

## Public Horror: The Monstrous Other and *Antigone in Ferguson*

By Nathan Bowman

### Abstract

Belief in the power of the dead to affect the world of the living permeated ancient Greek culture. The works of Greek tragedy are rooted in a worldview which accepts the power and control that unseen, dead forces have over the physical world. In this essay, I examine how the production *Antigone in Ferguson*, presented by Theater of War Productions, explored the role of the unseen dead in public life, utilizing the ancient themes of unseen supernatural forces to challenge the social and ethical assumptions of its audiences. Theater of War, through its timely adaptation of *Antigone*, challenged its audiences to reconsider their views of the dead by bringing into question the qualities of Otherness associated with the dead character Polyneices. In doing so, Theater of War offered its audiences a worldview which sees the dead as an active, suffering force in the public life.

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“How do we kill our dead?” For a modern audience, this question may be perplexing. You can’t kill the dead; they’re already dead, right? This question presumes that the living concede a sense of agency to those entities who are not present in this world; those who are invisible. Such a question is one which might be asked at a religious service where the possibility of supernatural existence is foregrounded. And yet, the works of Greek tragedy are rooted in a worldview that accepts the power and control that unseen, supernatural entities have over the physical world. While there are some examples in the extant work of tragedy of these ghosts being present on stage,<sup>1</sup> it is often the case that these dead figures need not be physically present on the stage to make their power felt. For instance, in the *Antigone* of Sophocles, the dead Polyneices, or more specifically, the question of what to do with the dead Polyneices, is the primary driver of action throughout the play. The dead in tragedy are “invariably associated with judgment and retributive justice” (Poole 34). As such, the dead are a driving force of the onstage action and a dominant motivating factor for the characters. Approaching *Antigone* necessarily requires attending to this invisible dimension of the action, what Andrew Sofer refers to as the “dark matter” of performance. This “dark matter comprises whatever is materially unrepresented onstage but is unignorable” (Sofer 4). The presence of the dead, though unseen, is a “constitutive element” in any performance of Greek tragedy. In her book *Restless Dead: Encounter Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient*

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Persians* and *The Eumenides* of Aeschylus.

Greece, Sarah Iles Johnston outlines various categories of the dead, the first being ἀταφοι (ataphoi)<sup>2</sup>, dead who are angry because they have been deprived of proper funeral rites and are trapped between the living and the truly dead (Johnston 128). In *Antigone*, the power of the dead is seen clearly as Creon loses all of his loved ones as a direct result of his unattendance to the dead Polyneices. Creon loses all of his loved ones as a direct result of not respecting the laws of the dead.

Tragedy cannot be fully understood without a grasp of how its performance was directed by and for these unseen forces. To this end, tragedy is radically non-rational and non-modern. Its values and role in society, its entire *raison d'être*, is alien to the values of an empirically and globally based modern world which takes as orthodoxy the inherent realism of all things physical and measurable. It is the radical difference between ancient Greek culture and the modern world, embodied in tragedy, that provides a challenge for its continued performance in today's world. Through the process of public forum, New York based Theater of War Productions sought to tackle this challenge, highlighting the agency of the dead in its adaptation of the play by Sophocles: *Antigone in Ferguson*. Theater of War attempted to engage the audience by questioning those unseen realities which modern society rebuffs, but which nonetheless contribute to violence on both an individual and communal level. Theater of War asked its audience to address their unspoken anxieties in the face of their perceived monsters by beginning its post-show talkback session by asking the question: "How do we kill our dead?"

I was in the audience that evening, at a performance of *Antigone in Ferguson* held at Harlem Stage in October 2018. The air was thick in the

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<sup>2</sup> The word ἀταφος, the singular form of ἀταφοι, means "unburied" and is related to the word later word αταφία, which means "want of burial." Ἀταφος is of Attic use; αταφία is found to be used much later in Lucian. Τάφος means "a burial" or "a tomb." The prefix α- infers a "lack" or "absence."

densely packed room as the audience took a moment to discern the nature of the performance they just witnessed. The heat felt by the audience was perhaps more psychological than actual; sweat by osmosis having just observed a powerful Chorus made up of citizens of Ferguson, Missouri and New York City bring the performance to a close with a lengthy rendition of the gospel inspired choral ode, “I’m Covered,” written by the production’s composer and musical director Phil Woodmore. As the Chorus vigorously repeated the refrain “I’m covered in the precious blood of the lamb,” Chorus Leader De-Rance Blaylock gave ecstatic praise to the God who covers all with Its power. The audience could see Blaylock’s body in duress. As she sang, each note became more compelling than the last. This was not a musical theatre performance. Blaylock sang with the intensity of one who did not care to preserve her voice for the next performance, but in that moment, was compelled to lament the dead with the entirety of her corporeal being. This was not a choreographed performance, yet Blaylock dynamically channeled each muscle of her body to display a vocal presence that penetrated the room and was accompanied by minimal but authoritative gestures toward the sky. As the song ended and Blaylock made her way center stage to take her well-deserved bow, her breath was heavy, and she was covered in sweat. Looking as if she had just completed a marathon, she walked with a stagger – one may be forgiven for worrying that she could fall over at any moment. After the bow, she left the stage. She could not participate in the talkback as she had weakened herself to the point of sickness. It was at this time, after having witnessed a performer quite literally sing themselves sick in their lament of the dead and praise to God, that the audience was asked, “How do we kill our dead?”

The tragedy of *Antigone* continues to inspire theatre artists across the globe as a means of addressing societal questions of justice and one’s

obedience to the law. In the span of a few years, the *Antigone* of Sophocles has seen an abundance of productions and re-interpretations across the United States, not to mention the play's popularity internationally.<sup>3</sup> In just one year, including *Antigone in Ferguson*, New York saw no fewer than three productions of the tragedy. As New York theatre blogger Jonathan Mandell noted, "New York audiences can't help seeing the immediate relevance of the story of Antigone" (Mandell). The Classical Theatre of Harlem under the leadership of Ty Jones produced their own Afropunk-inspired production of *Antigone* (Ignacio). Within the same year, Japanese director Satoshi Miyagi staged a bunraku-inspired production of *Antigone* at the Park Avenue Armory (Mandell). The character of Antigone represents to the modern audience an ideal model of non-violent protest against the laws of a tyrannical state (Daube 5). In these interpretations, Creon, King of Thebes, is transformed into a symbol of the tyrannical power which the play is protesting: racism, sexism, capitalism, fascism, etc. Antigone places herself in direct conflict with this power when she acts against a decree which prohibits the burial of her brother Polyneices who died in battle as a traitor to the state. While Antigone is an idealized character to modern audiences, she occupies little stage time when compared to Creon who is arguably the play's true protagonist. In the context of ancient Athens, the audience would see themselves in Creon from the outset. He is a man who is trying to stabilize the state, and states need laws. The audience would have been immediately sympathetic toward Creon's dilemma as the Athenians were proud of their democratic state and were especially skeptical of criticisms toward it when those criticisms came from the mouth of a woman. In this context, Antigone is

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<sup>3</sup> Notable international productions of *Antigone* include: a 2014 production by Mohammad Al-Attar in Beirut in which the cast was made up of Syrian refugees; a 2011 adaptation by Homayoun Ghanizadeh at the City Theatre of Tehran; Three UK productions at Barbican (2015), Pilot Theatre (2014), Royal National Theatre (2012).

not initially a hero, but an enemy to the worldview of the Athenian audience. Similarly, what makes the play relevant in modern society is not that the audience sees themselves in Antigone, but that the play has the ability to present audiences with the bitter truth that we are more like Creon than we care to admit. Like Creon, individuals who make up modern audiences turn their cheek to instances of unfathomable violence which affect the world around them. Antigone's attempts to enlighten Creon of the powers which will inevitably come to dominate him are fruitless. Society's inclination to deny the powers of violence and its effects, as manifest in the character of Creon, take center stage in the Theater of War production of *Antigone in Ferguson*.

*Antigone in Ferguson* was developed in the wake of the murder of teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri at the hands of a white police officer in 2014. Theater of War Productions, a New York based company, was founded with the mission of presenting adaptations of classic work, for free, in public venues for the sake of addressing issues of public health and social justice. Like the original audience of these plays (an Athenian citizenry of civilian-soldiers and people otherwise affected by a century of war and disease), Theater of War presents Greek tragedy to communities struggling to wrestle with the trauma of violence. Because of this, Theater of War artistic director Bryan Doerries is of the opinion that his audiences are more knowledgeable of these pieces than he is, expressing his belief that:

people who have come into contact with death, who have faced the darkest aspects of our humanity, who have loved and lost, and who know the meaning of sacrifice, seem to have little trouble relating to these ancient plays. (Doerries 6)

Theater of War traveled to Ferguson to develop *Antigone in Ferguson* with the community most impacted by Brown's murder and the subsequent fallout. The production was originally staged at Normandy High School, Michael Brown's alma mater, in September of 2016, before moving on to runs at Harlem Stage in New York in 2018 and at St. Ann and the Holy Trinity Church in Brooklyn in 2019. As with previous Theater of War projects, such as their ongoing program which presents the tragedies *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* to veterans and military families, the format of *Antigone in Ferguson* was that of a staged reading performance by a revolving group of professional (sometimes quite famous) actors who played the character roles. The cast of four changed weekly, and rehearsals with these actors are limited to a short number of hours just days before they perform. As a reading, there was no scenery except for the event space itself. The actors wore no distinct costumes, but ordinary, everyday clothes. The actors were accompanied by a Chorus, a diverse body of choir singers and band members including police officers, activists, youth, teachers, and concerned citizens from the St. Louis area and New York City.

Following the hour-long performance, a two-part community talkback was held which Doerries described as equally a part of the performance as the words of the actors. Doerries does not view the talkback session as supplementary, but rather, as the objective. The discussion acts as a mode of reinvigorating Greek tragedy with a sense of participatory public forum which the audiences of ancient times were accustomed to. To this end, the first portion of the community discussion is not directed toward the performers of the piece, but to community panelists: a small selection of audience members (four in this case) chosen prior to the performance and brought to the stage after the curtain call to discuss their experience in conversation with the rest of the audience.

Doerries meets with the panelists prior to the evening's performance and asks them to listen closely to the scenes and identify which moments linger in their minds and are perhaps reflective of their own experiences. In the second portion of the talkback, following the panel discussion, Doerries mediates a town hall-style conversation with the audience. He poses thought-provoking questions, the answers to which are anything but simple, if answers exist at all. For instance, during a performance of *Ajax*, Doerries began the conversation by asking: "How do we honor Ajax's great accomplishments without honoring the violence that took place at the end of his life?" (Klein 151). As with the nature of Greek tragedy itself, these questions reflect an understanding that one's encounter with suffering is a complex intersection of experiences, the reasons for which are not easily discerned.

"How do we kill our dead?" During the panel and audience discussion, members of the room touched on a variety of issues raised by Brown's murder and the subsequent civic unrest: police brutality and racism, black disenfranchisement, community strengthening, grief, and pain. Though there was a conscious choice not to use his name during the performance, the talkback session revealed what had been obvious to anyone in the room: Michael Brown was at the forefront of the audience's mind throughout the evening, affecting our experience of the performance. Many of the performers in the Chorus and band knew him personally. Chorus leader Blaylock was Brown's high school music teacher. In a quote about her performance on the production's website (which she reiterated during the evening I attended) Blaylock stated: "every night that we sing "I'm Covered" at the end of the play, it's my way of covering my student Michael Brown." Reviewer Tim Teeman commented that the very name *Antigone in Ferguson* suggests an intent to distill the Greek tragedy into a "commentary on the urgent questions—including around police

brutality and racism—resulting from the death of Michael Brown” (Teeman). Those who conceived of the piece, Doerries as translator and director with Woodmore as composer, knew that no such direct reference to the victim of the heinous violence they sought to address was necessary for his presence to be felt through the power of the performers. For Doerries’s part, the script which was read aloud by the actors was a straightforward, though accessible, modern translation of the words of Sophocles with no contemporary signifiers. Woodmore’s choral arrangements were entirely original songs. With the lyrics directed at questioning or giving praise to the power of God, the gospel style compositions were not altogether different in mode than the function of the Chorus in ancient Athens; the Chorus was updated to reflect modern religiously-oriented music. With both the script and music keeping close to the intent of the work of Sophocles, the inaction toward justice which characterized the fallout of Brown’s murder was cited directly but framed as analogous to the inaction toward justice given to Polyneices.

*Antigone in Ferguson* was not accusatory. At their core, the projects of Theater of War do not seek to find an empirical cause to violence, but rather, address society’s response to it. The company takes as its assumption the inevitability of suffering due to the power of forces beyond our control. *Antigone in Ferguson* did not examine the death of Polyneices by designating an enemy that the well-informed can rail against. The very inclusion of Ferguson, Missouri police officers in the Chorus suggests that the production was not interested in espousing a moral binary of good and bad, heroes and villains. Establishing such a binary would have cheapened the production’s questioning of how *we*, the culture at large, are implicated in the perpetuation of violent crime and racial inequities. As Doerries notes, “tragedies are designed not to teach us morals but rather to validate our moral distress at living in a

universe in which many of our actions and choices are influenced by external powers far beyond our comprehension" (Doerries 13). Therefore, the production did not seek to rationalize the events surrounding Brown's murder by casting blame at a single individual or institution. Rather, the production sought to investigate the ways in which society at large, presented through the character of Creon, is consumed with irrational forces which make themselves manifest in horrifically violent acts; there is nothing rational about a child being murdered in cold blood. Society's culpability in such violence lies in the broad refusal to acknowledge those forces, resulting in lack of justice given toward those who have been most victimized.

*Antigone in Ferguson* investigates this culpability through an exploration of the drama surrounding the suffering of the dead Polyneices. Even as the secular, industrialized world has lost an enthusiasm for many of the ritual practices which were dominant in earlier times, Doerries believes that suffering individuals in the modern world are continue to respond to tales of supernatural forces which affect them and drive their anxieties. He states of supernaturally inclined myths that "humans today are no less receptive to them than were our ancient forebears" (Doerries 27). The presence of Polyneices, an invisible dead figure, hovers over the action of the play as his improper burial weighs heavily on the mind of his sister Antigone. Antigone continues to remind her family members, and audience, of society's obligation to put the dead to rest properly. In this manner, the conflict between Antigone and Creon is analogous to the media circus surrounding the aftermath of Brown's murder, but also reflects the disturbing reality that Brown's body was allowed to be left lying in the streets of Ferguson for four hours after his murder (Bell). Not present at the scene was any concern from city officials for the wellbeing of this deceased person. *Antigone in Ferguson* presented this scenario as a

grievous lapse in obligatory action toward the deceased, a lapse which ultimately led to more violent suffering for the living.

The power of the dead to inspire violent conflict is seen clearly as Creon loses all of his loved ones as a direct result of his unattendance to the dead Polyneices. However, the threat of the dead Polyneices toward the social order upheld by Creon is made more dire given his status amongst the Theban citizens. Polyneices is a traitor, an outsider, one beyond the confines of the walls which define the city of Thebes. Polyneices is not one of them, he is Other. The fear of tainting the citizens of Thebes with the presence of such a body adds a further dimension of disgust to Creon's attitude toward the dead person. Maybe if Polyneices had lived up to Creon's standards of respectability he would still be alive, or at least honored. The Otherness of Polyneices is made more apparent as it is contrasted with the honor given to his dead brother Eteocles, a respected member of the Theban community. Antigone's plight is not only to bury her dead brother, but to make the case for his very personhood; that no matter the acts he performed, he is still a member of the community. Yet the members of this community refuse to accept him as one of their own, painting him in the worst possible light to justify the mistreatment of his body. The fear and disgust directed at the dead Polyneices is precisely a manifestation of the perception of him as outside of the city; the Other.

Theater of War Productions, through the story of *Antigone*, presented a radically different view of the meaning of death, and by doing so invited the audience to reconsider their views on what it means to pay heed to our dead. "How do we kill our dead" is a question that forces a modern audience to assess their own obligation to those dead persons who are dismissed from public consciousness upon their exit from the world of the living. The audience of *Antigone in Ferguson* was made to

consider if our corpses are simply passive victims, or if they are actively suffering due to society's inability to acknowledge their presence through action. The refrain of the performance's final song repeats again and again the words, "I'm covered in the precious blood of the lamb." These words remind the audience that all people are covered in the blood of those whose lives are taken by the irrational forces that so many refuse to acknowledge.

Greek tragedy can be characterized by narratives driven by supernatural entities who are framed as both threatening and impure (Carroll 16). Polyneices, the victim, is framed by Creon as such an entity. And yet, the production of *Antigone in Ferguson* complicates this perception of Polyneices by undermining the qualities Creon associates with this dead force. The distance between "Us" and "Other" is minimized as those most affected by the violence in Ferguson were placed front and center. As an audience member, this traumatic news story was no longer an abstracted event. The Chorus, Ferguson citizens, lament the devastation caused by the inaction of properly putting our dead to rest. Ultimately, the window that tragedy provides to the modern world is a visceral investigation into the subjective encounter with suffering that is rooted in an experience not reducible to scientific or rational explanation. People come face-to-face with horror. Through a fictitious lens, Theater of War utilizes the medium of tragedy to expose a reality that the domineering and unstoppable force of suffering can occur without motivation or reason. A disregard for the immutable omnipresence of the irrational forces of the cosmos, rather than mitigates, emboldens violent conflict. A denial of these irrational forces only perpetuates them. The horror of tragedy is found in the final confrontation of the protagonist with those deadly forces that they have denied. Greek tragedy utilizes a fear of the supernatural Other to force audiences to question the very

qualities they associate with Otherness. In doing so, tragedy provides the dark hope that each and every person will inevitably confront those monstrous qualities which are at the heart of violent conflict, or suffer.

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