

# Migrant Deaths and European Revenants in Thomas Köck's *antigone. a requiem* (2019): Sophocles' Tragedy Recomposed and Decomposed

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article discusses *antigone. a requiem* (2019) by the Austrian playwright Thomas Köck as one of the latest contributions to a growing body of work that has engaged with Sophocles' *Antigone* in light of current migration debates. Avoiding psychological realism in favour of postdramatic techniques, *antigone. a requiem* differs aesthetically from other recent revisions in that this tragedy-as-requiem does not primarily aim for the audience's affective response. Inspired by Judith Butler's theory of the spectral return of socially neglected, ungrievable lives, the play replaces Antigone's unburied brother with corpses washed ashore on European beaches to question European migration policies through a critical assessment of Europe's necropolitics. Formally recomposing Sophocles' tragedy as a requiem with a distinct linguistic musicality, Köck's play skilfully repurposes the funeral song shared by Sophocles' *Antigone* and chorus and relocates Antigone's anagnorisis to the chorus of contemporary Europeans who eventually recognize themselves in the dead. Köck's requiem also decomposes its model, as it stages the undead as revenants who return to remind Europe of its history of colonization and exploitation, in which Sophocles' *Antigone* was employed as a carrier of European values. In this respect, Köck's recomposition also sings a requiem for *Antigone* itself.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Greek tragedy, postdramatic tragedy, theatre of migration, lament, necropolitics, ungrievable lives, grief activism*

What can Sophocles' *Antigone* tell us about the current migration debates? Apparently a lot, as a growing body of theatrical, cinematic, performative, and theoretical works that engage with *Antigone* in the light of migration demonstrate. Emma Cox has elucidated the mythopoetic work undertaken by such engagements, calling attention to the fact that our current discourses and imagery “are always already caught in an echo chamber of archetypal

[...] narratives” because “we already have a symbolic system by which we recognise [...] ‘know again’ migrants and migration, and this compels our reading of the political present” (9). At the same time, each new mythopoeitic contribution to this network can also question and modify these archetypical master narratives. This article discusses *antigone. a requiem* (2019) by Austrian playwright Thomas Köck as one of the latest contributions to the growing migratory *Antigone* network. The play rewrites Sophocles’ *Antigone* to account for a multitude of corpses that wash up on the “theban-european” beach (Köck, *antigone* 81). The resonances with actual migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea are clear but never made explicit, and the dead simultaneously function on a surreal level as revenants that return to remind Europe of its denied history of colonial violence. *antigone. a requiem* thus transforms the tragedy’s conflict over the proper burial of Antigone’s deceased brother into a controversy regarding Europe’s migration policy and its postcolonial responsibilities. While Köck’s Creon – a slick representative of realpolitik with a tendency toward autocracy – sees the dead as invaders of Fortress Europe, Köck’s Antigone is a radical activist willing to die for her cause: she insists that Europeans need to acknowledge the dead as their own and even as themselves. Köck’s chorus, placed between these extremes, plays a decisive role in the controversy as witnesses, commentators, and agents in their own right.

Köck, who has become one of the most successful young dramatists in German-speaking theatres in the last few years, is also one of the most pronounced political playwrights interested in questions of global injustice. His plays have been produced by prestigious theatres, he was named the best young playwright by the leading German-speaking theatre magazine *Theater Heute* in 2018, and he has won several awards, most prominently the Mülheimer Dramatikerpreis in 2018 for his play *paradies spielen (abendland. ein abgesang)* [*play paradise (occident. a swansong)*], the final part of a trilogy dedicated to the climate crisis, and again in 2019 for *atlas. antigone. a requiem* premiered in Hannover in 2019, directed by Marie Bues, who previously co-directed Köck’s *paradies fluten (flood paradise, 2016)*, *paradies spielen (2017)*, and *abfall der welt (waste of the world, 2018)*. Since then, Köck’s *antigone* has seen two more productions despite the lockdown of theatres because of the coronavirus pandemic: a production by the Austrian Burgtheater on its Akademietheater stage, directed by Lars-Ole Walburg, and a production at Mülheim’s Theater an der Ruhr, directed by Simone Thoma, both of which premiered in September 2020.

The play begins with a new prologue spoken by the chorus before the first encounter between Antigone and Ismene, taken up from Sophocles’ tragedy. They exasperatedly describe how corpses are washed ashore on the

very beach on which they intended to enjoy their leisure time: “Europe lies on the beach and / there they lie / there they lie,” (Köck, *antigone* 9).<sup>1</sup> Marking the clash between the beach as vacationscape and thanatoscape, the play starts from the juxtaposition of different forms of mobility that has become a troubling phenomenon in recent years on Greek, Spanish, and Italian beaches, where European mass tourism is confronted with the life-risking migration of those who seek refuge in Europe – and vice versa (see Kluwick and Richter). Köck uses the symbolic value of this clash of travel forms – unlimited versus restricted, recreation versus enforced migration, temporary versus life-changing – as the dramatic starting point for his engagement with Sophocles’ *Antigone*, a tragedy with its own considerable and ambivalent history of migration that encompasses worldwide theatrical productions; translations; philosophical and theoretical interpretations; adaptations across the genres of literature, film, and the visual arts; and educational propagation – including the syllabi of the colonial system (see, e.g., Hardwick and Gillespie, van Weyenberg). Köck’s play is interested in these travel itineraries of Europe’s past as encoded in *Antigone* and, by repurposing Sophocles’ classic for an intervention in the current European migration debate, also asks how the play returns to Europe today, transfigured by its migration history.

Commissioned by Hannover’s Staatsschauspiel, *antigone. a requiem* is Köck’s first play that directly adapts a dramatic classic, and, as I will argue, his rewriting shows that he both employs and seeks to work against the mythopoetics of migration described by Cox. In a lecture delivered in the same year in which he worked on *Antigone*, he emphasized how he detests the habitual reactivation of the canonical plays of the past in German-speaking theatres for an “endless classics bingo” (Köck, *ghost matters*; my translation). He argued that texts written millennia ago cannot grasp our late capitalist, postcolonial present and hence cannot offer any new political perspectives. What he is interested in instead is a processual, critical inquiry into the classics that includes formal revision. Accordingly, his play tests, partly repudiates, enriches, and fundamentally changes the ancient tragic form for the current European drama of migration. Accordingly, the title’s “requiem” is followed by the subtitle “a recomposition.” The category of “recomposition” implies that tragedy is always a composite form: a temporarily stabilized assemblage of formal elements in a particular order that allows for some degree of flexibility, that is, for processes of de- and re-assemblage. As I will argue in the following, Köck’s recomposition of Sophocles’ tragedy preserves crucial tragic elements but relocates and thus modifies them – most prominently, anagnorisis and catastrophe. Köck likewise introduces new elements and gives prominence to the chorus, as

well as one particular formal constituent that the title already signals: the requiem or mourning song, which was already an important feature of Sophocles' tragedy through Antigone's funeral song, called *kommos* in Greek antiquity. Köck's privileging of the mourning song in his title and as the overall concern of his rewriting is a philosophical, political, musical, and dramaturgical move.

From the *Antigone* network created by the tragedy's trans-cultural travels, Köck uses Friedrich Hölderlin's deliberately archaic and poetic German translation of Sophocles, which was also the translation that Bertolt Brecht worked with in his post-World War II *Antigone* adaptation, just before he developed his theory of *Verfremdung* that prepared the ground for the current postdramatic political theatre. Köck's play juxtaposes Hölderlin's antiquated pathos of the tragic heroine with the all-too-common standard phrases typical of the twenty-first-century's mediascape and the prosaic register of bureaucratized European migration policies. Thus, when Antigone laments initially in Hölderlin's words, "man soll sie lassen unbeweint und grablos,"<sup>2</sup> "They are meant to be left unlamented and graveless," Ismene responds, "[W]ell as far as I know / there is a body bag / black with white stripes clinical / simple and bureaucratic," (13). Through this technique of juxtaposing linguistic registers, Köck follows the model of Elfriede Jelinek's postdramatic writing. Among Jelinek's plays, *Die Schutzbefohlenen* (*The Charges*) is particularly relevant for Köck's *antigone*: in 2013, at the height of the refugee crisis, Jelinek's play responded to the deportation of refugees who had sought sanctuary in Vienna's Votive Church by rewriting Aeschylus's *The Suppliants*. Like Jelinek, Köck creates tension by confronting political-bureaucratic phrases with the poetic pathos of ancient tragedy, but his *Antigone* version is less radical in its postdramatic deconstruction of the source text's dramaturgy. While Jelinek's writing is not assigned to particular speakers or characters, does not use division into scenes or acts, does not develop dramatic action, and completely abandons the tragic dramaturgy with peripety and anagnorisis aiming at the audience's *phobos* and *eleos*, Köck's recomposition keeps many of Sophocles' features, including the main characters and the overall plot development.

### **ANTIGONE RECOMPOSED AS CHORIC REQUIEM**

As Köck emphasizes in interviews, in his writing all dramatic speech derives from a choral gesture and choral energy (Peters 306). Therefore, Köck's Sophoclean characters come closer to postdramatic enunciators of public discourses than to psychologically complex subjects who authentically express themselves and invite the audience's sympathy. The playwright announces in the foreword of his recomposition that he "sacrifices" family psychology

for the sake of the chorus, in contrast to many successful adaptations of Greek tragedy in European theatres that do the opposite – namely, dispense with the chorus in order to rewrite ancient tragedy as an Ibsenite family drama (2). To increase psychological realism, such revisions often highlight facial expressions via camera close-ups projected onto the stage, for instance in the popular remakings of Greek tragedy by the Swiss-Australian director and author Simon Stone, whose productions premiered in Australia, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany and travelled to many other countries. Stone's rewritings transplant Greek tragedy into a family drama of our contemporary world, sometimes drawing on actual events, as in his *Medea* version (premiered 2014 with the Toneelgroep Amsterdam and restaged in 2018 with a new artistic team at Vienna's Burgtheater) that responds to the story of a US physician who killed her children to take revenge on her former husband. Likewise, Sophie Deraspe's recent movie adaptation of *Antigone* (2019) explores the situation of African refugees in Quebec through family psychology. As the director stated in an interview, she "wanted the audience to connect with Antigone as they would with a normal character and forget about the fact that she bears an ancient Greek name" (Deraspe in Heeney). She recounts how she and the actor who plays Antigone, Nahéma Ricci, "worked to bring this character to something naturalistic. At the same time, Antigone is a hero, and we have to believe in her being this regular young woman who has to step into such big shoes in order to protect her family and her dignity" (Deraspe in Heeney). Köck's postdramatic approach clearly differs from such attempts to recast *Antigone* as a psychologically engaging family drama.

Focusing on the clash of political positions, Köck's characters represent different responses to the political, social, and psychological scandal of the deaths of migrants. In this controversy, Köck privileges the chorus's collective voice, which starts the play and throughout the action serves as an intermediary between auditorium and stage. The comments and reactions of the chorus of present-day Europeans, above all their ignorance, self-questioning, self-exculpation, and helplessness, animate audiences to develop their own stance towards the current migration debates. Köck's postdramatic chorus thereby reactivates the chorus's role and function in ancient Greek tragedy, where "the audience could not rely on the chorus's judgement to interpret the action, although it could relate to the choral struggle to do so" (Foley, "Envisioning the Tragic Chorus" 355). The play's first production in Hannover's state-funded theatre, where the artistic team around director Marie Bues worked closely with Köck, cast citizens of Hannover as chorus members and thus accentuated the chorus's representative function. As Bues stated in an interview, she deliberately cast the chorus as a

diverse group that reflects the diversity of the city's inhabitants (Varga). The chorus in both Ole Walburg's Burgtheater production and Simone Thoma's staging at Theater an der Ruhr were composed entirely of actors who played the other parts, too, which led to a double coding: starting with the group of actors as a chorus, each actor represented a particular voice when performing their part and melted back into the observing and commenting collective whenever they were not directly involved in the action. The productions thus responded to Köck's general treatment of dramatic speech, in which, as he explained in an interview, theoretically all the characters in the play are suspended in choric speech (Peters 306). Even though they chose different realizations, in all three productions the chorus thus emphasized the polyphony and tensions within the collective, who speak the same lines but whose members are not necessarily of the same mind – a reflection of the heterogeneity of the audience.

The choric speech privileged by Köck underlines the musicality of his "recomposition" of *Antigone* as a "requiem." In the paratext, he names several musical pieces, both classical and pop songs, as inspiration for his play, which develops its own linguistic musicality, chiefly by creating a special rhythm marked through repetitions and interruptions. As Köck repeatedly points out in interviews, he used to compose songs for his band before he studied scenic writing and began to write plays. He describes his playwriting as "writing for a concert" and stresses his interest in speech as sound and as a "resistant form" (Wille; my translation). On the stage, choric speech in particular focuses on the physical and musical aspects of language ("Der Autor Thomas Köck"). Köck's interest in speech as a bodily experience on the stage is reflected in his writing style on the page too: as in his previous plays, he centres each line and thus gives the text a visual, almost physical quality that goes beyond its semantics. The particular flow and rhythm of his writing is enhanced by the fact that Köck uses neither punctuation nor capitalization (the latter technique is much more significant for the German original than the English translation) and that he makes extensive use of enjambment, which keep readers from easily identifying whole lines as syntactic units. This writing style creates a flow of words from which meaning has to be retrieved by intonation and breaks during the performance. Readers, too, will feel compelled to read the text aloud as the evolving rhythm facilitates the grammatical task of identifying syntactic units.

To illustrate Köck's style, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the first lines of the play in both German and English. Here, the chorus introduce themselves as late capitalist European consumers. Overwhelmed by their own affluence and the wealth of information they have to process daily, they keep postponing their report about the deaths they just encountered. Thus, they are introduced as reluctant performers of a requiem:

<p>wir schon wieder schwer am atmen stöhnen keuchen</p> <p>wir völlig außer uns wir überinformierten durch deklinierten aus buchstabierten zu ende gedachten wir hipsteropfer wir von der geschichte ausgestoßenen wir endzeitattentäter wir späterdenbewohner wir intensitätssüchtigen identitäts verweigernden im rausch die identität suchenden wir die wir uns nur</p> <p>mehr noch im angesicht der anderen erfinden wir die wir nur noch in unseren zimmern drin vor den bildschirmen auf die welt hinschauen wir überschussopfer die wir von allem längst genug von allem viel zu viel wir hier berichten völlig außer uns wir hier berichten völlig außer atem dass alles am ende einfach viel zu viel am ende einfach alles viel zu viel von allem</p> <p>(<i>antigone</i> 7)</p>	<p>we again breathing heavily moaning panting</p> <p>we completely besides ourselves we overinformed over discussed out spelled thought to the end we hipster victims we expelled from history we end-time assassins we planetary latecomers we intensity-addicted identity denying in intoxication searching for identity we who only</p> <p>invent ourselves in the face of others we who only in our rooms in front of the screens watch the world</p> <p>we surplus victims who have long since had enough of everything too much of everything we here report completely besides ourselves we here report completely out of breath that everything in the end simply way too much in the end simply too much of everything</p> <p>(<i>antigone</i> 7)</p>
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Köck's word choices, as well as his semantically compressed writing style and his extensive use of enjambments and semantic ambiguity, make it hard to translate his writing into English. For instance, an expression like "wir [...] durch deklinierten" (ll. 5–7), which means "we whose identities have been investigated from all angles, we who have been fully grammatically declined," is only insufficiently translated as "we [...] over / discussed." Other ambiguous meanings show that the chorus speaks with several voices even though they say the same words: "wir von/der geschichte ausgestoßenen" (ll. 11–12) can mean (1) "we who were expelled by history," as in, we live in post-historical times, invoking the universalization of Western liberal democracy and capitalism as the ultimate form of government; or (2) "we who were ejaculated/thrust out by history" as in we who were created/born (and then abandoned?) by history; or even (3) "we who were excluded from and made abject by (Western) history," which is a proleptic third meaning that foreshadows the chorus's eventual transformation into the dead. Köck stated in interviews how important the openness and ambivalence of literature is to



him, as it invites the free association of readers (“2019 – Thomas Köck im Gespräch”). As a result, his dramatic writing at times has a resonance that comes close to poetry and cannot fully be absorbed by listening once to a performed version of his lines.

In theatrical productions, the frequent enjambments invite performers to a particular rhythm of speech characterized by short stops within syntactic units. Often, these enjambments help to accentuate one particular word, as in the repeated highlighting on “wir”/“we” above that either stands alone as in lines 1 and 3 or is the final word of a line that syntactically belongs to the next verse as in lines 4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 17, 20, and 24, thus creating an almost ritualistically repeated narcissism that initially stops the chorus from speaking about anything other than themselves. Eventually, after 25 more lines, they manage to report how they encountered the dead at the beach:

wir	we
sehen dass sich die toten vor den toren sammeln	see that the dead at the gates gather
der	the
sand auf dem wir sonst halt liegen selfies	sand on which we usually lie shooting selfies
schießend	
blutüberströmt aufgebläht und aufgequollen	covered in blood bloated and swollen
liegen sie	they lie
da die überflüssigen körper wen	there the redundant bodies who
gehen die denn an warum	do they concern why
liegen die da die toten das	do they lie there the dead that
sind doch viel zu viele die da jetzt liegen schafft	there are far too many lying there now get
sie weg man	them out of here
will das doch nicht sehen	don't want to see that
wir	we
sehen eh schon viel zu viel wir	see too much anyway we
müssen so vieles schon sehen warum	have to see so much already why
müssen wir die toten denn jetzt auch noch	do we have to put up with the dead too
ertragen	
[...]	[...]
europa liegt am strand und	europe lies on the beach and
da liegen sie	there they lie
da liegen sie (8–9)	there they lie (8–9)

Again, a close reading of the first few lines is illuminating to demonstrate Köck's poetic principle: The word choice and syntactical construction “wir / sehen dass sich die toten vor den toren sammeln” imagines the dead both as passive, inanimate bodies that accumulate and are collected (in German: “die sich *ansammeln* und *gesammelt werden*”) and as active agents who assemble in front of the city's/Europe's “gates.” The English term “gather” captures this double meaning: “we / see that the dead at the gates gather.” The text continues “the / sand on which we usually lie shooting



selfies / covered in blood bloated and swollen they lie / there the redundant bodies.” In the German version, “schießend” (“shooting”) is privileged by its end position before an enjambment, and “blutüberströmt” (“covered in blood”) must characterize the sand rather than the corpses that are described directly afterwards as “bloated” and “swollen,” which creates a moment of hermeneutic irritation when reading and in production would require a short break for clarification to allow audiences to understand a dense text that is presented breathlessly, as the chorus emphasizes in their first words: “we / again breathing heavily moaning panting.” Köck’s careful diction as well as the syntactic and rhythmical construction thus continue the double scenario of bloated bodies washing ashore and a mass of living bodies that were shot in front of the gates on the beach, covering the sand with their blood. Through this double meaning, Köck’s scenario opens up associations with far-right politicians in Germany and Austria who insinuated that shooting refugees could be a way to secure Europe’s borders. At the same time, the insertion of “selfies” into the process of shooting marks the chorus’s egocentric unwillingness to acknowledge the disturbing presence of the dead. They express their desire for blindness, for the *τύφλωσις* announced as the third subtitle on the play’s title page, and for unbothered calm. The opening makes clear, however, that the original meaning of “requiem” as “rest” is inverted in Köck’s version: his funeral song is interested in the disquiet, also in the linguistic restlessness, caused by the dead. The prologue thus prepares the ground for the ensuing play by raising the question of how the characters, chorus, and audience ought to deal with the insistent, annoying, horrifying presence of the dead: which requiem are they willing and able to perform?

### **THEATRICAL FUNERAL SONGS AND PERFORMATIVE GRIEF ACTIVISM**

The prologue makes clear that while Köck composed a highly rhythmic, musical score, *antigone. a requiem* is hardly a holy mass in commemoration of the dead or an artistic ritual with sacral overtones that offers a spiritual equivalent. Instead, Köck offers a theatrical requiem as a political intervention and thus comes close to the way in which Sophocles used the funeral song for his *Antigone*, as I will argue. To understand Köck’s political concerns, an additional title in his list of inspirations, itself part of the *Antigone* network, is relevant: Judith Butler’s study *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004). Butler’s book, written in response to 9/11 and the so-called War on Terror, examines the politics of commemoration for those who died in the attacks: while American citizens were intensely mourned, identified by name, and memorialized in rituals and monuments, most of the victims of America’s fights abroad remain

unknown and unaccounted for in the United States. Butler draws attention to the political significance of mourning practices:

Although we might argue that it would be impractical to write obituaries for all those people [who died because of the War on Terror], or for all people, I think we have to ask, again and again, how the obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed. It is the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition, the means by which a life becomes noteworthy. As a result, we have to consider the obituary as an act of nation-building. The matter is not a simple one, for, if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note. It is already the unburied, if not the unburiable. (*Precarious Life* 34)

The idea of the unburied and potentially unburiable is highly evocative of Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Butler's chapter quotes twice from the play, after her earlier study *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (2000) offered a detailed reinterpretation of *Antigone* in light of kinship structures.

Re-employing Butler's ideas for the current European context, Köck's play explores the failures of European migration policies, which neither avoid the deaths of refugees nor acknowledge them as publicly grievable lives. Köck is also concerned with the sheer multitude of deaths that need to be remembered. Taking Butler's argument about the large number of deaths into account, which makes mourning them appear impossible for "practical" reasons, Köck replaces the single brother of Sophocles' play by uncountable dead refugees, possibly playing on the "poly," "many," contained in the name "Polyneices" (which means "many quarrels"). We saw that in the prologue, the chorus emphasizes the multitude of the dead, "way too many" ("viel zu viele" *antigone* 7), which add to the overburdening of contemporary Europeans who fashion themselves as "surplus victims / who have long since had enough of everything too / much of everything" (7). The play ends with an epilogue by Ismene in which she attempts to downplay the importance of the "few" dead, but inadvertently begins to count up to "the thousands yet uncounted" (117). Köck's refiguration of the requiem as tragic conflict transforms Butler's theory in so far as, in his version, the denial of the dead leads to a heightening of their visibility rather than their disappearance from public attention: Köck's *Antigone* does not cover her brother's body with earth but, as Köck's messenger recounts, instead frees the dead from their anonymous body bags meant to hide them from view and drags them from the beach into the city to confront the citizens with the sight and smell. As a consequence, the citizens stay at home because they want to avoid "the city of the dead" (31) in which corpses cover the streets.

In its political aim, namely, to draw attention to the otherwise neglected deaths of refugees at Europe's borders, *antigone. a requiem* belongs to a group of plays, performances, and artworks that share this concern. For instance, in a 2015 project called *Die Toten kommen (The Dead are Coming)* by the Zentrum für Politische Schönheit (Center for Political Beauty) – a group of seventy activist artists who characterize themselves as “an assault troop that establishes moral beauty, political poetry, and human magnanimity” (*Center*) – performers dug graves in the square between the German Parliament and the Chancellery for the unknown refugees who had died at European borders. The researchers of the Center reported that many of the bodies washed ashore could have been identified but they were instead buried as unknown in Italian cemeteries (Lewicki 281). To counter this, for a second project, the members of the Center managed to identify the bodies of two Syrian refugees who had drowned, contacted their families, brought the bodies to Germany, and had them buried in Berlin cemeteries with a Muslim ritual that was attended by family members via an online stream (see also Rygiel). Leading politicians in the German government were invited to the funeral but did not attend, their empty personalized seats becoming part of the performance. The project was criticized for “faint traces of an orientalist imaginary,” since “the artists feature as puppet-masters and refugees remain at the receiving end of their charity” (Lewicki 283), but it nonetheless managed to raise considerable public attention for migrant deaths in and beyond Germany, as the performance led to imitations all over Europe. As Aleksandra Lewicki recounts in her insightful discussion of the performance, “[f]or a few days, the hashtag #dietetotenkommen [the dead are coming] became the most popular in Germany. Hundreds of graves in honour of unknown refugees were set up in over 70 German cities, but also in other countries, including Austria, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, Romania, Sweden, Latvia and in front of the British Parliament in London” (285). Several reviews that are prominently featured on the Center's website compared *The dead are coming* to Sophocles' *Antigone* (Widmann and Wildermann). In comparison to such “grief activism” (Stierl 174; see also Lewicki 283) that deliberately intermingles fact and fiction, ritual and performance, and that draws a sensationalist frisson from the (alleged?) presence of real refugee corpses, Köck's performance aims at “counter-memorialisation” (Stierl 184) of the refugees who died at Europe's borders in a different, decidedly aesthetic, register, that of tragedy, in which the mourning song has had political importance since Antiquity.

Sophocles repurposed the social ritual of the funeral song, the *kommos*, as Antigone sings her own dirge when she walks toward her grave, thus making clear that Creon ordered her death, and not, as he himself declared, her life in captivity. As Simon Goldhill pointed out, this entry “is an immediate sign

of the oddness of her ritual action, allowed by her strange circumstances: it is not normal to sing one's own *kommos*. The traditional *kommos* is antiphonal, and involves consolation from the group to the individual mourner as well as shared, often incantatory, expressions of grief" (110). Antigone herself emphasizes her isolation as she has to march toward "to the high- / Heaped prison of my / Tomb" (Sophocles, ll. 904–5) "un- / Lamented by any / Friends" (ll. 847–48), "Without anyone's / Weeping" (l. 875). The chorus follows the usual metric form of the *kommos*, answering Antigone's lines with anapaestic stanzas (Goldhill 110), but their pity for Antigone soon shifts to criticizing her for comparing herself to a goddess, Niobe, and for her "self-willed temper" that caused her destruction (Sophocles, l. 873). Rather than offering a form for unification via compassion and shared grief as is typical of the *kommos*, Antigone's lament here involves "a delicate and subtle interplay" with the members of the chorus, who "switch between consolation and condemnation" while Antigone oscillates between asking for compassion and distancing herself from the living (Goldhill 110). As Goldhill concludes, the *kommos* "maps a flowing relationship between chorus and young girl, from conversation and consolation through to moral equivocation and even condemnation, and isolation" (112). Through this ambivalent reaction, the funeral song activates the audience in the theatre, who are confronted with multiple options for reacting to Antigone, with "a multi-voiced score of shifting sympathies from a group of individuals" (113). The complexity of the scene is further increased by the fact that Creon watches the encounter between Antigone and the chorus, unmoved by her dirge and impatient to stop it. As Helen Foley argues, Antigone here employs a conventionalized expression of public grief as a form of political protest against Creon's rule: she "uses lamentation to carry her point assertively in a public context that might otherwise have silenced her speech," which is an example of what Foley describes as "the potentially revolutionary force of women's role in rituals performed for the dead" (*Female Acts* 32–3). Bonnie Honig has also argued that Antigone's lamentation can be understood as "an essentially contested practice, part of an *agon* among fractious and divided systems of signification and power" (2).

Like Sophocles' dramatic repurposing of the *kommos* – not as unification through shared grief but as "an emotionally and intellectually conflicted exchange, which engages, provokes and upsets the audience" (Goldhill 113) – Köck's play, as announced in the title, turns its entire action into just such a conflicted requiem. However, even though it connects Butler's and Sophocles' interest in the political affordances of public mourning as a form of protest, Köck's version does not aim to trigger an affective response from the audience. Eschewing psychological realism, spectators are neither invited to suffer with Antigone nor are the dead refugees ever personalized or their stories

narrated. Instead, they remain a depersonalized multitude, demanding recognition. This differentiates Köck's play from other current rewritings of *Antigone* that use the play's lament to engage with the losses caused by migration. For instance, *Antigone of Shatila*, devised by the director Omar Abusadaa and the playwright Mohammad Al Attar, both of whom fled Damascus, used Sophocles' tragedy for a performance with thirty female Syrians living in Beirut's refugee camp Shatila who reflected on their own experiences via the character and story of *Antigone*. The production, which was shown in various versions in Beirut, Marseille, and Hamburg between 2014 and 2016, impressed reviewers with the emotionality of the untrained performers and the shocking circumstances of their war and displacement experiences (Lang and Lange). As Liz Tomlin elucidated regarding a related theatre project, these performances are based on an "empathy operation" that aims primarily at an affective rather than reflective reaction and has its own psychological, social, and political complications (Tomlin 129; see also 147 and Stuart Fisher). In contrast, Köck's play analyses European immigration discourses and policies in a predominantly cognitive and confrontational rather than affective manner, and as a decidedly aesthetic theatre project aims at a distance for reflection rather than the intensification of emotional involvement. This distancing from the characters also means that Köck's requiem-as-tragedy evokes neither *phobos*, *eleos*, nor catharsis and thus departs from the canonical identification and reception patterns of tragedy.

### IMPOSSIBLE MOURNING? DOMOPOLITICS AND EXTENDED GLOBAL FAMILIES

How can a theatrical requiem that refrains from inviting compassion mourn for a depersonalized multitude? Köck has his protagonist take on this challenge in her larger-than-life identification with the dead. In her very first scene Antigone programmatically states, "[M]y life belongs to the dead" (15), repeatedly declares, "[T]hese are our dead" (15, 17, 42), and eventually, she dies for her cause. Maurice Stierl uses the term "'impossible' acts of identification" to account for grief activism's concern with the unknown dead (174) – and this term might also be fruitfully applied to the "impossible" identification, compassion, and acknowledgement of responsibility to the point of self-sacrifice that Antigone represents. Antigone's radical identification with the dead unsettles political reasonability, thus actualizing and even heightening the radicalism of Sophocles' heroine (see Lehmann, *Tragedy* 186). It remains incomprehensible to the other characters on stage (her sister Ismene calls her "insane" 19), and possibly to some audience members, too. Functioning like an allegory for a self-critical European historical awareness, Antigone poses the ethically urgent and politically difficult question of how narrowly we conceptualize the group that is "ours / our own" (45) – and hence, those whom we

will adequately bury and mourn. Arguing that the dead are an essential part of Europe and that their presence exposes the limits of a too restricted definition of “humanity love family the state / the values this continent” (45), she fights Creon’s exclusive, nationalist approach that has been labelled “domopolitics” in political theory to describe the “fateful conjunction of home, land and security” (Walters 241). Such a politics understands the state as a home that has to be protected, while at the same time, this protected, excluding home attempts to expand and to subdue others. Köck’s play emphasizes both these aspects of domopolitics: the colonial past and the present neo-colonial economic exploitation are part of the globalized belief in “thebes worldwide” (*antigone* 20), while the home state itself is secured by walls and barbed wire to avoid backlash from its own imperialism.

Whereas Köck’s *Antigone* opposes Creon’s domopolitics, in Sophocles’ version, her position is different. As Debra Bergoffen points out, in this regard *Antigone* is not the idealized freedom fighter into which she has often been turned in adaptation and interpretation history. *Antigone* has a remarkably narrow concept of kinship when she states that she would not have risked her life for the burial of her husband or her own child, but only for the children of her dead parents, created by an incestuous and hence unusually close relation (Sophocles, ll. 967–70). She thus reflects and takes further the intimate setting, as *Antigone* is one of the few Greek tragedies in which the entire dramatis personae come from the same inland community. As Edith Hall has put it, “[i]t is as if the incest which created *Antigone* [...] has psychologically infected the entire population” (307). In Bergoffen’s view, Sophocles’ *Antigone* therefore stands for “a politics that continues to include some at the expense of others” (A255): “What plays out in *Antigone* is not the scandal of speaking for one’s own but the destructive effects of speaking *only* for one’s own,” (A256).

In contrast, Köck’s *Antigone* pleads for a radical extension of the concept of family when she is ready to sacrifice her life for the sake of the dead refugees. She thus represents what Bergoffen envisions as the “construct of an extended or overextended family” (A256). Similarly, Richard Beardsworth employs *Antigone* to conceptualize a modern trans- or post-national ethical union of the living: “a community of the equality of life that is not given in any specific institutional form” (105). The question that arises from Bergoffen’s notion of an overextended family and Beardsworth’s idea of an ethical community constituted beyond institutions is whether such a broad conception of community makes a concrete politics of saving lives at borders less feasible. Does this family of humankind eschew possible political action and ultimately remain a utopian concept? And shouldn’t we be more concerned about the living refugees who arrive in Europe rather than commemorating



the dead bodies? As Stierl observes in his article on grief activism, “[w]hile commemorations for unknown others may facilitate a post-mortem apprehension of a ‘life that has been lived,’ they come, in a sense, always-already too late, the life has been violently taken and the manifest absence of another signifies an enduring failure” (187). Is Köck’s strategy to rewrite *Antigone* as a requiem also part of this enduring political failure?

One way to address this question is to remind ourselves that theatre’s ethical and political contribution does not necessarily derive from a direct, concrete intervention into politics. Instead, its aesthetic frame offers a space for reflection and critical distance – for instance, a possibility to think community beyond the feasibility of concrete political steps or the time to ponder on the proper treatment of the dead as one way to come closer to a better treatment of the living. In this vein, Hans-Thies Lehmann’s exploration of ancient (in his view, predramatic) and postdramatic tragedy emphasizes tragedy’s potential for ambiguity, interruption, and suspension of the logic that usually guides our thoughts and actions. He singles out *Antigone* as a model that shows how a focus on the demands of the dead distorts the rational and calculating logic of power, the state, and the laws:

The dead remain with us: this is one of the basic experiences of all tragedy. The circumstance lends tragedy its dynamism in the present day, too: what would happen if forms were no longer available to satisfy the claims of the dead beyond political distinctions of friend and foe? Tragedy asks this very question. Society endangers itself when it assumes the role of Creon – who makes the same rules apply to the dead as to the living – and is unable to conceive of a gap, a suspension or a flaw within the logic of power and law. (*Tragedy* 177)

For Lehmann, all tragedy and in particular *Antigone*, offers a form and a forum in which political binaries can be suspended and alternatives beyond political rationality can be considered (178). Köck’s postdramatic requiem reactivates *Antigone* for this reason, too: to create a theatrical requiem that interrupts and suspends the current logic of power and law in order to reflect on current politics through European necropolitics.

The difference between activism on the streets and aesthetic interventions like Köck’s became particularly tangible during the opening night of *antigone. a requiem* at Vienna’s Burgtheater in September 2020, which coincided with protests in front of the theatre against Chancellor Kurz’s decision not to take in refugees from the Mória refugee camp in Greece, which was in flames. While the protesters on the streets voiced concrete political demands such as “Save lives. Moria is Murder” or “We have room,” inside the theatre, a reflective space was opened up that presented conflicting viewpoints and suggested that theatre offers a “non-room,” a “u-topos”: as I have shown,



Köck's theatrical *antigone* cosmos encompasses the utopian belief in a globally extended family as well as dystopian scenarios of corpses covering the streets so that in a sense Köck's Antigone stages apocalyptic street activism within the larger frame of the tragedy-as-requiem. Köck expressed his sincere interest in the art of theatre as a unique forum of political reflection in his 2019 poetics lecture. Here, he makes clear that he seeks the "sperrigkeit" of theatre art, that is, the larger-than-life, the unwieldy, the unmanageable, and a theatrical politics that takes seriously the autonomous theatrical means to reach beyond clear-cut political messages. In his view, even state-subsidized theatres too rarely allow for this truly artistic theatre form because they are implicated in capitalist audience targeting as "tightly timed / somehow currently only shrinking / no-failure-allowed business" (Köck, *ghost matters*; my translation). During his performative lecture, he left eleven blank pages and a long silence "in remembrance of all these unimaginable / but possible / socio-political conditions" to mark the reflective and imaginative space that is needed for political reform but so difficult to open up in late capitalist "vorstellungsräumen," meaning both performative spaces and imaginative spaces (Köck, *ghost matters*; my translation). The title of his lecture, "ghost matters," and his interest in the "dead possibilities" of theatre emphasize Köck's general interest in the residues of the past that linger and haunt the present and future, waiting to be activated for an as yet unimaginable future. It has direct links to *Antigone*'s complication of the binary of the living and the dead that Köck was working on at the time he gave the lecture (Köck, *ghost matters*).

### **ANTIGONE'S FUNERAL SONG FOR EUROPE'S UNDEAD – AND FOR ANTIGONE?**

Köck's interest in the ghostly already signals another way of addressing the question of what political and ethical contributions a post-mortem theatrical requiem can offer beyond lamenting political failure. How dead are Köck's dead, and how alive are the living? This final section of my article will pay closer attention to a conceptual notion of death as a gradual, liminal state of public unintelligibility that cultural and political theory has developed in conversation with *Antigone*, and which Köck's play employs and modifies for its own aesthetic, ethical, and political concern. Starting from the observation that some deaths cause intense public attention and are followed by collective mourning whereas others are not considered losses and are marginalized, Butler asks what status these lives had before they ended: how do different degrees of social recognition and intelligibility lead to a spectrum rather than a clear binary between being alive and being dead? How do they create a liminal state between being socially alive and being socially dead? Inspired by Butler's work, Köck's refiguration of Polyneices as refugees also offers such a conceptual, gradual understanding of death. For instance, when the chorus

states, “what / sinks below twenty metres has no / face no name no / language drifts outlawed between / the fish what / sinks below twenty metres does not concern us” (*antigone* 20), the play makes clear that the drowning of refugees stands for their general sinking away from public attention, which includes the lack of responsibility taken for saving the shipwrecked or for a proper burial of the dead, but which also concerns a general lack of interest in their lives before their displacement or in their lives in refugee camps outside of Europe. Neither the dead nor the refugees living for years in camps under inhumane conditions concern “us” in Europe: regarding public attention and responsibility, they are (relatively) dead to us.

In her analysis of how violence against those who are regarded as not-quite-alive is played down, Butler has observed that they nonetheless “have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never ‘were,’ and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. [...] The derealization of the ‘Other’ means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral” (*Precarious Life* 33–34). The program for the Burgtheater production quotes this passage under the heading “*Auf ewig gespenstisch*” (“Interminably spectral”) because it elucidates the central metaphor for Köck’s requiem, which explores this liminal state between being alive and being dead for its characters, including the chorus, and which eventually stages the uncanny return of the undead migrants. Butler’s observation that the (un)dead “must be negated again (and again)” can even be understood as a dramaturgic and linguistic cue for Köck’s requiem, which shows how the characters attempt to talk away the presence of the dead in repetitive phrases.

As in Sophocles’ version, Köck’s Antigone from her first entry displays an intense acknowledgement of her ties to the dead, which puts her in a liminal state between the living and the dead that is finally realized by her entombment while she is still alive. Recent criticism has called attention to a word choice by Sophocles that associates Antigone’s liminal state between life and death with the liminal state of migrants: she repeatedly calls herself “*metoikos*,” which means a stranger with the right to live in the polis, a resident alien. Two main explanations for why a ruler’s daughter would call herself “*metoikos*” have been offered: her origin might explain why she feels strange in Thebes, as she is “anything but the ordinary offspring of a legitimate union between two Thebans” (Bakewell 81). What is more, doomed to slow death in her cave, Antigone feels caught between life and death, exiled from both spheres. As Andrés Fabián Henao Castro points out in an article that employs *Antigone* to develop a political theory of the stranger, this liminal state between life and death relates to the stranger’s lack of home (313). Drawing on Hannah

Arendt's theory of statelessness, Castro analyses the political and psychological effects of what he calls the "contagious potency of the dead body of the exile" (314): He argues that the refusal or inability to bury the dead in a proper form haunts the living and eventually kills them, at least metaphorically speaking. In Köck's version, which starts with a motto taken from Arendt, Antigone not only radically accepts her own close ties and her indebtedness to the dead, she also eventually succeeds in convincing the chorus of their inescapable interconnectedness with the dead. While the chorus initially was caught in egocentric self-reflection exemplified by "selfies," they gradually, in another comparison with Narcissus, acknowledge their kinship with the dead and their historic responsibility for the current migration: "we see our / selves in the water there trembling in front of / ourselves in the water there trembling in front of / what man / makes possible" (78).

For this process of shared mourning work, Köck rewrites Antigone's *kommos*. In contrast to Sophocles' version, Köck's Antigone does not lament her imminent death in a dirge, and she hence has no moment of anagnorisis in which she regrets her strong-willed determination, expresses her vulnerability, or appeals to the chorus's and audience's compassion. Instead, she adopts an utterly unsentimental, combative position, while Köck reassigns the *kommos* to the chorus who lament their own fate after they acknowledge their historical guilt. Just as Sophocles' chorus criticizes Antigone for her transgressive comparison with Niobe in her lament, Köck's Antigone confronts the chorus because of their inert, politically irrelevant, and hypocritical self-pity: "can't you think / of anything else but / watch history lamenting / pleading until / your burden of guilt which you / caused will return" (81). When she continues to mock the chorus for "your / indulgence in your own / hopelessness your / white victim cult your / European pretence of cosmopolitanism full / of self-pity and blindness and / another undiscovered market which / you can exploit mournfully" (81), she also ridicules ancient tragedy itself as the foundational European ritual of sacrifice whose global export as carrier of European values, philosophy, and art legitimized colonial exploitation and whose tragic script of a predestined fate is now used for European self-exculpation. Therefore, in her final appearance, Antigone sings tragedy's dirge – or, more precisely, the dirge for the political appropriation of tragedy as a carrier of European superiority and exemplarity, historically used to legitimize colonialism as a project of enlightenment and progress and now ignoring global economic exploitation. In her earlier encounter with Creon, in which she points out how Creon's European domopolitics contributes to global human and ecological exploitation and destruction, she asks, "what were / the values once which we / carried into the world so greatly now / these values come back here rotten bloated [...] / [...] / [...] what are they still talking about these values

in the face of the dead" (44–45)? Köck's plurivalent line, "these values in the face(s) of the dead" ("diese / werte im angesicht der / toten" in the German version) suggests that facing migrant deaths means to acknowledge how foul and rotten the European values have become and that the dead as Europe's revenants carry these values inscribed in their bloated faces. Therefore, instead of singing a mourning song for herself during her final appearance, Köck's Antigone sings a scornful funeral song for the undead European values as allegedly crystallized in *Antigone*. Köck's play not only recomposes *Antigone* but also forensically examines a decomposed *Antigone*, the undead afterlife of Sophocles' tragedy that returns as a revenant to haunt Europe.

In this movement toward the spectral and decomposed, Köck's chorus is eventually transformed into the dead in a process that starts with their reluctant identification with the dead and ends in a complete transformation: As Köck's stage directions for the final scene laconically note, "*chorus enters. now chorus of the dead. filthy. zombified. mummified. wet.*" (110). Köck's transformation of the chorus of increasingly deadened Europeans into the chorus of reanimated dead migrants merges the two roles and functions that the chorus had in ancient Greek tragedy as "either space defenders or space invaders" (Hall 29) and offers a dramaturgic equivalent to observations like Castro's that "[the] living death will turn those who are alive into cadavers by their inability, as living bodies, to provide a proper burial for [their] already inert corporality" (314). Thus, while Köck's Antigone and Creon have no moment of insight before their deaths, the chorus's gradual acknowledgement constitutes the slow anagnorisis of the drama. This exchange highlights how Köck's recomposition rearranges the formal elements of tragedy and thereby creates new aesthetic and political affordances, as the anagnorisis of the chorus of Europeans asks European audiences to (re-)consider their own position. It is part of the play's overall interest in reconceiving the refugee as a European revenant and in appealing to the European audience's responsibility, strategies that Jeff Casey has recently analysed in this journal as transformative and ethotic approaches that are often interlinked in the current theatre of migration: while transformative strategies seek to reconceive the concept of the refugee, the ethotic invites audiences to acknowledge their relationality towards refugees (Casey 351 and passim).

For Creon, the invading reanimated dead are a violent nemesis, the final step of his catastrophe. Clinging to his cold political reason, Creon hardly takes time to mourn Antigone's, Haemon's, and Eurydice's deaths and instead declares them to be "sacrifices" for political "progress" (*antigone* 107). Köck's Creon thus, like Antigone, denies the *anagnorisis*, the insight into his responsibility for his downfall, which gives Sophocles' Creon the quality of a second tragic hero next to Antigone. However, Köck's messenger has to report a fourth blow to Creon, namely the return of the dead in such massive numbers that

the seafront is turned into an ocean of corpses: “barely / water still fit between them” (108). Köck’s hyperbolic imagery here takes up the sticky metaphors of the “waves,” “streams,” and “floods” of refugees that have frequently been used in the debate over migration (see Jeffers 25–90) and turns them into a Gothic, surreal horror scenario intensified by the reanimation of the dead:<sup>3</sup> “hardly arrived at the beach then / they lay still for a moment then they opened / their eyes caught sight of me on the cliffs / and followed me” (108); “the dead are coming back they / have long been standing in the city / they have long been thundering at / your gates they have followed you all the way / here” (109). Castro’s argument that the refusal to bury the dead in a proper way infects the living with deadliness is here turned into a scenario of aggressive attack. When they enter the stage, they repeat the former chorus’s initial lines and then continue to describe their state of exclusion:

we  
again breathing heavily moaning panting  
we  
completely besides ourselves we  
excluded we  
surplus we  
superfluous we  
we who have passed away at your gates we  
created by you we  
sum of your business games we  
sum of your calculations we  
surplus postnational postglobal we  
one after the other we  
deported aborted chased away  
locked out made up we  
who are your others all the time [...]

(*antigone* 110)

Rather than exiling Creon from the polis as in Sophocles’ version, Creon’s recklessly protected space here is invaded by those whom he tried to keep out. Thus, the revenants become an active, aggressive part of this *agon*, demanding acknowledgement and taking revenge: they finally kill Creon in a gesture of enforced inclusion into the collective body of the excluded.

Creon’s complete catastrophe, his death resulting from the failure of his domopolitics and necropolitics, leaves Ismene as the only survivor among the corpses on stage and thus gives her a prominence that we can also see in other recent African and European *Antigone* reworkings (see Wald). Directly addressing the audience, Köck’s Ismene has the final words which in Sophocles

belong to the chorus, and she takes over the chorus's representation of contemporary Europeans after they are transformed into the (un)dead. As a hesitant European, she asks herself and thus the audience that must now be part of the "we" that this solitary figure among the dead speaks of:

wegen der paar hier toten wollen wir doch nicht wegen dieser paar toten hier wegen der toten hier wollen wir doch hier nicht wegen der ein zwei drei vier fünf sechs sieben toten wollen wir doch jetzt nicht wollen wir doch wollen wir doch wollen wir doch wollen wir ( <i>antigone</i> 117)	because of the few dead here we do not want because of the few dead here because of the dead here we do not want here because of the one two three four five six seven dead we do not want now we do not want we do want do we want ( <i>antigone</i> 117)
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Once more, because of the different grammatical forms of negation, it is difficult to translate into English the German play on "wollen wir doch jetzt nicht" ("want we not now") which is hesitantly reduced to "wollen wir doch" ("want we yet"), which can both be an interrupted version of the previous negation or a change of heart as in "now we want to after all," and the final "wollen wir" ("want we"), which again can be the interrupted, minimal version of the initial "we do not want to" or the question "do we want to?" For performers, these few lines offer ample opportunities for engaging with the ambivalent, self-questioning, hesitant tone of Ismene's concluding lines. The epilogue thus invites the audience to find their own position in this requiem's spectrum between a radical identification with the dead and ignorant blindness in the face of their fate, between working toward a proper commemoration of the dead that would involve the acknowledgement of the not-quite-alive living migrants and singing the dirge for self-proclaimed European, now undead values as epitomized by *Antigone*. Ending on Ismene's half-phrased question of what it is that "we" plan to do because of the dead, Köck's requiem asks us to commemorate, bury, and reanimate *Antigone* for our current moment in the way that we (do not) want to.

## NOTES

1. All translations from Köck's play are mine.
2. Köck changed only Hölderlin's *ihn*, the singular "him," for Polyneices to the plural *sie* / "they" (Sophocles, trans. Hölderlin 171).
3. On the problematic framing of the current migration debates as an expression of a "migration crisis," see Cox and Wake (140–41).

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