

Antigone re-imagined: uprooted women's political narratives

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Abstract: In this paper I am thinking with Antigone, a political figuration that has been invested with many readings, interpretations, and artistic expressions in feminist theory and beyond. The paper draws on a research project of listening to migrant and refugee women's narratives of displacement and travelling. What connects these stories via the figure of Antigone, is women's desire to tell their stories as an expression of their will to rewrite their exclusion from oppressive regimes, defend their choice of civil disobedience, grasp their passage, claim their right to have rights and affirm their determination for new beginnings. What I argue is that uprooted women's narratives follow the Arendtian tripartite schema of political action by intervening in the ethics and politics of forced choices, becoming spectators of impossible actions and inscribing mnemonic traces in emerging decolonial histories and feminist genealogies.

Key words: Antigone, forced choices, displacement, political narratives, uprooted women

Perhaps this is our task for the future: to challenge and exceed limits, like Antigone, while nevertheless maintaining our human contours, our human rights, our dignity and our own voice. (Söderbäck 2010, 13)

In this paper I am thinking of /with Antigone, a political figuration that has been invested with so many readings, interpretations, philosophical ruminations and artistic expressions. As all Greek tragedies, *Antigone*¹ raises existential questions to its diverse audiences and readers, across multiple times and geographies, spanning ‘from Greece to Australia, via Brazil, Argentina, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Poland, Spain, Egypt, Turkey, Colombia, Mexico and beyond’ (see Söderbäck, 2010: 3). In mapping Antigone’s travels around the world, Moira Fradinger has observed that ‘it is a challenge to one’s stamina to follow the traces of this 2,500-year-young Theban princess, who looks younger every day (2010: 15). How is this possible? Tina Chanter’s rationale, which links Antigone’s ‘youth’ with her rebirth in modern South Africa seems persuasive: ‘as many times as Antigone dies, she comes alive, reborn time and again, born anew each time she enters the theatrical stage, inserting herself into a new political history’ (2010: 83).

But what is it that has brought Antigone on the stage of narratives of displacement and travelling? This paper draws on a Leverhulme funded research project in which I have problematised the figuration of the nomadic subject in feminist theory and politics. (see Tamboukou 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). The idea for this research initially emerged from the fact that in January 2016 women and children on the move outnumbered adult men for the first time, comprising 60% of migrants crossing into Europe.² I was intrigued by this gendered change in the mobility flow and I wanted to know more about the experiences of women moving *en masse* in the wilderness. More importantly, I wanted to see whether feminist theorizations of the nomadic subject were in touch with the lived experiences of uprooted women. (Tamboukou 2020c)

Taking up the salience of stories not only in recounting experiences, but also in forming an experiential basis for changing the subject and its world, I have thus interviewed twenty-two migrant and refugee women about their experiences of being on the move. I have encouraged these women to tell stories about their decision to leave, as well as about their experiences of travelling without feeling obliged to limit themselves within discourses of victimization and vulnerability. (see Tamboukou 2020b) It was while listening to these stories that the figure of Antigone erupted and became a constant presence in the narrative archive of my research:

Before I was born in 1982, my first brother was executed by the Iranian regime for political reasons, in 1981. When I turned 5 years old, my second brother, who was an activist and supporter of the movement against the dictatorship of Khomeini was also executed. I never met my first brother, as he was executed before I was born, but the second one, I remember him, because we used to go and see him while he was in prison before his execution [...] My first brother was 19 when he was executed and

the second was 23, so there was always this question in my mind, ‘why were they executed?’ They were so young. (Somi’s story)

Somi, started her story memorializing the execution of her two brothers by the Iranian regime. Their violent death was inscribed in her memory through the stories she heard in her family while growing up. It thus became a traumatic event that marked her life from the very beginning and initiated a series of forced displacements as an effect of her civil disobedience—her decision to leave her country at the age of nineteen and join a group of Iranian dissidents in Iraq. Somi had to bury her own dreams of growing up as a young woman, studying and living an ordinary life in Iran. Within the archive of run-away stories that migrant and refugee women shared with me, burials of different kinds, both real and symbolic, became the read thread that connected their narratives with the figure of Antigone. In this light, Somi’s decision to escape an oppressive political regime and join forces of resistance has made connections with Click, a Zimbabwean freedom fighter. After the death of her father during the war, Click crossed the borders with her childhood friend to join the guerrilla army in Mozambique, when she was only sixteen years old.

Hanna’s story of escaping the hidden dictatorship of Sierra Leone, when she was an eighteen-year-old single mother, has opened up a different political arena wherein resistance can emerge, not only as a civil disobedience, like Antigone’s, but also as an on-going struggle against poverty and extinction that reaches our own days in many places around the world. As Steven Castles (2006) has persuasively argued, conflict and forced migration form a continuum, since flows of movement across the globe have always been triggered by wars, wider geopolitics, as well as local and global economic dynamics. It was from such socio-economic and political entanglements that Hana escaped, leaving her baby son behind and thus burying the dream of being a mother. She had to struggle with her fear to speak publicly before becoming an ardent activist defending refugee and migrant women’s rights in Greece.

Elena, a Gülenist scientist, persecuted by the Turkish government crossed the borders on foot, carrying her three months-old baby daughter in one hand and a bag with her laptop in the other. Elena had to bury her dream of getting a PhD in physics, after she was fiercely and violently excluded from her academic community, which was even more painful for her than her persecution by the police, and even by the way her family and friends turned their backs on her when she mostly needed them.

Migrant and refugee women’s stories of forced displacement are unique and unrepeatable. Yet, what connects them with other stories of displacement and movement via the figure of Antigone, is the desire to tell their stories as an expression of their will to rewrite their exclusion from oppressive regimes, defend their choice of civil disobedience, grasp their passage, claim their right to have rights and affirm their determination for new beginnings. It is through stories that we enter the web of human relations, Hannah Arendt (1998) has argued, and it is through narration that not only do we create meaning in our lives but also understand the world we emerge from, and by sharing meaning we act in concert, in-the-world-with-others. As Julia Kristeva has beautifully put it about Arendt’s understanding of narratives within the political: ‘only action as narration and narration as action can fulfil life in terms of what is “specifically human” about it’ (2001, 8).

It is this idea of a life lived as action that can be narrativized and shared by others, who did not necessarily participate in the narrated action, that makes the Arendtian conceptualization of narratives so compelling and so relevant to her overall work as a political philosopher. In Arendt's thought, actors make history only if their action is recorded and becomes memorable: this memorialization is the role of narratives. But how is this memory constituted? As Kristeva has pithily commented, 'it is spectators who complete the story in question, and they do so through thought, thought that follows upon the act. This is a completion that takes place through evoked memory, without which there is nothing to tell' (2001, 16). Crucial as it is in memory work, narrative meaning however is never fixed, but always negotiated by its audience, the political community of remembrance that stories are addressed to.

Memory is thus crucial for the survival of political life' Söderbäck has noted (2010: 71), in an Arendtian reading of Antigone's decision to bury her brother, as an act of doing politics through memory work: resisting a tyrannical regime and inscribing herself in history by becoming an actor, a spectator and a narrator of her ethico-political intervention. It is this double stance of narrating through action and acting through narration (see Tamboukou 2018a) that I consider in this paper, within Hannah Arendt's (1998) tripartite schema of politics: acting, narrating and memorializing.

In thus following migrant and refugee women's 'lines of flight' (see Tamboukou 2020c), as inscribed in their stories, the paper unfolds in four parts. After this introduction, I look at the rich archive of feminist readings of Antigone, excavating themes and tropes that make connections with the stories of my research. In doing so, I have followed Arendt's (1960) argument that narratives ground theoretical abstractions, flesh out ideas and create real and imaginary connection in the web of human relations, wherein understanding can emerge from the actuality of the recounted event. Stories thus contribute to the search of meaning revealing multiple perspectives and remaining open and attentive to the unexpected. In this milieu, Antigone becomes a *narrative persona*—a conceptual and aesthetic figure that I converse with, in the analysis of migrant and refugee women's political narratives in the third part of the paper.³ By way of conclusion, I revisit Arendt's famous actor/spectator separation in her analysis of life narratives in the light of uprooted women's stories of agonistic politics.

Traces in the *Antigone* feminist archive

unmourned by friends and forced by such crude laws
I go to my rockbound prison, strange new tomb—
Always a stranger, O dear god,
I have no home on earth and none below,
Not with the living, not with the breathless dead. (848-852 [938-942])⁴

Sophocle's *Antigone* is amongst the most discussed and analysed literary text in the history of philosophy, feminism and political theory. Themes that often come up in its different and contended readings, interpretations and performances, include civil disobedience, the public/private divide, gender, sexuality, mourning and death, as well as the right to resist the tyranny of sovereign power.⁵ I remember being taught this text as part of my Ancient Greek course in the last years of my high school. We were at the heart of the military dictatorship

in Greece (1967-1974) and *Antigone* was the text [and pretext] for discussing the importance of speaking truth to power, under a strict authoritarian regime. Little did I know then, that the protagonist of a tragedy that was a core component of our curriculum would soon become a central figure in a rich body of feminist literature, which I configure as the Antigone archive in the context of this paper.⁶

My engagement with *Antigone*, thus emerges from my own situated position as a feminist who grew up during the military dictatorship in Greece. While marking my own position in the Antigone archive, I also acknowledge its constraints and limitations, within a wider spectrum of figures that transgress Western mythologies in opening up spaces wherein feminist politics can be re-imagined. Having pointed to the Western origins of *Antigone's* influence however, I have also been drawn to the inspiration that the play has offered to thirty Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, within the wider project *Antigone of Syria*⁷. In reflecting upon her involvement in this project, Hiba Sahyl, who has lost two brothers, in the war, has said: 'I understand why Antigone does what she does. If I could go to Syria and bury my brother with my own hands, I would do it', (Ross, 2014: 2) Sahyl's claim of understanding *Antigone* resonates with Andrés Fabián Henao Castro's (2013) argument that '*Antigone* stands for refugees, undocumented immigrants, and noncitizens in the reinvention of the play's symbolic repertoire in the twenty-first century' (2013: 309). In making this statement, Henao Castro has referred to a performance of *Antigone* by young Palestinians at the Jenin Refugee Camp in the northern West Bank in February 2006, as a protest against the construction of the *Museum of Tolerance* upon the grounds of the largest and most important Muslim cemetery in all Palestine. (308)

To return to the feminist archive on *Antigone*, it goes without saying that it is large and still unfolding, but it is outside the scope of this paper to do a comprehensive overview of the various debates within it. What I have done instead is to follow lines of thought that make connections with my interpretation and understanding of the stories that migrant and refugee women have shared with me. Bonnie Honig's (2013) important re-reading of the play has largely influenced my own understanding and interpretation, throwing new light on my Arendtian take of political narratives, as well as in my conversations with the figure of *Antigone*. In this process, I have created 'the Antigone assemblage', bringing together concepts, ideas and insights from a range of feminist theories and beyond, as they make connections between them, as well as with narrative lines of forced displacement. As I have written elsewhere at length, assemblage thinking facilitates a nuanced understanding of the complexity of entanglements between different theoretical perspectives while also allowing for reading theories through one another (Tamboukou 2020a). In this light, assemblage approaches have opened up new ways of reading, understanding and using theories as restless entities which are made, unmade and remade in a continuous process of shattering static epistemological positions and terrains.⁸

In reviewing the early feminist readings of *Antigone*, Catherine Holland has pointed to the danger of past texts and figures overfilling the present and thus limiting our political vision and horizons: 'how can feminist political theorists "restate new possibilities" without reinstating the past?' she has asked (2010: 28) In Holland's reading, this is precisely what we can learn from *Antigone*: the radical possibilities of breaking with the past, by taking the difficult decision of leaving behind family ties, wedding expectations, or the promise of 'a

normal life', in the pursuit of what feels to be right. But liberating the self from a paralyzing past is not easy and the tragedy boldly exposes Antigone's fear and anger in reflecting on the material effects of her transgression.

In searching for 'new possibilities', I have thus mapped 'the Antigone assemblage', beyond the limitations of reinstating the past and with reference to the connections they make with uprooted women's narratives. In doing so, I have considered the visceral forces of narratives in terms not only of the historical conditions that have made them possible, but even more importantly in terms of their spatiality, materiality and embodiment. As I have written elsewhere at length, the consideration of 'how matter matters' (Barad 2007) in narrative research is a weak link in Arendt's approach to storytelling (see Tamboukou 2013). There are thus three heuristic and overlapping clusters in the cartography of Antigone's narrative, framed within space/time/matter entanglements: the political force of corporeality and embodiment, the discursive confrontation with power through the spatial figuration of the stranger [metoikos] and finally the notion of *agonistic humanism*, as a way out of the deadlock of 'lamentational politics', embracing life forces and new beginnings. (see Honig, 2013)

Bodies that talk, suffer and act

Although driven by ethical principles in challenging the absurdity and hubris of sovereign power, Antigone is not indifferent to the fact that her body is going to suffer. It is precisely because she is sensitive to the needs of the body that she has decided not to let her brother's dead body exposed, 'his corpse carrion for the birds and dogs to tear, an obscenity for the citizens to behold' (207-207 [229-231]) in Creon's cruel edict. The tragedy itself starts with Antigone's call to the physicality of her relationship with her sister: 'My own flesh and blood—dear sister, dear Ismene'. (1[1]) It is the tragedy's focus on the grammar and corporeality of the body that Adriana Cavarero highlights in her own reading of *Antigone*, pointing to the complex ways that physical and 'stately bodies' are entangled in political action, the body/polis opposition in the case of this tragedy: 'the enemy appears as pure body: a body that takes sides against the bodies of co-citizens, a warring body, a body that kills and is killed : *body politic* in a direct rather than metaphorical sense' (2002: 47). As I will discuss in the next section migrant and refugee women's bodies are at the heart of their stories, whether they talk about restrictions, violent and traumatic events or transgressions.

The passage from the tragedy that has initiated this section is taken from Antigone's dirge, whilst taken to her tomb to be buried alive—the ultimate annihilation of her living body. As Judith Butler has commented, Antigone's death 'is always double throughout the play: she mourns over her imminent death, but also for the fact that she has not lived, that she has not loved, and that she has not borne children' (2000: 23). As she walks to the land of the dead, she realizes that she has already been there, since 'her punishment precedes her crime' (77), as an extension of her parents' incest, Butler has remarked:

Look at me, men of my fatherland,
Setting out on the last road
Looking into the last light of day
The last I will ever see ...
The god of death who puts us all to bed
Takes me down to the banks of Acheron alive—

denied my part in the wedding-songs,
no wedding-song in the dusk has crowned my marriage—
I go to wed the lord of the dark waters. (806-816 [900-908])

Power and the stranger

Butler's turn to *Antigone* has offered two versions of the tragedy's impact on political thinking. In *Antigone's Claim* the overarching theme is the battle over sovereignty entangled in the paradoxical act of challenging power, while embodying its norms. (2000: 10) Butler's reading and interpretation focuses on Antigone's language acts, highlighting the importance of performance, particularly since *Antigone* is a play after all. In this context, Antigone's defiance of state power is double: not only does she disobey Creon's edict, but she also boldly accepts that she has done it: 'I did it. I don't deny a thing' (443 [496]) she responds to his interrogation: 'do you deny you did this, yes or no?' (442[491]). Her defiance is even bolder when Creon asks her: 'were you aware a decree had forbidden this?' (447[496]) to which she answers back swiftly: 'Well aware. How could I avoid it? It was public'. (448[497]) In taking full responsibility of her transgression, Antigone tries to appropriate Creon's sovereignty, although in the end she fails, Butler has observed (2000: 77).

When the figure of Antigone returns in *Precarious Life* (2004) however, it is the heroine's grief and lamentation of ungrievable lives that Butler is more interested in. Antigone's act of burying her brother 'exemplified the political risks in defying the ban against public grief during times of increased sovereign power and hegemonic national unity' (2004: 46). As Henao Castro (2020) has commented, Butler's interpretation of Antigone's grief in *Precarious Life*, creates 'a frame of grievability', wherein ethics and politics are interwoven in the spatial figuration of the stranger [metoikos]. Antigone's lamentation is not only about her death, but also about the fact that she feels she has no home, neither with the living, nor with the dead. 'I am a stranger' (868 [956]) she bemoans, grieving over her un-lived life.

Antigone 'is indeed a stranger [metoikos] to every given order' Cavarero has commented (2002: 41). Her actions estrange her not only from the tyrannical regime of the polis, but also from her beloved sister— 'you are in love with impossibility' (90 [104]) Ismene tells her in the opening scene of the play. Her fiancé, Haemon, kills himself in devastation after having warned his father Creon that 'her death will kill another' (751 [842]). Antigone, however, does not refer to Haemon, not even once in the play. Her grief is over losing an important ritual in a woman's life—her wedding, not over her future husband. Within the economy of the tragedy, she has distanced herself from Haemon, well before his unsuccessful plea to save her life. In Henao Castro's reading of the tragedy, Antigone's reluctance to connect with her fiancé can be understood as 'a refusal to compromise the ontological ambiguity of her strangeness in marriage [given] the inseparable function of marriage in organizing and regulating political membership' (2013: 316). The figuration of 'the stranger' is a continuous trace in the narratives of this paper, whether women talk about feelings of estrangement at home, in border situations or as residents of new countries.

Agonistic humanism

It is the interruption of Antigone's dirge in the canonical readings of the play within feminist theory and beyond that Honig has taken as a starting point in a new reading of the tragedy. Antigone's lamentation 'is always and inexorably political-even partisan', she has commented

(2013: 120). Without denying the power of public grief in reconfiguring resistance politics, Honig points to the danger of death and lamentation taking over the force of the Arendtian notion of 'natality' and new beginnings in political theory. As Arendt has suggested, 'the lifespan of man running towards death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action' (1998: 246).

Arendt's notion of politics, which is shaped by the model of the ancient Greek polis has been one of the themes that a lot of feminist debates have revolved around, and in this context, one would equally wonder whether it could be relevant to the refugee condition.⁹ Yet, Arendt was herself a refugee, a stateless person for over twenty years, the period when she elaborated her political theory, putting natality and new beginnings at the heart of her unique take on politics. What is crucial in Arendt's (1998) theorization is the configuration of politics as an arena of public appearance, wherein the uniqueness of the political actor can only be recognized and validated by the plurality of his/her spectators. As Olivia Guaraldo has concisely put it: 'politics, far from being the realm of construction of order – as it has been conceived and theorized especially in Modernity – is the sphere of appearance, where the acting individual discloses her/his uniqueness as she/he acts in front of others.' (2013:65) Here lies the importance of narratives in Arendt's political theory: action produces stories and it in stories that political praxis can be represented in its volatile, contingent and incessantly renewable nature. It is within this field of action that Honig points to the risks of 'lamentational politics', considering instead *Antigone's* ongoing impact towards an *agonistic humanism*, particularly addressing the question of how to act politically in conditions of impossibility, the refugee condition par excellence (2013: 8).

In putting forward the notion of 'agonistic humanism' as a lens for a different reading and indeed understanding of *Antigone's* stance, Honig has drawn on Arendt's notion of natality as the ontological condition of political action, taken as the ability to make new beginnings: 'men, though they must die, are not born in order to die, but in order to begin', Arendt has famously asserted (1998, 246). Juxtaposed to a *mortalist humanism*, maintaining that 'what is common to humans is not rationality, but the ontological fact of mortality' (Honig, 2013: 17), *agonistic humanism* emphasizes 'natality and pleasure, power (not just powerlessness), desire (not just principle), and *thumos* (not just *penthos*)' (19). In Honig's succinct definition then, 'a humanism that calls on us to act not out of shared finitude but out of natalist commitments to worldiness is an agonistic humanism'. (in Browning, 2012: 135) *Somi's* decision to leave, *Hanna's* determination to speak out, *Click's* resolution to follow her friend in becoming a guerrilla fighter and *Elena's* choice to cross the borders in the illegal way are all sound signs of *agonistic humanism*, as we will see in the next section.

Seen in the context of 'agonistic humanism' *Antigone* is still a figure that laments her brother and takes the decision to bury his body against Creon's inhumane edict. But in doing so she is not just a conscientious objector of a tyrannical regime, a humanist lamenter of the dead, or a monstrous creature of desire—three subject positions that canonical readings of the play have mostly configured for her, Honig has argued (2013: 7). *Antigone* laments, 'but she does so in a way that is also partisan, vengeful, not just mournful or humanist' (8). It is not only the dead that drive her action, but also her loyalty to her living sister *Ismene*, whom she tries to protect till the end, Honig maintains in a completely new reading of the two sisters'

relationship in the play. 'Courage! Live your life. I gave myself to death, long ago, so I might serve the dead' (559-560 [630-631]) is Antigone's last address to her sister, before taken to her tomb. In doing so she takes responsibility for Polynike's first burial—an act that remains a mystery in the tragedy¹⁰, but could have been performed by Ismene, Honig has suggested (2013: 161). In protecting her sister, Antigone 'enacts sorority as a different sort of citizenship' in Honig's interpretation (91) In this context lamentation is not taken as an affective practice, expressing pain and grief, but rather as a complex political vernacular, overflowed with multiple, different and contested meanings in Honig's analysis (89). The question here is not about what lamentation is, but rather about what it does.

Against long-held readings of the play that see Ismene as an anti-political character, Honig identifies a language conspiracy in the scene where the two sisters confront each other in front of Creon: 'Never share my dying, don't lay claim to what you never touched. My death will be enough' (615-617 [546-547]) Antigone responds to her sister's imploration: 'Oh, no my sister, don't reject me please, let me die beside you, consecrating the dead together' (544-545{613-615}). According to Honig's new reading then, the language conspiracy lies precisely in Antigone's dismissal of her sister's confession, as an act of protection and not as a sign of disdain for her. The sister's quarrel 'is a theatrical performance for Creon's benefit' (2013: 167), Honig argues, in dissecting aspects of political agency in both women's deeds and words. It is Honig's proposition of 'an agonistic humanism' through the prism of the politics of lamentation that I want to explore in the next section, following lines of migrant and refugee women's narratives.

Lost lives and new beginnings

But I still had to make a decision; if I moved to that camp, I would be free from all the pressure in Iran, but at the same time, I was giving up my life. Because I had to dedicate my life to having more activities, just to help the Iranian people. This was a decision I had to make. (Somi's story)

An Antigonean theme that runs as a red thread through Somi's story is the realization that she had to sacrifice her life in the struggle against the Iranian regime. Her brothers did not remain unburied, but were unjustly killed, so she followed Antigone's steps in civil disobedience. But reverberating Antigone's act, not only for the dead brother, but also for the living sister, Somi took the decision, to honour her two brothers' death, but also to create new possibilities for the living, herself and a new generation of Iranian women. 'I accepted the risks, I took the fears and everything and I just travelled', she said in the spirit of an *agonistic humanism*, that embraces 'natalist commitments to wordliness' in Honig's pity definition, above (in Browning 2012: 135).

Moreover, the lamentation of her brothers' death was not restricted to mourning, although in her story Somi admitted that there was a lot of grief in her family after her brothers' execution: 'there was sadness, the whole family was mourning, no one was happy anymore'. It was precisely the sadness and continuous grief in her family that made Somi's decision to leave extremely difficult: 'I didn't want to leave them, because I knew they had already lost two children and if they lost me too, that would be very hard on them. And yet, I didn't really

have a choice because I just couldn't continue my life there.' In raising the question of the impossible choice, Somi moves beyond lamentation. She marks a new beginning through the decision to join the dissidents' camp in Iraq. Her narrative follows lines of Antigone's dirge : it is an *agon* over the meaning of her action, which will leave its marks in history and will appear in the public sphere of *the polis*, irrespective of her death, the dissolution of her corporeal body. Echoing Antigone's cry 'always a stranger', Somi repeatedly emphasized how she grew up feeling like a stranger [*metoikos*] in her own country. Embodiment took central stage in the way, she expressed her oppression: 'especially for girls and even younger girls, there were a lot of restrictions: to go to school, you had to wear what we call a "chador", so we had a scarf on the head, we had to wear long things, and no parts of our bodies should be shown'. Space restrictions were also unbearably frustrating for her:

I was also banned from a lot of recreational stuff, like even bicycle. As you know, women do not have the opportunity to enter sports stadiums in Iran. It's not possible to take part in outdoor activities freely, and this was always my question; why do these restrictions exist for women? Wherever I went and anything I wanted to do, there was an obstacle in my way. There were only specific places, where women could go.

When she went to university Somi found herself in a group of students who were trying to organize a resistance network: 'we would write small letters against the regime and at night when everybody was asleep, we used to go door to door to the dormitories and give the letters, telling students that "you should start speaking now, let's go to the demonstration, let's stand up against this criminal regime" and stuff like that.' Somi's struggle was thus a continuing effort to redraw the lines of the polity that excluded and marginalized her, an Antigonean line of resistance that Chanter has succinctly traced (2010: 94). But when their activities became known to the university authorities, they were threatened with expulsion. It was then that the idea of joining a dissidents' organization outside Iran emerged: 'they hadn't expelled me yet, but I knew they were going to expel me soon because they had warned me a few times. So, there was a lot of pressure on me, inside the university, outside the university in our family, everywhere. I was not going to tolerate the situation anymore'.

Instead of being restricted to 'lamentational politics', Somi's decision to leave was turned into an Arendtian new beginning, 'so that the future generation, the other girls, wouldn't have to go through what I went through in my life'. But it seems that Somi's life seems to have unfolded as a series of disasters and new beginnings: 'every step I was taking in my life I was hoping for a better future, but it was like every step, was just another mistake'. Although Somi did not go into a tomb to be buried alive, she had to bury her dreams of living a carefree adult life. Her experience in the Iraqi dissidents' camp was fierce and violent—she was not walled up in an earth tomb like Antigone, but the refugee camp was a marginal space, which became a death trap in the wake of the Iraq war.

The last part of Somi's story around her stateless condition in Albania, where she was transferred after the disbanding of the Iraqi camp, unfolds as a dirge over 'a lost life': 'at that time, I had a lot of stress because I had lost my whole life: I was not allowed to go to university, I was not allowed to get a job, I had lost my family, I had lost everything.' When she crossed the borders to go to Greece, she had hoped for a better future, but again she found herself in a country hit by a deep financial crisis and uncontrolled refugee flows. It took a lot of

courage to undergo imprisonment when she was arrested at the airport with a fake passport and was threatened with deportation back to Iran: 'when we were getting attacked when we were in the camps, I was afraid of my life, it was too hard, but when I was in prison and they were telling me you should be deported that was a lot harder for me'. There were many moments in her story, when Somi wept over her 'lost life', but every time her dirge turned into a vengeful defiance: 'I have done a promise to myself that until the day I die I am going to try and try again, even if I fail every day until the rest of my life' she told me towards the end of her story, a sign of resilience and perseverance, in Honig's configuration of *agonistic humanism*.

Uprooted women reflected a lot on the difficulty and pain of the decision to leave, even when there was almost nothing to leave behind. In doing so they were continuously vacillating between the two Antigonean subject positions that Honig's analysis has identified: 'the active dissident' and 'the vulnerable lamenter' (2013: 69). Click agonized a lot over her friend's suggestion that they should leave Zimbabwe and join the guerrilla forces in Mozambique to fight for freedom. As already noted in the first section, at the time of this critical decision, she was living with her friend's family after her father was killed in the war of independence against the British imperialism:

One day we went together to the well, to fetch some water. And then she said to me: 'we must, let's go and fight, we must go'. I said: 'go? where?' She said, 'to Mozambique'. I said 'MOZAMBIQUE? What about school?' And she said, 'do you think all these missionaries will take care of you? We must go and fight'. I said 'no', she said 'you don't have a family, let's go'. I said 'no', she said 'I thought you were my friend'. I said, 'no, no, no, no, I can't go. But overnight, I decided, I said 'OK', I decided to go. (Click's story)

Click never clarified how and why she changed her mind overnight, but it was her friend's determination and a feeling of love, care and camaraderie that gave them courage to walk through the dangerous bush for days 'without food and without water'. Her decision can be framed within the schema of sorority based democratic politics that Honig has offered in her analysis, as already discussed above. She decided to follow her friend not on the basis of a shared finitude —dying together in the war for independence—but on the basis of 'sorority', her love and care for her friend, her Arendtian determination to live in-the-world-with-others.

When the two friends finally crossed the borders of a flooded river and joined the Mozambique soldiers, they were treated with suspicion, because nobody could trust two young girls: 'they were very harsh with us'. Both Somi and Click talked about the risks of being recognized as political actors, because of their gender. 'What man alive would dare' (248 [281]), Creon wondered, when told about the violation of his edict, immediately taking the gender of the offender for granted. It took a year in the military camp before Click and her friend could start their training. And yet, they persevered and eventually actively contributed to the history of liberating their country. Echoing Antigone's political imaginary, their actions was a critique of the colonial conditions that had perpetuated suffering for their people and a call for a radical future that has yet to be realized. Finding herself as a migrant worker in a far away country many years after the war for independence, it is through her story that Click

reinserts herself in the book of history, as an actor, spectator and narrator, in Söderbäck's (2010) reading of the Antigonean stance.

Gender norms and restrictions were not only externally imposed, but also very deeply and forcefully internalized as well. When Hanna first got involved in agonistic politics in Greece, fighting for migrant women's right to claim residence status, she was confronted with her own ghosts of being afraid to speak in public, as she felt trapped in the discourse of African's women inability to speak: 'For me, for African women, it is very difficult to speak in public because in Africa when I was there, everything you do, they tell you, 'shut up, you are a woman, what do you want to say?' Hanna's decision to speak was a new beginning in her life, since she had left Sierra Leone to escape the trap of poverty and create a better future for herself and her family. Her own dirge was an internal process that eventually took her out of the dark holes of patriarchy and into the public sphere of appearance and action. This exit however has not absorbed the pain of not having seen her son for thirty years, since she left her country: 'I will never forget this moment, when I was saying goodbye to my people and was mostly crying'. Material suffering and bodily pain were at the heart of Hanna's narrative. She went through the horrible experience of assisting her childhood friend to bury her newborn baby, but she also had to bury her own dream of seeing her son grow up. Her forced displacement was unavoidable though, the only possible escape from unbearable entanglements of poverty and tyranny: 'People got sick and there were no doctors and at the same time you didn't have the right to speak or say anything. Sometimes we had to go for days without any food and I just felt I was living a nightmare that keeps returning in my dreams up until now.' But Hanna's body that suffered, also became the body that talked back and acted against her predicament.

But while for Hanna it was political activism that opened up a new path in her life, for Elena, the Gülenist physicist, running away from Turkey, it was science and academic writing that threw light in her dark times. Her response to my question of how she imagined her life in five years' time was unequivocal:

I want to go on with my research, I already have several publications. I actually wrote most of them when we were hiding. It was a small house, there was only a room and a kitchen, but I was working non-stop, as we were trying to keep sane. My research took my mind away from all the drudgeries and that's how I published so many things when we were hiding. When I crossed the borders, I only had a bag with very few things, but my computer and my work was with me. (Elena's story)

A genealogy of women's involvement in science and politics has yet to be written, but there are some significant events in considering the relevance of science studies in the long durée of women's fighting for freedom and independence. (see Koblitz 1988) It was precisely the emancipatory aspects of scientific knowledge that have made the Gülenist movement so appealing to many young Turkish women, like Elena, as Caroline Tee (2016) has shown in her study of this movement. When talking about her decision to leave Turkey and cross the borders carrying her three-months-old baby daughter, Elena remembered how difficult this decision was and how estranged and isolated she had felt, particularly so from her academic community: 'I was especially hurt by my supervisor's attitude [...] we had a lot of projects, and publications but when he heard that I was fired, first thing he did was to block my phone

number and tell my friends that I was sick, and that they shouldn't call me.' Not knowing what to do, Elena ultimately took the decision to run away. She recounted her escape in a slow-motion cinematic narrative, where we follow vulnerable refugees bodies crossing borders step by step:

We were four people, and I was alone with my baby; nobody accompanied me and maybe that was the hardest time for me: I could have been kidnapped, I was travelling with people we didn't know' [...] The smuggler drove us close to the border; after that I turned my head away and I didn't even look at him in the eye, because it was dangerous. So, we found ourselves at the border and the hard journey started. I gave my baby some medicine to make her sleep; she was sleeping when we crossed the borders and she had no idea of what was going on now. When we crossed the river, we started walking; we could see the border and we were taking courage. There was the border we wanted to escape from, and there was the other border where we wanted to get caught. We were longing to see a police officer and say, 'Please arrest us now!' (Elena's story)

While walking between borderlines, Elena was fully aware of the life-threatening risks she was taking: 'I was crying [...] I could be one of those people who had either died or drowned and I could have lost my child'. Her dirge was over the bleak prospect of death hanging over her illegal crossing, but she also knew that 'there was only one way for us'. Elena's narrative again brings forward the ethics and politics of difficult and impossible choices. But in the context of *agonistic humanism*, her lamentation over the risks of border crossing was at the same time an affirmation of a new beginning: 'A new life started for me on that day; we were in a detention centre for three days, but of course I understand, they had to do that, we had crossed the borders.' Elena's decision to cross the borders was an act of taking back her rights of free movement. Her passport had been confiscated and the authorities had denied issuing a passport for her baby daughter. Going beyond the lamentation of having been stripped of her civil rights, Elena thus decided to reclaim them. As Balibar has aptly noted 'the whole history of emancipation is not so much the history of the demanding of unknown rights, as of the real struggle to enjoy rights which *have already been declared*' (2002, 6, emphasis in the text).

What I suggest then, is that Elena's and indeed all uprooted women's 'illegal' crossings is a forceful claim of their 'rights to have rights' (Arendt, 1943). The different tactics they have deployed in grasping their right for free movement materialize Honig's idea of an *agonistic humanism* that sees in mortality, suffering, sound, and vulnerability resources for some form of enacted, if contestable universality.' (2013: 19) Universality should not be taken here as homogeneity, since the resources that Honig refers to are various, diverse, contested and multiple. What I suggest following Honig, is that *agonistic humanism* should rather be taken as an assemblage encompassing components of grief, mortality and suffering, but also of natality, determination, joy and power, taken as *potentia*.¹¹ Mapped within the assemblage of *agonistic humanism*, lamentation is not only about shared human finitude, but also and perhaps more importantly, about vengeance, politics and the quest for sovereignty, Honig has succinctly remarked (2013: 19). Like Antigone, uprooted women are lamenting subjects, grieving over the pain of leaving behind their loved ones, as well as cherished places and spaces. In doing so they raise to the challenge of grappling with unprecedented difficulties,

confronting life threatening risks and indeed facing death. But while lamenting, they are also reborn as political agents, who plot, conspire, manoeuvre and act politically: they re-imagine their futures and open up paths in and out of personal troubles and wider geopolitical upheavals. Through narrating their actions, they finally leave mnemonic traces, and forcefully intervene in the making of future archives.

Acting, Narrating, Remembering

In this paper I have unravelled space/time/matter entanglements between narratives, memory and politics, to look at uprooted women's narratives through the figure of Antigone. In doing so, I have followed Söderbäck's Arendtian schema of political action unfolding in three steps: 'first in an action, then in the witnessing of this action, and finally in the memory and commemoration of it'. (2010: 71) Uprooted women's narratives have been charted within this tripartite schema: a) they have acted by intervening in the ethics and politics of difficult, and sometimes forced choices, b) they have become spectators and indeed narrators of 'impossible' actions rendered possible and c) in narrating their experiences, they are in the process of inscribing the mnemonic traces of their actions in emerging decolonial histories and feminist genealogies. As Söderbäck has eloquently commented 'Antigone's actions have not only survived in various stories for generations to come, but also continue to inspire and make possible subsequent acts of resistance' (2010: 77).

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¹ I italicise *Antigone* when referring to the play and not the figure.

² <http://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/human-rights-of-refugee-and-migrant-women-and-girls-need-to-be-better-protected> [Accessed, May 16, 2016]

³ For an extended discussion of the figuration of the *narrative persona*, see Tamboukou 2018b.

⁴ Citations to the play indicate first the Greek lines and then in square brackets the lines from the Fagles' translation of Sophocles *The Three Theban Plays* (1984).

⁵ The background of the *Antigone's* play lies in Sophocle's previous tragedies. When Oedipus, King of Thebes, discovered that without knowing it, he had killed his father and married his mother, Jocasta, he put out his own eyes, while Jocasta killed herself. Once Oedipus gave up his throne, his two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, agreed to alternate as king. But when Eteocles refused to give up power to Polyneices, the latter attacked the city. When the two brothers killed each other in the battle, Creon, Jocasta's brother, became the new king. In his attempt to bring order, he decided that Eteocles would be given an honourable burial, while Polyneices corpse would remain unburied on the battlefield as a punishment for attacking his home city.

⁶ For earlier engagements with Antigone, see Irigaray, 1974; Elshtain, 1982; Dietz, 1985; Zerilli, 1991. The current developing body of literature includes, Butler, 2000, 2004; Cavarero 2002; Sjöholm, 2004, 2010; Söderbäck, 2010; Honig, 2013; Gsoels-Lorensen, 2014; Henao Castro, 2013, 2020.

⁷ For more details about this project, see <http://www.openartfoundation.org/antigone-of-syria>

⁸ There is a growing interest in assemblage thinking within feminist theory and beyond. See amongst others Puar, 2007; Chidgey, 2018; Kinkaid 2020.

⁹ For an overview of these debates, see Honig, 1993; Guaraldo 2013.

¹⁰ Creon's edict is violated twice in the play. The first time, an unknown person throws dust on the body as a symbolic burial act. The body is re-exposed by the guards, but a second burial is performed, and Antigone is caught in the act. Everybody assumes that she performed both burials, but this mystery has never been resolved. (See Honig 2013: 157-161 for a discussion of various readings and interpretations of this second burial in the Antigone archive)

¹¹ In Braidotti's conceptual vocabulary, power is taken both as entrapment (*potestas*) and as empowerment (*potentia*) (2019: 33)