eaningful alliances aren't imposed, they are consented upon. [...] Resignation of agency is a by-product of the allyship establishment. [...] There's a difference between acting for others, with others, and for one's own interests, be explicit. (Indigenous Action Media 4, 6)

For all the reasons traced in this study, Ismene can make readers uncomfortable; her admission that she was born without the power and means to act (δρᾶν ἔφυν ἀμήχανος, 79) is a reminder that recognising in oneself the power and means to act is the only way one can commit to fighting for social justice. It is up to us, therefore, to use these discomfiting lessons of Ismene as an opportunity to identify our own motivations and goals in espousing an activist cause. That, I believe, is the first step toward the realisation that we are response-able, thus responsible for and accountable to ourselves, our kin, but also our globalised polis.

⁵⁸ See Cindy Milstein [ed.], *Taking Sides: Revolutionary Solidarity and the Poverty of Liberalism*. AK Press, 2015.

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