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Face to Face in Freedom: Beauvoirian Ambiguity in Sophocles' *Antigone*

Irene Han

NYU-Gallatin, 1 Washington Place, New York, NY, USA
Email: ih472@nyu.edu

Abstract

In my examination of Sophocles' *Antigone*, I use Beauvoir's existential philosophy as a lens and hermeneutic model and apply her language and terms—immanence, transcendence, and ambiguity—to the original ancient text to understand the gendered metaphors of the play and to reveal an area of oversight in her superficial treatment of the tragedy. Taking this theoretical approach, I use "feminist" or "existentialist" Beauvoir (*The ethics of ambiguity*, *The second sex*) against herself, that is, her interpretation of the *Antigone* in "Moral idealism and political realism," to show how existentialist freedom is achieved in the tragedy. In my reading, I cast Antigone as a figure of ambiguity, situated in an oppressive context, and I argue that she creates her own project and strives towards freedom, in the Beauvoirian sense. I also extend the subjectivity of ambiguity to Ismene and illustrate the course of her own existential freedom to portray the reversibility of the transcendence/immanence polarity in these two figures and, ultimately, to suggest that the sisters are intertwined. Inscribing my reading in a tradition of feminist interpretations surrounding the *Antigone*, I advance a new reading that finds in the play a feminist political theory of existentialism, inclusive of the sororal pair.

1. Condemned to be free

A lasting source of interest for feminist theorists, Sophocles' *Antigone* inspires readings and rereadings.[1] In my examination, I use "feminist" or "existentialist" Simone de Beauvoir against herself,[2] that is, her interpretation of the *Antigone*, to show how existentialist freedom is achieved in the tragedy. The deepest goal of this study is to correct Beauvoir's view of *Antigone* via a use of Beauvoir's concepts (ambiguity and existential freedom) in a reading of *Antigone*, which yields two main fruits: it illuminates the meaning of Beauvoir's concept of existential freedom, ambiguity, and the figure of the radical activist, and it helps us see *Antigone* with new nuances, in its applicability to the goal of articulating a progressive feminist politics. My Beauvoirian approach, then, offers new insight into the text; it illuminates Antigone's mode of feminism that moves

beyond notions of the feminine and maternity and casts light on a central problem of the play:[3] how women and other Others can have ethical agency under conditions of constraint.

Beauvoir's existential philosophy operates as a lens and hermeneutic model in my reading, and I apply her language and terms to the original ancient text to understand the gendered metaphors of the play and, in turn, to reveal an area of oversight in her superficial treatment of the tragedy. The theoretical enhancement reveals Antigone as a figure of ambiguity, situated in an oppressive context, and I will argue that she creates her own project and strives towards freedom, in the Beauvoirian sense. That is, by assuming a radical ethical position, Antigone enters into the political sphere, and, though she may fall prey to a Cause (Beauvoir 1997, 49) by at first refusing her freedom, this mistake is due to her "situation" of subjection. A radical activist, she embodies the "twoness" of the existentialist position, a combination of both subject and object, private and public, male and female, transcendence and immanence, freedom and body, choosing agent and trapped object. I also extend the subjectivity of ambiguity to Ismene and, in the third section, "Antinomies of Action," will illustrate the course of her own existential freedom to portray the reversibility of the transcendence/immanence polarity in these two figures and, ultimately, to suggest that the sisters are intertwined.

With this angle, my analysis will make an intervention in the recent scholarly interest surrounding the play, which has noticed the significance of gender to its meaning. This discussion was initiated by Peter Euben, who argues that Antigone vindicates its heroine against a hypermasculinist construction of politics (1997, 178). Then it resumes with Judith Butler, who recognizes Antigone as a destabilizing figure with her subversive gender identity that disrupts both the political and symbolic spheres (2002, 82). Finally, Brooke Holmes picks up the thread: "Antigone holds out the promise of gender severed from sex. Her virginity has the feel of a blank slate. It animates her with raw potentiality and lends her resistance a sense of ideological purity. Moreover, indifferent to her fiancé, she occupies an ambiguous erotic space defined by incestuous birth and her fierce fidelity to her father and brother" (2012, 149). Among "[t]he restless reinterpretations of Antigone" (Holmes 2012, 149), I will illustrate how she licences the practice of politics in a new way,[4] precisely because Antigone serves as the heartbeat of sororal solidarity in the movement that she creates with her sister Ismene. This paper, then, will also focus on Ismene's evolution, as the play unfolds over time, for I suggest that Ismene takes political action and transcends both internal and external limitations to exemplify the existential feminist, a complex figure of ambiguity, as a reflection of her sister.

This reading differs from Amy Story's article "Simone de Beauvoir and *Antigone*: Feminism and the conflict between ethics and politics," which argues that Beauvoir's reading of *Antigone* in "Moral idealism and political realism" is inadequate, but that resources from Beauvoir's later thought and work (*The second sex*, *The blood of others*) provide tools for a more nuanced reading of *Antigone* (one that takes into account the situational constraints on Antigone's freedom). I make the same critical move that is found in Story's argument—using the later Beauvoir's thought to critique the earlier Beauvoir's reading of *Antigone*—but use a different Beauvoir text with which to read the tragedy, *The ethics of ambiguity*. The presence and use of this particular text give the reading a new orientation: rather than emphasizing the gendered situational constraints on *Antigone*, as Story's reading does, my examination is more interested in showing how Sophocles' Antigone is a classic figure of existentialism (rather than a moral idealist, which Beauvoir accused her of being in "Moral idealism and political realism") and acknowledges the significance of Ismene, who also assumes an existentialist ethics. This

discussion is therefore more invested in connecting Sophocles' play to keywords from *The ethics of ambiguity* like "immanence," "transcendence," and "ambiguity" than Story was and sees more to reclaim from the early, pre-feminist writings of Beauvoir than Story did. Furthermore, my reading is more interested in queer models of subjectivity and "in-betweenness" of identity than the Story article, which gave a more classically feminist reading of Antigone's situation in Ancient Greece.

I look through different prisms in my reading of the play by using *The ethics of ambiguity* as a key theoretical source in order to shed new light on the *Antigone*. I illustrate the centrality of the concept of ambiguity in Beauvoir's thought, which complicates the existentialist's journey from immanence to transcendence and undercuts the binary poles of a pair. I suggest we have to read *The ethics of ambiguity* and *The second sex* together in order to fully comprehend Beauvoir's feminist existentialist theory and that, in doing so, we will find that a non-binary concept of gender is at work in both Beauvoir's thought and the *Antigone*. I will demonstrate the relevance of Beauvoirian terms to the drama, the oppression that both Antigone and Ismene are subjected to (their "situation") and the resistance (transcendence-freedom) that they manifest. This experience also has universal consequences and speaks to a pressing contemporary issue: how members of any given society may have radically different experiences depending on their position in the social hierarchy and, nonetheless, forge their own subjectivity rather than comply and surrender to domination. The themes of exclusion, objectification, and power, which Beauvoir treats and develops, will enhance the same problems in the *Antigone*, and these are challenges and realities, which are simultaneously entrenched in the Western context and go beyond it.[5]

1.1 The Beauvoirian apparatus

In her work, Beauvoir uses Jean-Paul Sartre's terms of immanence and transcendence to describe the experience of women and their oppression.[6] Historically, Beauvoir argues, women have been prevented from attaining this end of transcendence and tend to sink into immanence, rather limited and confined by societal expectations, norms, and institutions such as marriage, reverting to "an infantile world because, having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, they have no means of breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads" (1997, 37). In *The second sex*, she suggests that women have nothing to lose but their chains in their pursuit of freedom when they undertake a project of emancipation (2009, 754). Transcendence and freedom seem to be used interchangeably in this context, where freedom begins with the self-recognition of one's deficiency in the present and desires transcendence, the reaching toward and attainment of one's further or truer potential through a willed action that involves creation and making one's mark in and on one's environment, that is, history-making. The real horror for woman has been man's efforts to completely "Other" her to a static state of immanence.

The concepts of "ambiguity" and "situation" call into question the strict dichotomy between immanence and transcendence. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir suggests that no one is merely transcendent, namely because one finds oneself in "situations," and woman constitutes a "situation" (1997, 40–41).[7] In her discussion, this term refers to the ways in which an individual, particularly woman, has been constructed, due to facts about her body and the social consequences and attitudes that ensue. The facticity of physiology or cultural conditions, which limit existential projects of transcendence and reinforce contexts of oppression, constitutes one's "situatedness." Beauvoir thereby advances the "situation" and acknowledges the "multiplicity of existants," who inhabit a

space of ambiguity in their position (1997, 72–73). For this reason, Beauvoir scholars have made clear that leaving behind the plane of immanence was many a man's blunder in her view and have argued that ambiguity, a relational in-between zone, and the assumption of one's ambiguity give rise to freedom, which is situated, nor is it a pure negation.[8] Objectified, under conditions of oppression, women, who comprise an entire class of people, historically have been prevented from conceiving their own projects and participating in an "open future" (1997, 88–89). Self and other fail to look at each other in a state of mutual recognition, and they exist, rather, in a hierarchy and state of power difference.

Beauvoir believes that this failure—the tension between consciousness and materiality, separateness and interdependence, freedom and subjection—defines the ambiguity of human existence. Ethical ambiguity is grounded in the notion that, in a world without universals, what is ethical isn't always clear and implies that decisions, informed by social constructs, are oftentimes complex. Women embody ambiguity more explicitly than men in a patriarchal milieu since they live an imposed social destiny of objectification and, generally, are excluded from expressing existential freedom, which would consist in creating projects that promote freedom for oneself and others and authenticity in interhuman relationships. Beauvoir equates the assertion of one's freedom with ethical behavior—"To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision" (1997, 24)—and this position, furthermore, is inherently connected to the freedom of others since human beings are relational beings: "To will oneself free is also to will others free" (1997, 73). Rejecting moral absolutes, Beauvoir insists on ethical projects of transcendence that embrace the ambiguity of the human condition. They may differ from individual to individual, especially because situations exist in the world, but distinct projects coincide in the supreme end of freedom.

The very point of ambiguity—that we are at once separate and interconnected, and embodied—generates an ethics and initiates a pathway to freedom. The model that Beauvoir provides emphasizes the ethical responsibility of *universal* freedom that the individual forges in the face of others, solidarity, and collective action. While she critiques Marxists for their rejection of the moment of choice, that is to say, their denial of freedom (1997, 23), she upholds revolutionary agency: "In order for the universe of revolutionary values to arise, a subjective movement must create them in revolt and hope" (1997, 19).[9] The revolutionary, like the artist or writer, has the potential to bring being into the world when he/she accomplishes positive revolt: "[Revolt] is fulfilled as freedom only by returning to the positive, that is, by giving itself a content through action, escape, political struggle, revolution. Human transcendence then seeks, with the destruction of the given situation, the whole future which will flow from its victory" (Beauvoir 1997, 31). Revolt, which establishes content through acts, "action, escape, political struggle, revolution" and envisions the future as open and contingent, converts absence to presence and facilitates freedom and transcendence. In other words, for Beauvoir, engagement with the community and political activism lead to existential freedom in her ethical framework, which recognizes "situations" or conditions of subjugation and endorses ambiguity as a basis for ethics and freedom.

1.2 Beauvoir against Beauvoir

In this paper, I challenge and push back against Beauvoir's view that Sophocles' play promotes a primitive vision of values and aim to dispel the "dream of purity" (2005, 189) that she attributes to the moral idealist, represented by Antigone, who, "while being

contemptuous of earthly goods, proclaim[s] the necessity of certain eternal principles and insist[s] at any cost on keeping [her] conscience pure—even though they may forfeit their own lives or the lives of others" (Beauvoir 2005, 175).[10] More precisely, Beauvoir's interpretation of Sophocles in "Moral idealism and political realism" is based on a French translation of the ancient text,[11] and this point is important for understanding how her concepts (immanence, transcendence, and ambiguity) can be applied to the play and, thereby, bridges the gap between philology and theory. Next, to readers who may raise the objection that it is irrelevant and anachronistic to put Beauvoir in dialogue with Sophocles, it is Beauvoir herself who draws on the tragedy in her essay.[12] From a Beauvoirian angle, what is magnified is Antigone's resilience, ambiguity, finally, her significance as an ethical and political actor: she inhabits two opposing attitudes and manifests a certain "twoness," which, in Beauvoir's thought, characterizes the human condition. She instantiates both separateness, as an isolated individual, and connectedness, for she forms a partnership with her sister Ismene, and both figures illustrate the paradoxical position of Beauvoirian ambiguity in a network of resistance in an expression of female solidarity. Beauvoir's project is to create an ethics that acknowledges the radical separateness of human beings and their inescapable connectedness to one another: "An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existants can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all" (1997, 17). Inscribing my reading in a tradition of feminist interpretations surrounding the *Antigone* such as those of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva,[13] as well as the kinship-focused reading by Butler, Bonnie Honig's democratic critique, and Mary Rawlinson's reevaluation of Ismene as a transgressive and experientially grounded moral agent, I advance a new reading that finds in the play a feminist political theory of existentialism, inclusive of the sororal pair. I revisit the question of how the ancient heroine and her counterpart Ismene embody a progressive feminist politics: an existentialist treatment of the *Antigone* shows us how individuals and collectives can navigate their existence to transcendent ends and rebel in the face of absurd and oppressive contexts.

2. Freedom in the encounter

Beauvoir's concepts of ethical ambiguity and existential freedom do not simply add additional vocabulary to well-established arguments about the play, but, rather, they advance a new understanding of Antigone's character. This section will illustrate the affinity between Beauvoir's thought and Antigone's mode of being in my application of the theoretical concepts to the heroine. The Beauvoirian framework, while illustrating the ambiguity of Antigone's freedom, due to her status as an Other, imparts to the figure feminist agency in her act of rebellion. The application of this conceptual apparatus suggests that Antigone and *Antigone*, in its portrayal of the title character's activism and political resistance, offer a valuable feminist paradigm of human and female agency, which different feminist readings of the play fail to adequately address when they leave existentialism behind: the treatments of Irigaray and Kristeva, which start from an assumption of feminine difference, and even by Butler and Honig, both of whom do stress gender in their theorizing of the political rather than sexual difference. I engage more at length with Honig's argument in section 3, "Antinomies of action," and argue that the Beauvoirian perspective provides us with an additional set of terms with which to reclaim Ismene from her submissive, insignificant status.

I am interested in Butler's project of deconstruction to dismantle binaries between male and female, inside and outside, from which a concept of "queerness" ensues, the idea that one can inhabit a gray space and combine oppositions, and will approach Antigone from a non-binary perspective, namely, through the lens of ethical ambiguity in Beauvoir. Rather than focusing on the language of kinship to illustrate the family as a contested political site, in other words, the politics of kinship, as Butler does, my intervention believes that Beauvoirian ambiguity initiates another avenue by which to demonstrate the futility and fragility of binary oppositions at work in the play in the moral dilemma that Antigone exhibits. Precisely her ethical ambiguity calls into question the strict division between two opposite choices and illustrates the way in which a subject is never entirely autonomous nor entirely socially constructed. Having the experience of "becoming a woman," of being a gendered subject, does not necessarily preclude moral agency, and I argue that Antigone's ambiguity compels the feminist ethics that she construes for herself and for others in a revolutionary project of freedom. Finally, this reading challenges the Hegelian dialectic that Beauvoir uses in "Moral idealism and political realism," the opposition between Antigone and Creon, state and family, ethics and politics, respectively, and will seek to show that her concept of ambiguity destabilizes any dualistic vision of the world. In contrast to more conservative approaches to the tragedy, which uphold the binary, such as the earlier Beauvoir, the spirit of this paper, therefore, supports a contemporary theory of gender and believes in the feminist potential unleashed by the play.

The feminist project of Antigone is demonstrated by her revolutionary agency and brought to fruition by the cooperation that she elicits from another partner, her sister, Ismene. She is situated in an environment of oppression, yet Antigone manages to construct her freedom by conceiving a project of resistance and simultaneously participates in an act of destruction by striving to eliminate the given situation for herself and another, namely, Ismene (Soph. *Ant.* 531–81). In this interaction, while relating to her sister, Antigone finds an equal reflection that eludes a power differential and confirms herself in herself; her initial position to defy Creon's decree is validated, in turn, by Ismene, who ends up supporting the act of defiance: "I did it, I confess. That is, if we are partners, anyway. I am an accomplice, and I bear responsibility with her" (Soph. *Ant.* 536–37).[14] At this particular moment, they look at each other in a state of mutual recognition. Despite facticity, their gender, and the political context into which they are thrown, existential freedom, defined as "the realization of concrete ends, of particular projects" (Beauvoir 1997, 24), the ability to "[cast] oneself into the world and of disclosing being" (Beauvoir 1997, 44), is found in this encounter.[15]

From a Beauvoirian point of view, Antigone discloses freedom because she assumes what we can understand to be her ambiguity illustrated by her opacity: she is constrained by her circumstances or situation and occupies a space of negativity, neither inside nor outside, both choosing agent and trapped object, spirit and body. In terms of actual physical space, Antigone fails to belong and literally goes under, "living by her own law" (αὐτόνομος) (Soph. *Ant.* 821), in order to reassert the law of the dead.[16] After reconstituting the bodies of her family members, Antigone returns to the womb of the earth, which she understands to be her "everlasting home" (οἴκησις ἀείφρουρος). Resolved to die, "marching" or crossing over to those who are her own (πορεύομαι πρὸς τοὺς ἐμαυτῆς), she enters into the realm of Persephone, queen of Hades. Clearly, there are strong resonances with the Demeter-Persephone myth:[17] the Persephonic principle of vegetation, fertility, and generation is at work in this episode, whose αἴτιον is given in the Homeric Hymn, or, rather, an anti-Persephonic principle of sterility and anti-

generation. Antigone, in her case, subverts the rite of passage reserved for the κόρη and, in contrast to the goddess, will never return among the living, and her refusal to marry ensures that she remains childless. With an act of self-sacrifice, she escapes the restraints of marriage and childbearing and assumes a masculine trajectory: by withholding her womb, Antigone chooses a heroic path and comes home to the Earth as one of its original children, "equal in memory to the gods in life and death" (Soph. *Ant*. 837–38).

The lines between a series of oppositions get blurred, and categories, confused: masculine/feminine, public/private, ethics/politics. By undergoing this trajectory, installing an οἶκος in the world below, Antigone is excluded from the symbolic laws of the πόλις. Finding herself in such a position in a space of "non-belonging," holy and unholy, dead and alive (Soph. *Ant*. 810), she moves into the realm of Beauvoiran ambiguity, ultimately a gendered category. In her paper "Theories of desire: Antigone again," Françoise Meltzer identifies her "foreignness" (2011, 171):

> The putting of things where do they not belong … creates the outrage of unholiness. With the borders between realms provided by the gods, gender too produces a shock value when it is no longer in its place. Antigone's contention that she belongs neither to the dead nor to the living is an echo of the feminine subject with agency—a third term that reveals the place of danger because it fits into neither its native category nor the one that is its opposite. (2011, 175)

As a "third term," Antigone combines both the masculine and feminine in addition to other binaries or, rather, represents a radical "limit."[18] Lastly, Meltzer argues that even the mode by which Antigone dies is gendered, blurring the distinction between male and female: "Antigone hangs herself with her veil of virginity, symbol (in the words of Loraux) of her sex. Thus the mixture of gendered roles: she is led to her execution like a man, but she hangs herself (already unusual) with a veil of femininity" (2011, 184).

The "betweenness" that Meltzer designates to the heroine (2011, 185) fails to capture the dynamic interplay between (masculine) transcendence and (feminine) immanence, which defines Beauvoirian ambiguity. The theoretical apparatus contributes to and enhances the language of movement, the posture of activism that characterizes Antigone's unique androgynous position. She constitutes a project by assuming her "fundamental ambiguity," what Beauvoir scholars have identified to be a "strange amalgam of consciousness and fleshly materiality, of freedom and constraint" (Kruks 2012, 33), taking responsibility in the given situation, and, in this way, produces a moment of rupture. The movement of departure and her breakthrough are conveyed by the repetition of the language of "going" in her final wedding hymn and funeral dirge. What is emphasized in these last moments is the image of the "road" (ὁδόν),[19] illuminated by an eclipsing sun (Soph. *Ant*. 808–09) or the path that Antigone follows underground. On this path, she goes, "I am going" (ἔρχομαι),[20] a sojourner among the dead (μετοικος) (Soph. *Ant*. 869), "I am led" (ἄγομαι) (Soph. *Ant*. 877*)*, "I am crossing" (πορεύμαι) (Soph. *Ant*. 892), and "I leave" (Soph. *Ant*. 892). Antigone recognizes that she belongs neither here nor there, a "resident alien" (μετοικος), and inhabits the duality of existence, expressed by the middle voice, "leading" and "being led" (ἄγομαι), and by crossing over.

The relevance of Beauvoir's concepts to Sophocles' text is made clear by the heroine's journey; the emphasis on her passage—from life to death, upper to lower, lightness to darkness—substantiates her in-between status and, at the same time, her elusive and disruptive presence, which resonates with the existentialist. In accepting her untimely

death, Antigone constructs a moment of freedom, not fleeing the situation which faces her, and also undergoes what Beauvoir identifies to be "a negative movement which rejects oppression for oneself and others" (1997, 170). Her death is, ultimately, a rejection of Creon's oppression and a political act that gains support from her sister but also the citizens of Thebes. Though she is situated in a bleak context of subjection, Antigone makes a choice, nonetheless, and wills freedom, which constitutes both an ethical and political act: she expresses subjective passion yet pays an enormous price— her life— for the facticity of her situation. Choosing the path of the transcendent hero means choosing death: her act of resistance ruptures the given, and death in this case amounts to transcendence. Antigone, therefore, incarnates Beauvoir's conception of ambiguity that defines human existence, which is always an admixture of internal freedom and external constraints imposed by the weight of the world, and an ethics of ambiguity calls on others, namely, Ismene and Thebans, to join her in bringing certain values, projects, conditions into being.

Antigone's barren womb symbolizes a microcosm for the macrocosm, the political experience, and, in both life and death, Antigone, after resituating herself, remains a figure of ambiguity, exerts the power of her existential project, and transcends. She garners support from the citizens of Thebes and opens up the possibility for democracy, as Haemon, her fiancé, explains to his father Creon and protests.[21] In Haemon's appeal to his father, he describes how the entire city stands behind Antigone and is "mourning for this girl," for it believes that no woman of all women ever died so shamefully for deeds so glorious (Soph. *Ant*. 694–95). In his dialogue, the Athenian perspective slips in and permeates the Theban backdrop: Antigone practices παρρησία, the liberty to speak freely, in the face of a tyrannical presence and, by garnering sympathy, creates a democratic movement. She influences and embodies the will of the people, aligned with the "common man" (ἀνδρὶ δημότῃ), who would not dare to speak such words that would offend Creon with his "terrible glance." Her single voice matches and unites the voice of the many and resonates even after her death: Teiresias warns Creon that an "unholy stench" will come to the city that has confused the living for the dead and leaves its corpses unburied (Soph. *Ant*. 1064–83). As a result, Antigone has a direct impact on the political fate of Thebes described as a living organism, a body politic, which emits odors and wanes. Political cycles correspond to the patterns of Antigone's body, which has refused to bear, remains hollow, and serves as the origin of decay.

The rapprochement of Beauvoir-Antigone brings to the fore the question of human and female agency and illuminates Antigone's actions for authenticity. While she is stubborn, bold, and reckless, Antigone opens a road to human transcendence and achieves immortality after death: her spiritual presence remains and is felt even after her body perishes. Her martyrdom fulfills what Beauvoir describes in *The second sex*, the destiny of the idealized creator, "who, transcending himself in a work, goes beyond the given and appeals to a freedom in others to whom he opens up the future" (2009, 612), and, ultimately, results in glory and a form of celebrity.[22] In life, Antigone alludes to her own greatness from the start when she claims for herself the "beautiful death" (Soph. *Ant*. 72), a metaphysical experience that preserves the hero's innate excellence and yields a snapshot of eternal beauty. It would seem, then, from one point of view, that Antigone's political act of resistance marks an aesthetic accomplishment as well in its beauty and unbearable splendor. In fact, is it not this splendor that amounts to transcendence, for it persists, after she is buried in a cave, in her immortal reputation when Haemon explains that the entire city is talking and empathizes with her commitment to bury her brother, one of "the most famous deeds" (ἔργων

εὐκλεεστάτων), worthy of golden honor. The emphasis on her golden quality attests to her fame and lasting influence, what organizes the city's common sensibility and unites the people around her. Her single act of defiance, therefore, coincides with and creates the collective will by establishing a bond between her freedom and the freedom of others. That is, although Antigone's situation is unique and constitutes her own subjective experience, her own desire for freedom echoes and promotes the entire city's and, in the end, has universal reverberations; Thebans, on the whole, have aligned themselves with Antigone and are protesting Creon's tyrannical measures, though their voice is "obscure" (ἐρεμνή). Thus, she conceives of a future in her lifetime and after her demise by constructing an ambiguous existence and engaging in passionate activism that opens herself and others to freedom, when she leaves and goes home "forever" (οἴκησις ἀείφρουρος) (Soph. *Ant*. 892).[23]

3. Antinomies of action

The Beauvoirian framework also reveals new dimensions to a treatment of Antigone's relationship with her sister. The point of this third section is to show that both Ismene and Antigone are figures of ethical ambiguity, in that both choose transcendent ends that are yet limited by their situations given the conflict of inner freedom and external oppression, but that they differ in Beauvoir's reading in the expression of moral attitudes. I will suggest that there is reason to prefer Ismene as an ethical actor qua Beauvoir because of her ability to change her mind. My Beauvoirian reading thus reorients and builds on Honig's interpretation in her piece "Ismene's forced choice": it tracks the reversal or confusion between two polarities from this particular theoretical framework and elevates Ismene's status to that of an existential figure.

In an innovative reading, Honig offers great insight into this very problem, that there is more than one way of resisting oppression, and the way most people, including Beauvoir in "Moral idealism and political realism," have read Antigone as a symbol of heroic resistant sacrifice is only one of them. Honig identifies a conspiracy of sororal solidarity at the heart of the tragedy and challenges the notion that Ismene is anti-political, and the critics who split the sisters, Antigone and Ismene, into active and passive characters, respectively.[24] Instead, for Honig, Ismene takes a radically ethical stance, recuperated from her passive reception. In order to develop this position, Honig makes various provocative suggestions: first, that Ismene is responsible for the first burial (2011, 40); second, that Antigone ends up supporting and protecting her sister (Honig 2011, 45) and becomes a tragic heroine, who "saves her sister's life and leaves alive a remnant of the family" (Honig 2011, 49). Finally, Honig argues that Antigone and Ismene represent Lacanian notions of the classical "forced choice" and modern "forced choice," respectively.[25] An uncanny double, Ismene embodies the "modern forced choice," captured by freedom or death (Honig 2011, 58): "there is one character who comes close—awfully and anachronistically close—to this 'modern' position, the position in which 'the subject is asked to accept with enjoyment the very injustice at which he is horrified,' and that character is Ismene" (Honig 2011, 60). Indeed, the interpretation is original when Honig positions Ismene as a symbol of feminist politics and embraces her "worldliness" (2011, 63).

In their opening exchange, Antigone's attitude differs significantly from that of Ismene, who, at this point, remains within the patriarchal structure of her context. In the ἀγών that ensues between the siblings, Antigone asserts her radical outlook on the situation and relegates Ismene to enemy status.[26] The obligation Antigone has towards

her loved ones, those who are dear, compels her to bury the dead and to remain loyal to those who are below (τοῖς κάτω τῶν ἐνθάδε) at any expense, and her unbending will, in turn, frightens Ismene, who admits that she fears very much for her sister. Such an extreme conception of feminine duty to which Antigone is attached ironically turns her into a bold, masculine, Homeric warrior, in her mission to "die nobly" (καλόν . . . θανεῖν), a phrase twice repeated. She says, "For me doing this, dying nobly is best. I will lie with him, loved one with loved one," and, again, "I will suffer nothing so great so as to stop me dying with honor" (καλῶς θανεῖν). In the Homeric tradition, the beautiful death is an experience towards which warriors strive, the κάλος θάνατος, "a photographic developer that reveals in the person of the fallen warrior the eminent quality of the *anēr agathos*" (Vernant 1991, 51). At this moment, we see how Antigone pursues a certain kind of death that is reserved for men and chases after immortality, which would preserve her youth in addition to that of her "dearest brother" (ἀδελφῷ φιλτάτῳ), and in this way steps outside the boundaries of her (ambiguous) gender.

The way that Antigone understands her relationship with her brother is startling and stands in strong contrast to her treatment of Ismene, who is also a sibling but turns into an enemy (ἐχθρός). Blood-ties are confused in this scenario, and kin-relations constructed, as Antigone privileges some family members to others and seems to betray a desire for intimacy with Polyneices, for she will "lie with him" (μετ᾽ αὐτοῦ κείσομαι) together in their grave. Ismene uses the language of erotic desire to describe her sister's motives, "You love the impossible" (ἀμηχάνων ἐρᾷς). Perhaps statements like these are meant to evoke the tragic demise of Oedipus, his incestuous and self-destructive tendencies, which, evidently, have been transmitted to his children. In any case, the repetition of φίλοι language, one of the leitmotivs of the play, magnifies her tragic family history: categories have been disturbed, stretched, and redefined; family members have been written off as enemies, killed each other, or taken as lovers and beloveds. The situation is further complicated when family misfortune bleeds into the public sphere, for Antigone's personal act of rebellion against Creon, who is her uncle, also constitutes a political act of which Ismene is aware when she disagrees with her sister: "But to act in violation of the citizens' will—of that I am by nature incapable." Rather than reducing Antigone's political motivations to psychoanalytic causes, we see what is truly at stake, and it is political in the most literal sense: it has to do with the πόλις, with what the citizens want, and, by resisting, Antigone assumes a more democratic way of construing the will of the people, as Haemon later suggests in the play (Soph. *Ant.* 688–700).

Categorical statements such as the ones Ismene makes reinforce the transcendence/ immanence polarity at work in the play, where these two categories move along a spectrum of extremes, reverse, and mix, and a Beauvoirian reading brings to the fore the ambiguity of this contrast. It is true that Ismene sinks into immanence, what Beauvoir identifies to be a state of stagnation to which women are traditionally assigned, and accepts her situation as an objectified Other. The immanence that Ismene embodies, in turn, validates a condition of inequality and the patriarchy, for she participates in a chain of oppression, which Antigone, with an unruly body, disrupts, and the sphere of immanence occupies one polarity in a set of two. That is, these two sisters face a set of choices: Antigone can either resist and die, or she can do as Ismene suggests, decide that as a woman she is powerless (ἀμήχανος) to resist (Soph. *Ant.* 79),[27] obey Creon, and tell herself this is not immoral because ought implies can; an agent, if morally obliged to perform a certain action, must logically be able to perform it.[28] In Beauvoirian terms, Ismene can resist and transcend, or she can fall back into immanence/ facticity and act in bad faith, in other words, deny her own innate freedom and live inauthentically.[29]

Antigone and Ismene interpret what it is to be human/ethical and the nature of citizenship differently, in that Ismene sees it as gendered, or, rather, sexed, and Antigone simply doesn't share the same viewpoint at this point in the drama, though, in her dirge, she understands her plight from a gendered point of view (Soph. *Ant*. 891–928). On the one hand, Ismene maintains a posture of modesty by encouraging Antigone to stay silent about the covert operation: "At least give no one notice of this act; you keep it hidden, and I'll do the same." Ismene believes in and adheres to a standard Athenian conception of feminine virtue, which is coded with silence, voicelessness, and invisibility. Pericles in the Funeral Oration, for example, defines female excellence precisely as obscurity (Thuc. 2.45). Antigone, on the other hand, rejects this model of behavior and breaks through the silence when she protests: "For god's sake, speak out. You'll be far more hated for your silence, if you fail to proclaim these things to everyone." The use of the imperative "speak out" (καταύδα) highlights her fearlessness and demonstrates another way in which Antigone assumes nonconformist attitudes: she uses her voice to speak loudly and, thereby, appears in the public eye; she will also be talked about by men, citizens of Thebes, and future generations.[30]

Antigone is, at the same time, a flawed character, limited by her situation and displays her ambiguous nature as a composite of internal freedom and external oppression. With regard to the matter of "internal freedom," I recognize that tragic protagonists like Antigone or Oedipus exhibit something like an "internal" necessitation: their very "will" or their character is a product of an inherited destiny and, thereby, of divine influence. Jean-Pierre Vernant, for example, problematizes any claim to find something like "free will" in ancient Greek tragedy: he wants to deny anything like a modern space of interiority and free self-determination in Greek thought, prior to at least Aristotle. He argues the genre of tragedy, instead, portrays the "tension between the active and the passive, intention and constraint, the internal spontaneity of the hero and the destiny that is fixed for him in advance by the gods" (1988, 79). Such a condition of the Greek tragic protagonist does not obstruct the freedom or transcendence which Antigone ultimately exhibits, for divine causality does not prohibit nor does it completely exclude human initiative, that is, the act of making certain decisions in the case of our heroine, self-described as the "very doer" (αὐτόχειρ) of her actions (Soph. *Ant*. 900). She also actively asserts her responsibility for the burial of Polyneices: "I admit that I did it and do not deny it" (καὶ φημὶ **δρᾶσαι** κοὐκ ἀπαρνοῦμαι τὸ μή) (Soph. *Ant*. 443). The tragic system provides room for the individual to navigate his/her life towards a fated end, to exercise agency, and to express intimations of the will, against a backdrop of divine power.

The Beauvoirian apparatus brings into view another source of restrictions that limit and misguide Antigone's will: rather than exposing the heroine's character through the lens of divine necessity and determination, it puts the accent on the gendered constraints, which are imposed upon her and shape her experience as a woman living in a patriarchal society. Simon Goldhill, in a critique of Honig's reading, makes the point that kinship (always, but especially here) involves a *choice*: the family is a conflictual space (2012, 244–45). Antigone, in fact, knows this very fact about existence: like the Wife of Intaphrenes in Herodotus' *Histories* (Her. 3.119), she would choose her brother over her husband; here she has chosen her brother over her sister as well as over Haemon and the children they might potentially have had (Soph. *Ant*. 909–12). In view of the decision that she makes, this is another place where the existentialist, and existentialist feminist, reading proves illuminating because, as Sartre says in *Being and nothingness*: "the choice of total ends although totally free is not necessarily nor even

frequently made in joy" (2001, 448). The *Antigone*, after all, is a tragedy and especially captures woman's tragic situation, as described by Beauvoir in *The second sex*: she reinstates the ethical "agency" that men have refused women and then shows that the choices women make are often very bad ones, even/especially when they *think* they are nobly sacrificing themselves "for the good of the family" (2009, 267).

The same limitations apply to Ismene when she changes her attitude and, in a surprising turn, chooses transcendent ends, i.e. freedom. After Creon hears about the secret and makeshift burial from the guard, how "from the earth up rose a dusty whirlwind, pain in the sky," which would reveal a lone girl, after the passing of the storm (Soph. *Ant.* 416–23), he confronts both sisters.[31] At this time, Creon suspects an alliance between the sisters and understands them as two and a pair: their sisterly allegiance is reinforced when he claims to have nurtured "two plagues, two revolutions against the throne" (τρεφων δύ' ἄτα κἀπαναστάσεις θρόνων) and exclaims in the dual, "What a pair of children!" (τὼ παῖδε). Ismene, in fact, stands by her sister and changes her original stance. At this moment, she sheds her passivity and submissive attitude and reveals her true self and intentions, which are fiercely loyal to her family and to those who are dear.[32]

What happens over the course of the drama is that Ismene changes her mind, and she tries to share responsibility with her sister in their public "performance" before Creon and admits, "I did the deed." Beauvoir's anti-deterministic point of view—that existence precedes essence, "to be" a woman should be interpreted in the dynamic Hegelian sense of "to have become" (2009, 24)—is well adapted to dramatic analysis and elucidates this shift. While vacillating between two positions, Ismene's primary motivation for joining Antigone now is a fear of being alone, for she asks, "What life would there be for me alone, without her presence?" She, therefore, displays a consistent line of behavior by supporting her sister because, at this time, as well as in the beginning, she acts out of a fear of being abandoned and desires to preserve members of the οἶκος. At first, she discourages Antigone from disobeying Creon's decree in order to keep alive the two who remain and urges, "Now think about the two of us. We are alone" (νῦν δ' αὖ μόνα δὴ νὼ λελειμμενα σκόπει) (Soph. *Ant.* 58). Now, she will share punishment for the crime in order to remain with her sister and to avoid being alone.

Although her line of reasoning remains the same, Ismene's confession indicates a dramatic revision and draws attention to the progression of the plot (μῦθος): as the crisis heightens, she realizes what is at stake. At first, she disagrees with her sister (Soph. *Ant.* 69–97); then she understands the gravity of the situation and decides to show solidarity with her sister, after the fact. In her intervention into the ongoing debate about the relationship between the two sisters, Rawlinson prefers Ismene to Antigone as a model for feminist politics, due to her "fluidity" (2014, 115), and finds in Ismene "a courageously transgressive and experientially grounded moral agent, one who does not deny but acknowledges in her deliberations the irremediable conflicts and tensions that attend all human decision making" (Chanter and Kirkland 2014, 11). It is true that, at this time, Ismene makes an important decision by choosing to stand by her sister, and this stance—her "mobility," in the words of Rawlinson (108)— makes her a principled ethical agent, *even if Antigone rejects her*. This rejection might come from Antigone's compassionate desire to save Ismene's life, as Honig thinks (2011, 47), or from a worse motivation: that Antigone does not want to share the κλεος with anyone, or because, as Beauvoir's own reading in "Moral idealism and political realism" suggests, she is too much in love with her own abstract political ideal to count the cost to others in the real world.

The imposition of the Beauvoirian concepts, ambiguity and existential freedom, on the figure of Ismene reveals another weakness of the essay "Moral idealism and political realism," which completely overlooks her. Story, too, misses an opportunity to push the confines of her critique of Beauvoir even further in her own Beauvoirian approach to the *Antigone* and to bolster her reinterpretation of the tragedy as "a tale of unification," "[i]nstead of a story of division" (2008, 177), when she dismisses Ismene as "pathetic" and "false" and upholds the dichotomy between the two sisters: "If the play makes a division between actor and non-actor, then it is between Antigone and Ismene, not Creon and Antigone, both of whom are actors" (2008, 177). The flexibility of Ismene, that she makes ethical decisions without clinging to moral absolutes, helps resolve the question of means and ends, which lies at the core of the tension between ethics and politics, the relationship between present values and future political aspirations, such as world peace or revolution. In her attempt to reconcile morality and politics in the early ethical essay, Beauvoir fails to account for all the factors that influence and color the choices that an individual makes, given the ambiguities of human situatedness and freedom. On the view Beauvoir fleshes out in *The ethics of ambiguity*, Antigone and Ismene can both be principled ethical agents, even if they act for different reasons and even if they are at odds with each other. In the section, "The antinomies of action," Beauvoir describes the complex situation of the world in which we live.[33] Beauvoir recognizes that the world is defined by antinomies or paradoxes and the irreconcilable nature of values, not only among different individuals, but also within a single individual. Ethical dilemmas that confront the individual constitute the ambiguity of existence, but Beauvoir upholds freedom as a "supreme end," and the path to this end is oftentimes nuanced and consists in separate and inconsistent projects.

The application of Beauvoirian concepts to the original text brings to light both the conditions of possibility for ethics in general and the conflict between autonomous, authentic ethical agency and ethical failure. These conditions, in turn, are exemplified by the Theban situation and, particularly, by Antigone and Ismene, for they embody two poles, which converge into a supreme end, and, as the play develops, each expresses her own moral attitude. Being an ethical actor for Beauvoir is inextricable from being able to change (1997, 154): the "mobility" that Rawlinson identifies is, in fact, what we might understand to be Ismene's ambiguity, and Antigone changes too, if one compares her initial reasoning (and verbal style) to her dirge in the moments preceding her death, where she considers her gender roles as a wife and mother (Soph. *Ant*. 891–928).[34] For this reason, Beauvoir provides a powerful alternative model for feminist activism to Honig's, which tacitly requires that a good feminist also be a good person, maybe even "a good woman," and doesn't question the terms on which being "good" gets constructed. *The ethics of ambiguity* suggests that ethical/political Goods may in the real world be truly incompatible, and there tends to be a "remainder:" real wars involve collateral damage, and it is bad faith to pretend otherwise (Beauvoir 1997, 156–57).[35]

The inconsistencies that Antigone and Ismene display make them both ambiguous creatures, as seen in the way in which they inhabit positions of both immanence and transcendence and embody contradictory content. From one perspective, by putting herself in the service of divine law and refusing to compromise, Antigone falls victim to what Beauvoir calls a "Cause." In *The ethics of ambiguity*, Beauvoir provides a ranking of different individuals who function in the world, and defines the serious man as a person who "suppresses himself to the advantage of the Thing, which, sanctified by respect, appears in the form of a Cause, science, philosophy, revolution, etc" (1997, 49). The principal ethical problem is consistently applying abstract ethical principles in the face of

unclear and changing situations. Like a serious man, does not Antigone fall prey to a Cause in the Beauvoirian sense, of one of the many ways to refuse one's freedom? She holds fast to the principle of the unwritten or divine laws, which she invokes in her defense: "As to whose deed it is, Hades and the dead are witnesses. A friend in words is not the type of friend I love."[36] Adopting this brutal point of view, Antigone makes a final cut and separates herself from her sister: "Because you chose life, and I chose death." Ismene replies, "At least your choice was not made without my protests." The sisters that Creon understands to be a pair, Antigone again divides into two, "You" (σὺ) and "I" (ἐγὼ), a rupture that reflects their initial disagreement (Soph. *Ant.* 44–68). Finally, Ismene's response is the admission that alludes to their previous disharmony and exhibits a conservative outlook, which promotes the secondary status of women, echoed by the patriarchal voice of Creon: "They are women, and they must not be free to roam about."

In one sense, on this occasion, Antigone negotiates her existence with an unconditionally unambiguous attitude. She adopts a Cause as unambiguously of absolute value, and such a rigid posture, to a certain degree, sacrifices her freedom to an external object or goal. In the end, by facing her death, Antigone accomplishes the serious man's mode of being and destiny: "He loses himself in the object in order to annihilate his subjectivity" (Beauvoir 1997, 49). Certainly, her subjectivity is, on the most literal level, erased when Antigone rebels at all costs and dies for her Cause. Yet, at the same time, the interaction between Antigone and Ismene in the scene (Soph. *Ant.* 531–81) is significant: it amounts to one instance where she goes beyond the destiny of the serious man and transcends. When these two sisters are confronted by Creon, against this oppressive force, Antigone creates a situation whereby she collects a partner, her sister, Ismene, to withstand his presence. Her individual will participates in a mini-collective, and, consequently, the tragic heroine assumes the position of a radical activist, seen as acting with at least one other person, albeit not always harmoniously but with some sense of shared purpose. In her commitment to the unwritten laws, Antigone actually organizes rebellious political action and contradicts Beauvoir's description of the "arrogant" ethical idealist, who prefers to remain in the abstract, ethereal realm or "heaven" and abstains from the world of politics: "He wants to keep his hands clean, his conscience clear, and intends to escape all earthly defilement" (2005, 189). The coalition is driven by the exigencies of the political world, whereby both sisters confront the worldly realities of "defilement, failure, horror" (Beauvoir 2005, 190): Creon, on his part, understands them to be "two rebellions" (δύ' . . . κἀπαναστάσεις) and accuses Ismene of "sharing in the burial" (Soph. *Ant.* 533–34). Ismene, in response, contends, "I did it, I confess" (Soph. *Ant.* 536).

As Beauvoir wrestles with the problem of moral political action in "Moral idealism and political realism" in an overly individualistic account, she does not emphasize the key point of relationality, which is developed by *The ethics of ambiguity*: the idea that human beings, and, particularly, those who are oppressed, can practice and assert an ethics in political situations by forming alliances and advocating on behalf of others. By supporting her sister, Ismene takes a political stand, and her confession, whose truth-value is contestable,[37] still has some moral force; she decides to join the cause, and the risks involved in symbolic action can become very real ones. Though Ismene may not be the original "pure revolutionary," she joins Antigone at the last minute and asserts, "But I still want to help you. What can I do?" (Soph. *Ant.* 552) and "Without her, why should I live? I'd be alone" (Soph. *Ant.* 565). These postures become political, as Ismene joins her sister's project of revolt, which Beauvoir identifies to be the only escape from the

serious world: "the oppressed can fulfill his freedom as a man only in revolt, since the essential characteristic of the situation against which he is rebelling is precisely its prohibiting him from any positive development; it is only in social and political struggle that his transcendence passes beyond to the infinite" (1997, 93–94). When Ismene makes statements like, "the offense is identical for both of us (νῶν)" (Soph. *Ant.* 558), she challenges the oppressive order of the patriarchal structure as a "natural situation," along with her sister, and moves closer to freedom in the act of rebellion. The use of the dual νῶν emphasizes their joint project, whereby Ismene comes to seem much more like Antigone, an existential figure rather than a purely "immanent" one. That is, she takes up her fundamental ambiguity by simultaneously transcending her physical limitations through the political posture, ultimately, through thought, and combining the essential paradoxes of her internal experience—autonomy and dependence, sovereignty and objectification, past and future—all of which are folded into an external environment radiating back inwards. At the moment of confrontation, Ismene mirrors back Antigone's reflection and position of dissent and reinforces the reciprocity between self and other.

4. Future mythology

The play opens with the tragic refrain—"friends" and "enemies"— uttered by Antigone in the prelude: "Our enemies are on the march to hurt our friends" (Soph. *Ant.* 10). What follows is the clash and confusion between these two polar categories, and it would seem, in the end, that the dramatic players have taken their friends as enemies. In my reading, I present the existentialist dilemma that the tragedy exhibits, explore the limitations of polarized perspectives, and illustrate the complexity of radical ethical/ political decisions, which may be accompanied by losses, especially under conditions of oppression. To this end, I position Antigone as a radical activist, who rejects her imposed situation in a project of revolt and identify a feminist way of being in her stance and attitude, for she assumes and inhabits ambiguous spaces, creates a collective, and acts as a vessel for her own freedom and the freedom of others. In "Antinomies of Action," I trace the transcendence/immanence polarity with respect to the figures of Antigone and Ismene and illustrate the ambiguity of both. Reversing the transcendence/ immanence dichotomy, which maps onto Antigone/Ismene, respectively, I bring to light the inner freedom and existential project of Ismene, who changes over the course of the drama, and the elision of these oppositions in the sororal bond. The value of having read *Antigone* via Beauvoir lies in the ability of the theoretical apparatus to put into relief the concept of a third type that escapes a binary way of thinking and to yield a paradigm of female moral agency emanating from a context of ambiguity beyond maternity and the reproductive function. The rapprochement, then, offers a new feminist analysis of the ethical, political problem of the tragedy from a gendered perspective and suggests that we can find in the play a progressive model of feminism for renegotiating power relations, ultimately, to eliminate hierarchies based on sex and gender. Lastly, by linking up the classical with the modern, I am suggesting that the past continues to speak and that the play has political significance to this very day as well as for the future, in its poetic portrayal of the obscure trajectory from ambiguity to transcendence.

Notes

1 Adriana Caverero, for example, has looked at the way that the female body has been excluded from the political sphere and probes the intimate link between the physical body and "stately" body throughout human history (2010, 48–49). Fanny Söderbäck, also interested in showing the inversion of these binary oppositions, in her volume, *Feminist readings of* Antigone, argues: "Antigone lays the ground for a political space where action and speech can take place, whereas Creon embodies the private sphere of household economy" (2010, 6).

2 I recognize that Beauvoir's thought remains a dynamic body of work. Beauvoir revises her position regarding transcendence from her early work to her later thought and embraces "situation" and "ambiguity" (Daigle and Landry 2013, 109–10).

3 Bracha Ettinger, for example, emphasizes matrixial feminine difference: "Antigone's private death is less a price for her to pay than living through an irremediable explosion of the matrixial borderspace. She literally acknowledges the corpo-real source of this psychical space—the shareable maternal womb" (2010, 210).

4 Holmes asserts, "Antigone forces an interrogation of what a feminist or feminine . . . challenge to the state aims to achieve" and asks: "Should Antigone represent the integrity of a space outside or before politics? Or should she license the practice of politics in a new way?" (2012, 150).

5 Sophocles' *Antigone* has served as a source of inspiration for African and Latin American appropriations of and engagements with this text. In her study, Astrid Van Weyenberg (2013), for example, considers two adaptations, *The Island*, first performed in 1973 and set in apartheid South Africa, and *Tegonni: An African Antigone*, set in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria: "The performative aspects of *The Island* transgress racial and gender boundaries, first by transposing Antigone's predicament, configured by the philosophical canon of the West as a European plight, into the racialized context of South Africa, thereby contesting the white heritage that the European reception of Greek tragedy imagined into being" (Chanter and Kirkland 2014, 17). These modern interpretations of the ancient play find in the myth universal themes that transcend temporal, geographical, and cultural borders: the oppression that Antigone is subjected to, what I understand to be her "situation," and the resistance that she assumes, in Beauvoirian terms, her transcendence/freedom. See also Gibbs 2007, who explores the impact of Caribbean and Black Atlantic cultural traffic on rewritings of *Antigone*, and, more recently, Andrés Fabián Henao Castro (2021), who, in his reading of the ancient text, draws connections with critical race theory, inclusive of decolonial theory, settler colonial critique, Afro-pessimism, and queer of color critique, and argues for a decolonial reinterpretation of the tragedy.

6 The Cartesian view of subjectivity, expressed by his famous *cogito*—"I think, therefore I am"—assumes that experience is given *to* a subject, who reflects on his/her experience in the world and from this reflective capacity expresses the consciousness of the "I." This framework believes in the existence of God, that there is an essence in which thinking is grounded as well as subjective experience. We notice that the subject is given in advance, the "I," who perceives, experiences, and thinks, and is, therefore, revealed as a universal transcendental subject. Sartre refutes this idea of subjectivity and, in opposition, argues that there just "is" experience, without subjects or objects, inside or outside. This is a plane of material "immanence," "uniform and homogenous sameness," "a pure stream of consciousness without any contents" (Stawarksa 1998, 112). We do not begin as subjects who then have to know a world; there is experience and from this experience we form an image of ourselves as distinct subjects, and, therefore, existence precedes essence: "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterward" (Sartre 1975, 349). By certain actions and decisions, the individual then creates his/her essence, the transcendental subject.

7 In comparison to Sartre, "her understanding of situatedness suggests a more complex conception of human responsibility than is presupposed in Sartre's notion of radical freedom" (Card 2003, 12). In *The ethics of ambiguity*, Beauvoir develops a concept of oppression, which "situates" or restricts the individual's freedom.

8 Scholars have stressed the significance of her conception of ambiguity, which disputes the sharp division between immanence and transcendence and equating transcendence with freedom. See Marso and Monagh (2006, 3), Zakin (2006, 43), Kruks (2012, 33), and Stavro (2018, 35).

9 Beauvoir argues that the Marxist, in practice, actually bears an existentialist posture: "By acting, as also by preaching action, the Marxist revolutionary asserts himself as a veritable agent; he assumes himself to be free" (1997, 20–21).

10 In "Moral idealism and political realism," Beauvoir portrays Antigone as a moral idealist in opposition to Creon, the political realist, "concerned only with the interests of the state and determined to defend them by every possible means" (2005, 175). The polarity of their visions is symptomatic of a persistent duality, which has contributed to conflicts "all through history" (Beauvoir 2005, 175).

11 We know that Beauvoir is working in the French because she draws from G. W. F. Hegel's reading of the *Antigone* in *Phenomenology of mind*, as she makes clear in the first footnote of the essay (2005, 190), and, in her writings, translates his philosophical concepts into French, "*l'esprit*," for example (2005, 274).

12 It is worth mentioning that virtually every post-war French writer of note was explicitly doing this: Sartre, Jean Giraudoux, Jean Anouilh all made use of the classical theater tradition and myths in order to stage the very French ethical conflicts of the period. On a further note, I do recognize that there are differences between the ancient and modern frameworks: while it is true that God does not exist in the existentialist framework (Sartre 2001, 529), and Antigone claims to follow the dictates of divine law in the play, I focus on the secular consequences of her passionate commitment to this path and her blood ties, her constructive activity, and progression. The private sphere constitutes one of the very forces that situates her, for, typically in the ancient context, women have a familial duty to perform the funeral rites of kin (see e.g. Shapiro 1991, Loraux 1998, Dillon 2002). In other words, divine law is a gendered category in the ancient context, and it compels Antigone's position or "situation" in Creon's Thebes, which, of course, serves as a projection of democratic Athens. Froma Zeitlin has shown how the mythical setting of Thebes speaks to and reveals Athenian concerns by providing the negative model to Athens' manifest image of itself with regard to its notions of the proper management of city, society, and self (1990, 144).

13 Among French feminists, Irigaray, in her essay "The eternal irony of the community," believes that the *Antigone* "marks the historical bridge between matriarchy and patriarchy" (2010, 102) and that the figure remains a symbol of necessary feminine sacrifice that ushers in and sustains the political community: "*[Woman] ensures the* Erinnerung *of the consciousness of self by forgetting herself*" (2010, 109). Kristeva emphasizes Antigone's maternal desire: "She knows that the 'other' surges out of the limit where its identitary ambition to her is eclipsed, and thereby opens the horizon of possible alterities, of veritable singularities. Against the pathos of the mother and in her place: maternal love, limit states, and inaccessible horizon" (2010, 228).

14 My translations follow Paul Woodruff's (2001), with occasional adaptions.

15 Beauvoir scholars have been interested in her treatment of existential "freedom" and considered how, in the process of realizing freedom, the individual will coincides with that of the collective. Lori Jo Marso, quoting Beauvoir in *The second sex*, maintains that freedom is achieved "in the encounter" (2017, 443).

16 Soph. *Ant.* 891–928.

17 When Hades abducts Persephone and takes her as his bride, Demeter, the maiden's mother, prevents the seed from growing and nourishment among men (*Hymn. Hom. Cer*. 305–12). See also Holmes (2012, 149–50).

18 Meltzer identifies the grayness of Antigone's being, which "puts into question not only subjectivity, but the dyads (for example, gender), which it must insist upon and their concomitant hypostasizations of noncontiguity or spaces between them" (2011, 185).

19 See also Soph. *Ant.* 877–79.

20 See also Soph. *Ant.* 920.

21 Soph. *Ant.* 688–700.

22 Celine Léon notices a tension in Beauvoir's thought between the existence of a distinct feminine specificity and the denial of these feminine qualities and values: "'I banked,' said Beauvoir in the course of a *Vogue* interview, 'on values that could be called masculine—although in my eyes they are universal' (David 1979, 295). She admires, at the same time, 'feminists [who] refuse to be the equals of men, [and to share with them] the idea of competition, of masculine glory, and of celebrity' (Patterson 1979, 746). Women, she suggests, will have to work at realizing the difficult balancing act of reconciling the singular and the universal. Theirs will be a difficult dialectic between, as Beauvoir told Alice Jardine, 'accepting power and refusing it, accepting certain masculine values and wanting to transform them' (Jardine 1979, 228, 235)" (1995, 152).

23 Söderbäck advances a concept of "revolutionary time," a temporal model that challenges the division between linear time, which has historically been associated with men, culture, and transcendence, and cyclical time, which has historically been associated with women, nature, and immanence (2019, 57), and that "recognizes embodiment as the condition of possibility for futurity" (2019, 8) and transcendence (2019,

94). Aspects include "a movement of perpetual return—a set of restorations or re-authorizations of the past (restorations, as we shall see, that simultaneously seek to *de-authorize* certain notions of the past and of history)" and revolutionary and political force: "it is meant to provide a framework for a feminist revolution that puts an end to, or at least forcefully challenges, the systematic oppression and objectification of women so poignantly assessed by Beauvoir" (2019, 38). With the notion of "revolutionary time," Söderbäck is after something like the generative indeterminacy that I find Antigone ultimately exhibiting, although she finds them in the work of Kristeva and Irigaray.

24 Jacques Lacan mentions Ismene in passing (1986, 318) and only grants ethical agency to Antigone. He attributes to her an "unbearable splendor" (*l'illumination violente*) (1986, 327) and locates Antigone in the space between two deaths: "Entre les deux, Antigone choisit d'être purement et simplement la gardienne de l'être du criminel comme tel" (1986, 329). See also Žižek (1989, 116–17).

25 Honig compares Antigone's choice to that of Homer's heroes: "[Antigone] responds to the forced choice thrust upon her by constructing for herself something like the elongated, beautiful death of Homer's heroes. Before her immurement in the cave, Antigone participates in the *agon* over the meaning of her actions, a privilege Creon seeks to reserve for himself when he restricts her to menus of predetermined options. He tries to economize; she is excess" (2011, 56).

26 Soph. *Ant.* 69–97.

27 The state of Ismene's helplessness is conveyed by the repetition of ἀμήχανος in lines 90 and 92.

28 The ethical principle is ascribed to Immanuel Kant: "For if the moral law commands that we ought to be better human beings now, it inescapably follows that we must be capable of being better human beings" (1998, 70).

29 Sartre 1993, 167–69.

30 On the question of how to understand the ways Sophocles and Euripides give voice to very strong feminist sentiments *through their heroines' speeches and actions*, despite the fact that Athens was a very masculinist place, see Zeitlin 1990, Wohl 1998, Bassi 1998, and Foley 2001. Theater, as a central civic ritual, logically reflects this paradox.

31 Soph. *Ant.* 531–81.

32 Honig recuperates Ismene from her passive position: "Ismene is not, as Antigone charges, all empty words and no action. On the contrary, Ismene's words are well earned by her quiet courageous actions: the first burial of Polynices, which Antigone may now suspect and credit as a worthy act and, then, the attempt to die with her sister, also a worthy act" (2011, 48).

33 Beauvoir emphasizes the inescapability of paradox in action: "And it is true that each is bound to all; but that is precisely the ambiguity of his condition: in his surpassing toward others, each one exists absolutely as for himself; each is interested in the liberation of all, but as a separate existence engaged in his own projects" (1997, 121).

34 See also Kirkland 2010, which argues that Antigone is initially presented as absolutely and unquestioningly certain for much of the play, only to arrive at a certain explicitly acknowledged uncertainty and indeterminacy in her final scene (2010, 326–27).

35 Whereas other feminist approaches (such as the ethics of care) give a picture of what women might ideally be like (sororal, nurturing), Beauvoir always starts from a position of what women (and families) actually are like under patriarchy, and it is not a pretty picture.

36 Soph. *Ant.* 531–81.

37 It is possible, as Richard Jebb suggests, that Antigone performs both burials because libations were missing from the first one, and she goes back to the body to repair the omission (1902, 158). Understood precisely in terms of transgression and manifested in the curious repetition of burial rites, Antigone, moreover, may be a paradigmatic figure of ethical action, where "repetition gives the act a reflective aspect, repeating as reflective choosing" (Bernstein 2010, 119).

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Irene Han specializes in ancient political philosophy and received her PhD from UCLA (2017) and BA from Columbia University (2008). She teaches at NYU-Gallatin and received a Fulbright grant to the EHESS, Paris, France (2021–22) to pursue her research on the fragments of Sappho. Her publications include articles in *QUCC*, *EuGeStA*, and *The Routledge handbook of classics and queer theory*. She has written on Deleuze in Bloomsbury 20th-Century French Thought, and her book *Plato and the metaphysical feminine: One hundred and one nights* has been published with Oxford University Press in the Classics in Theory Series (July 2023).