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## Bearing Witness to Traumatized Witnesses: A Reading of *Antigone* from Agamben's Perspective

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### Abstract

This article examines Agamben's thoughts on witnessing, as understood through Auschwitz, within the context of Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*. Agamben understands the relationship between Auschwitz and witnessing through linguistic impossibility. According to Agamben, the transformation of the event into a subjective experience, becoming the subject of transmission rather than narration, pushes the subject into linguistic impossibility. This can place the subject in a situation where they are incomprehensible and inaudible to others. A similar situation occurs in the tragedy of *Antigone*. *Antigone* has failed to bury the bodies of her father and brother appropriately. *Antigone* is a witness to both the events experienced by her father and brother and to their subsequent declaration as outlaws, including herself. This is essentially what makes *Antigone's* witness traumatic: *Antigone* has witnessed, on the one hand, the context of political law that cannot be related to justice and, on the other hand, the way the law makes life fragile. *Antigone's* testimony is not limited solely to the possibility of conveying the events. *Antigone's* testimony concerns the dimension of the relationship between law and life that unites everyone, namely, fragility; therefore, bearing witness to *Antigone* entails an ethical and political responsibility.

**Keywords:** *Agamben, Testimony, Antigone, Law, Life, Fragility, Trauma*

## Introduction

Giorgio Agamben, drawing on the accounts of Primo Levi, a witness to the events at the Auschwitz concentration camp, opens up a discussion on the ethical-political meaning of testimony. Agamben attempts to conceptualize the paradoxical – and therefore traumatic – experience of witnessing, based on the responsibility of 'conveying the uncommunicable'. The witness is a witness because they have experienced a horrific event; however, their experience contains a dimension that cannot be directly grasped by another. This situation creates an *aporia* between the need to convey and the impossibility of conveying. Yet, despite the impossibility of conveying, the witness still bears the responsibility to convey. This is because the witness is the sole reference for recording the horrific event in history. The witness's conveyance is essential for the event not to be forgotten and to be preserved in memory. Therefore, the witness is responsible to history and to others.

However, what the witness has witnessed is an unrepresentable singularity that cannot be conveyed and, therefore, cannot be experienced 'again'. Thus, witnessing reflects the impossibility of language as the testimony of the unrepresentable. The witness is the only subject who can convey what they have witnessed; but on the other hand, since what they recount cannot be recorded in language -and in history- the witness is a stranger.<sup>1</sup> However, their strangeness is not an existential difference; as a witness to a historicity that does not belong to the present, the witness is an outsider who cannot be included in the present. The witness is compelled to speak from within the historicity they bear witness to—and the linguistic nature that makes it transmissible; this compulsion, however, casts the witness outside the present, transforming them into an outsider to the present. The witness, therefore, belongs neither

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<sup>1</sup> In Freudian psychoanalysis, the term 'uncanny' should be understood precisely in this context: it is both an indirect indicator of what is familiar or knowable to us, and a representation of what is different, ambiguous, and anxiety-provoking. Therefore, the uncanny inherently carries a traumatic character; Sveinaeus, 2013:250.

fully to the past they bear witness to nor to the present they are transmitting.

So, who will bear witness to the responsibility that the witness is forced to shoulder with all this traumatic existence? If the witness is the witness to the inexperiencable and untranslatable, who will make their aporetic and traumatic experience translatable? The singularity of the historical event witnessed by the witness cannot be understood from within the witness's linguistic foreignness, so a mediator is needed to represent them in the present. This intermediary bears witness to the proximity between the singularity of the historical event witnessed by the witness and the witness's way of experiencing this event. In other words, the witness's witness is a political subject who will remove the event from belonging to the past and present it as a potentiality that is always possible.

This article aims to demonstrate that the audience in the tragedy of *Antigone* can be considered as witnesses alongside *Antigone* herself, who is also a witness. *Antigone*, while experiencing the pain of being unable to provide a proper funeral for first her father and then her brother, also reflects her position caught between conflicting legal systems. *Antigone* speaks the language and religion of tradition, the ancient cult of ancestors, in opposition to the law of the polis, while *Creon* speaks based on his power, which excludes any law other than that of the polis. *Antigone* does not suffer only because she cannot bury her father and brother's bodies in a 'proper manner'; at the root of her suffering lies a kind of incomprehensibility. *Antigone* is unable to express the natural and ancient reason for her own law against the logic of the police, which has replaced the ancient natural law of kinship. She is seen as a stranger by the logic of the police, which excludes the law that preceded it; her thoughts, her speech, her mourning, and her pain are not accepted as valid by the law of the police. However, *Antigone* strives not so much to make her pain heard as to make it felt by others in the present moment. In other words, *Antigone* seeks witnesses to her own testimony. In this way, *Antigone* will see herself as part of the community she lives in with others. And this is also demanded by *Antigone* because it will enable her to convey her grief and mourning, beyond any claim or demand of legitimacy. However, *Antigone* cannot direct this demand to the city she is a stranger in; therefore, the audience, who can mediate between the past and the possible future, becomes the addressee. While

watching the events of the past conveyed on the stage of tragedy, the audience confronts the burden of being the subject of (social) memory. What is shown to the spectator is not merely an event belonging to the past; the spectator is confronted with the effect of the event extending beyond the time in which it occurred. This is an indication that the event has not ended, that it will haunt the present again, in a different guise, like a ghost. Therefore, the audience is not merely a spectator of the event; as a witness to an unlost past, they will become the transmitter of what they have witnessed—because only in this way can the past be prevented from haunting the present. The spectator's witnessing is a responsibility; however, it is not merely an ethical responsibility. While listening to the traumatic subject who experienced the historical event but is buried in their own pain because they cannot convey this experience to others, the spectator confronts the social and political causes of this experience.<sup>2</sup> In tragedy, the spectator witnesses the limitations of police law, which can only encompass the existing state of affairs, and realizes that justice can only be grasped in that ambiguous interval between an archaic past and a future that is yet to be comprehended. In other words, the tragedy of *Antigone* asserts that a law or claim to righteousness limited to its own time/space world cannot be valid on its own, while warning against the possible traumatic consequences of demanding it.

The tragedy of *Antigone* transforms the testimony of the past into a problem of the present and a possible loss – and pain – of the future. The entire symbolic structure of the tragedy is designed to emphasize the fact that an unrepresentable mourning is the problem of the community. The issue is to transform the untranslatable into the translatable, that is, to draw it into the realm of language's possibility. In this way, pain, mourning, and trauma—even if not fully resolved—become communicable to others, thereby freeing the subject from linguistic impossibility, that is, from radical solitude. The tragedy of *Antigone* shows us that speechlessness at the root of pain stems from a temporal mismatch: *Antigone* mourns not because she cannot bury her father and brother, but because she cannot describe this painful experience, because she cannot make herself expressible.<sup>3</sup> . *Antigone's* loss is

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<sup>2</sup> Cartledge, 2006:21.

<sup>3</sup> Honig, 2009:23-24.

not only her father and brother; she has also lost the community to which she could belong and express herself. Because Antigone is incomprehensible and inaudible, she comes face to face with her own death in the bodies of her dead father and brother.

In her testimony, Antigone harbors the ghosts of the past. Although she appears to be a witness to a singular historical moment, she is in fact the bearer and transmitter of memory. The audience confronts this rootless history in *Antigone*: the stage recalls past events and shows how these events continue to permeate the present. The actors on stage represent the past through their names and costumes, making them both familiar and foreign.<sup>4</sup> The tension between conflicting legal regimes and claims of truth constantly compels the audience to transcend time and language. The audience thus realizes that words and judgments coming from beyond time, which are met with strangeness in the present, also have meaning. What makes the untranslatable translatable, and thus promises to overcome trauma at the social level, is a remembrance left to the responsibility of the audience. This article proposes to understand Agamben's philosophical connection between witness and responsibility through the role of the audience in the tragedy of *Antigone*.

## 1. Witness and Language

Agamben approaches testimony through the aporetic context of Auschwitz. At the heart of this aporia lies the problem that it is impossible to determine with certainty what testimony fully entails. According to Agamben, the witness is the only person who experienced the camp's horrific reality and managed to survive that horror. However, what the witness bears witness to is at a level of reality that is unimaginable.<sup>5</sup> The witness who bears witness to the unimaginable is someone who cannot fully convey what they have experienced – because the witness is the subject of an experience that is too horrific or extraordinary to be believed. Yet the witness is the only person who can convey this horrific reality. The fact that what they convey as a witness to an unimaginable evil is

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<sup>4</sup> Kalaycı, 2014:205.

<sup>5</sup> Agamben, 2017:12.

questioned or disbelieved reflects the aporetic context of testimony<sup>6</sup>.

What the witness says is the only reference for reaching the truth itself, but these accounts cannot fully encompass the reality experienced. This is because testimony does not merely mean bearing witness to a historical event; what the witness testifies to is also the aporetic dimension of the event. In other words, for the witness, reality lies in the gap between the truth of the event and the representability of this truth in language. The witness has experienced the inexperiencable; therefore, it is the transmitter of the untransmittable. The fundamental dilemma underlying the impossibility of testimony is the incompatibility between truth and language. By nature, the witness is expected to reveal the truth of the event in their speech; however, what the witness testifies to is an excess or uncertainty that cannot be put into words. The witness is thus marked by an inability to speak while speaking. This traumatic structure, in a sense, constitutes the rule of the ambivalent nature of testimony. However, the rule here must be understood with reference to another aporia signaled by Agamben through the state of exception.<sup>7</sup> As will be recalled, in *The State of Exception*, Agamben speaks of a state of uncertainty in which the rule and the exception are intertwined. This is the space of uncertainty where a lawless power can impose itself as law.<sup>8</sup> This state of uncertainty is revealed in the fact that, despite being excluded in the state of exception, the excluded thing maintains its connection with the rule.<sup>9</sup> The state of exception, therefore, is not the suspension of the rule, but rather the loss of meaning of the boundary between the rule and the outside.

The witness, by being the witness of the impossible, represents such an exception. The gap between the reality they experience (concrete, material reality) and the reality they can convey (the network of representations of language) imprisons the existential context of witnessing in uncertainty. The witness, as someone who speaks but cannot describe themselves, becomes a representation of an impossibility that further widens the gap between language and truth. Following Agamben's line of thought again, it is possible

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<sup>6</sup> Cohen, 2002:43.

<sup>7</sup> Robert, 2006:41.

<sup>8</sup> Agamben, 2008:55.

<sup>9</sup> Agamben, 2001: 28.

to liken this existential uncertainty of the witness to *homo sacer*<sup>10</sup>. *Homo sacer*, as Agamben points out, is a legal term rooted in Roman law and used to express a life that is 'killable but not sacrificable'<sup>11</sup>. As a life that is killable but not sacrificable, *homo sacer* is an uncertainty where killing is not considered murder, that is, where a human being is accepted as non-human. *Homo sacer* signifies being outside of religious and linguistic representation; therefore, its life is not recognized as human life, nor is its death recognized as a human death. No funeral rites are held for *homo sacer*, nor is mourning observed for it.

*Homo sacer* is too complex to be reduced to a legal status. In his text *Coming Community*, Agamben refers to the term 'any existing thing', which has an ontological connection to *homo sacer*. 'Any existing thing' resembles an example that presents itself only as a substitute for something else<sup>12</sup>. In this sense, 'any existing thing' is an indeterminacy that cannot bear witness to its own singularity. It always comes to life by being associated with other things, by being included in their existence. In other words, 'any existing thing' symbolizes life that cannot be witnessed and cannot be 'saved'<sup>13</sup>. Agamben's idea of 'any' shares a critical commonality with what he says about the ontology of witnessing. Witnessing is an experience related to the dimension of reality that does not fall within the realm of law, that is, of judgment. In other words, what is witnessed is not merely a historical event; it is the experience of the event's dimension that cannot be reduced to the present or to language. The dilemma of witnessing lies in its uncertainty, which prevents it from being understood as a legal matter. This uncertainty stems from an ethical responsibility that testimony indirectly imposes and cannot escape: "the survivor's task is to remember"<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, the witness cannot leave the event behind and always carries it to a place where it does not belong. They can neither remain where the event took place nor continue to exist where they are now.

At this point, Agamben moves away from the experience of the event and turns to the witness's way of experiencing themselves.

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<sup>10</sup> Chare, 2006:42.

<sup>11</sup> Agamben, 2001:18.

<sup>12</sup> Agamben, 2012:20.

<sup>13</sup> Agamben, 2012:17.

<sup>14</sup> Agamben, 2017:27.



He observes that Levi, the narrator of the events at Auschwitz, took on both his own testimony and the testimony of other people he witnessed. In his narratives, Levi points out that those like himself always speak 'on behalf of third persons'. This means that the surviving witness does not consider himself a 'true witness' and therefore, despite his testimony, he is the one who cannot be considered a witness.<sup>15</sup> The witness's experience is, in essence, traumatic; because what is expected of the witness is to be believed to speak in the name of justice and truth. What the witness conveys is, in other words, accepted as complete and exhaustive.<sup>16</sup> However, at the heart of testimony lies a 'threshold of indistinguishability', and this place creates a gap between the internal experience of the event and its objectively comprehensible reality from the outside. This gap, according to Agamben, renders the witness's speech speechless as the uncertainty at the heart of testimony.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Levi and Hurbinek are paradoxically similar: although both are witnesses, they cannot convey what they have witnessed to others. Agamben considers that Levi sees himself as a kind of 'anyone'. Although Levi is a witness, he experiences his existential singularity as an incomprehensible and untranslatable uncertainty. Levi has experienced the untranslatable; however, he lacks the capacity to fully convey what he has experienced. Therefore, Levi is no longer a being capable of conversing with others within a shared life (*zoon politikon echon*). What Levi lacks, then, is not only his linguistic existence but also his political existence.<sup>18</sup> The traumatic existence of testimony cannot be reduced to the possibility of conveying historical events. Trauma also calls for a responsibility that must be assumed by those who bear witness to the witness. Just as Levi bore witness to other witnesses, witness must also be borne to Levi.

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<sup>15</sup> Agamben, 2017:33.

<sup>16</sup> Mocan, 2021:94.

<sup>17</sup> Agamben, 2017:37-38. Here, Agamben refers to a child whom the other prisoners in the camp call Hurbinek. Hurbinek is a 'mute' who cannot express himself or his experiences. Therefore, Agamben refers to his muteness, which undermines his testimony despite his witnessing, that is, the fact that the sounds he makes are deemed meaningless.

<sup>18</sup> Fraser, 1999:403.

## 2. Antigone: Testimony and Trauma

### 2.1. Witnessing in Tragedy

Greek tragedy is a foundational text that presents the political questions of the Greek polis in the form of human drama<sup>19</sup>. In these classical texts, ancient issues are discussed alongside contemporary relevance. A typical feature of tragedy is that it addresses universal human problems without neglecting the particular. Tragedy deals with secrets and obscurities that remain unchanged in a changing world but are always concealed. Understanding truth in accordance with its etymology, as the ancient principle of philosophy dictates, it strives to lift the veil covering the mysteries that permeate the present. As Heidegger emphasizes, tragedy attempts to grasp the truth at the source of the philosophical question, not by transforming it into a philosophical question, but through a poeticization that allows us to question the meaning of being<sup>20</sup>. This poeticization shows that problems relating to the human condition cannot be addressed solely with concepts generated by the mind. In tragedy, the human condition is addressed on the one hand at a historical and political level, while on the other hand, it is evaluated in a mythological context that transcends the historical. In this respect, tragedy is an attempt to bear witness to moments of crisis where the ancient and the contemporary confront each other.

If what constitutes tragedy is a kind of crisis narrative, and if at the heart of the crisis lies the confrontation between the ancient and the modern, then tragedy is, in a sense, founded on the reality of perpetual conflict. MacIntyre rightly says that what makes tragedy meaningful is the struggle between different goods<sup>21</sup>. But what we must really see is not the endless struggle or conflict in tragedy. The idea that the law is not eternal and universal is expressed here as the judicial condition that causes conflict. What causes conflict is the revelation of the valid and limited existence of the law, which is assumed to be the condition of the judgment of truth or justice.

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<sup>19</sup> Schmidt, 2001:254.

<sup>20</sup> McNeill, 2000:171.

<sup>21</sup> MacIntyre, 1984:134-136.

Vernant and Naquet therefore refer to the contingent nature of reconciliation and conflict in tragedy<sup>22</sup>. The reason why conflict cannot be eliminated, or reconciliation cannot be sustained, is the temporal gap between fact and norm, as well as the way this gap is experienced. Tragedy is a place where the human condition is staged, and what is staged here is a crisis of this gap or discord<sup>23</sup>. The metaphorical exclusion of the tragic hero by the law or the abandonment of the hero by fate is the experience of this temporal gap. The hero does not know where to go or whom to turn to in the zone of uncertainty between the law and its violation. For what he is witnessing lies outside the scope of the law to which he is subject and the judgement that derives from it<sup>24</sup>. The hero, therefore, does not experience the gap merely as uncertainty; the gap is a kind of impossibility. What creates this impossibility is the hero's inability to articulate what he experiences as a precondition for judging it.

The impossibility that tragedy reveals through crisis and openness reflects the hero's tragedy as much as it invites the audience to think. Indeed, it is not easy to determine who is right and who is wrong among conflicting demands. The logic of tragedy is based on making this distinction impossible. Therefore, the audience is expected to think rather than just watch. However, thinking does not mean establishing the principles or arrangements necessary to resolve the event. Since the audience witnesses the struggle between conflicting judgments through the hero's state of mind, they bear witness to subjective experience rather than the plot. The event is historical, and, therefore, left behind in time as a fleeting moment. However, experience is transferred to existence through the internalisation of the event's past origins and its spillover into the future. Therefore, the ethical-political context in tragedy arises not from the decision between right and wrong, but from the memory-forming effect of experience<sup>25</sup>. Although experience appears to be something subjective belonging to the hero, it actually belongs to the audience. This is because the hero of tragedy, positioned in the zone of uncertainty between law and transgression, cannot convey his witness to the event and cannot make himself

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<sup>22</sup> Vernant & Naquet, 2012:35.

<sup>23</sup> Segal, 1998:13.

<sup>24</sup> Beardsworth, 1999:39.

<sup>25</sup> Sezer & Kalaycı, 2017:14.

understandable. Consequently, the audience bears witness to the hero's impossible testimony and assumes the responsibility of carrying it forward. What the hero, positioned at the center of the conflict between the law of the police and the ancient laws of tradition, witnesses is not merely the objective image of the event. The hero has taken on the incommunicable experience of the event and represents that which is left outside, incomprehensible, in this conflict. The hero's tragedy, in the zone of uncertainty where the boundary between law and violation becomes blurred, stems from the untranslatable nature of the division between event and experience. The untranslatability of experience can result in the hero's disappearance from memory; this will remove the hero from belonging to the community.

As the subject of the tragic event, the hero is someone who directly confronts the experience of the event. Therefore, what they convey is critically important for understanding the experience of the event. However, what makes the hero's testimony meaningful is another testimony that complements it. What validates the hero's testimony as the speaking/narrating subject is the citizens as witnesses to what is being conveyed. Citizens/spectators learn through tragedy that the problems of solidarity in a singular story can be comprehended<sup>26</sup>. With this structure, tragedy shows that the personal is also socially/politically sourced. Therefore, bearing witness to the experience is as important as learning about the event. As the subject of the tragic event, the hero's testimony requires external witnessing and responsibility because tragedy is untranslatable and incomprehensible. Sophocles' *Antigone* illustrates the potential trauma that arises when such witnessing is absent.

## 2.2. Antigone's Traumatic Witnessing

The tragedy of Antigone recounts the events following the struggle between Oedipus' two sons (Eteocles and Polyneices) for power after his death. Before his death, Oedipus had advised his two sons to rule Thebes jointly, taking turns. However, when it was his brother's turn, Eteocles refused to relinquish power to him. Polyneices then arrived at the city with his army. After both brothers

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<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, 2012:1451b.

die in battle, King Creon orders Eteocles' body to be buried "like a hero who died for his country," while Polyneikes' body is to be left naked "like a traitor to his country"<sup>27</sup>. However, Antigone defies this order and buries Polyneikes' body. In this context, the tragedy stages a dual testimony: the first testimony belongs to Antigone. Antigone witnessed her father, Oedipus, dying silently like a stranger in a foreign land<sup>28</sup>. What Antigone witnessed in Oedipus was the traumatic experience of being a stranger. Oedipus, in a country where he was a stranger, was forced to reveal his identity, but he could not explain himself to anyone<sup>29</sup>. Antigone is a witness to her father's trauma; Oedipus was exiled as the perpetrator of a horrific event and murder. Leaving his homeland transformed him not only into a stranger but also into a dead man. Antigone sees that her father has been declared 'outside the law' in Kolonos. Being outside the law means not only not belonging to that city's law, but also that his word and existence are not counted as those of a citizen, or even a human being. The place Oedipus has gone to resists speech; Oedipus, in this sense, is positioned at a distance from human relations.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, Antigone confronts Creon with the demand to bury her brother Polyneikes' dead body 'properly'. Butler says that this demand is actually realized linguistically by being expressed both against the command of the law and in the presence of the law<sup>31</sup>. By mentioning her brother's name, who, like her father, has been declared lawless (*anomos*), in the presence of the law, Antigone actually makes him memorable and mournable. For Creon, however, Polyneikes does not deserve a proper burial because he is a traitor to his country. Not being buried properly is also a condition for Polyneikes not being remembered. Polyneikes is killed twice; the first time as a corpse that is no longer alive physiologically, the

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<sup>27</sup> Sophocles, 2017:20-25; Tripoula, 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Sophocles, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Oedipus states that he cannot leave the land (Kolonos) where he has taken refuge after committing murder. He is not only a stranger; he has also been forced to leave his homeland and has nowhere else to go. The elders of the city ask Oedipus where he comes from and who he is. Oedipus answers all these questions but asks them not to ask why he came here. However, when the elders learn who he really is, they try to expel him from the country. Oedipus then begs them not to consider him an 'outlaw' (*anomos*) (Derrida, 2020:37).

<sup>30</sup> Knudsen, 2018:70.

<sup>31</sup> Butler, 2007:19; Kakoliris, 2025.

second time as a symbolic death because he will not be remembered and his name will not be spoken. Antigone defied the order forbidding her brother's burial and acted to ensure his symbolic life. Loraux rightly states that Antigone brought the unmourned into the public sphere<sup>32</sup>. This is as much an act of defiance against the law of the polis as it is a step towards exposing its symbolic groundlessness. Antigone's claim is based on an ancient kinship law that takes precedence over the city's law. This claim contains the assertion of invalidating the city's 'temporal' law, that is, its reality existing within a specific time/space plane. Aware of this threat, Creon understands the meaning and existence of the law through the city's political unity.

Creon's discourse is based on the affirmation of the existing order and its acceptance as the supreme law. However, this discourse imbues the existence that gives the law its validity with a kind of mythical character. While Creon places the city's law above the ancient law of kinship, he relies on the police's presence here and now. Yet, in declaring the city's law to be the sole and supreme law, he cannot escape the hubris (*hybris*) of seeing it as above all other laws and claims to truth<sup>33</sup>. With his hubris, Creon also deems Antigone to be lawless (*anomos*). He orders her to be buried alive, but recants this decision when the oracle foretells disaster. However, Antigone takes her own life by hanging herself in the prison where she is held captive. It is not only Antigone who dies; Creon's son Hamion and his wife Eurydice also kill themselves. Creon, the ruler of the city, who rules with the power and authority granted by the city's laws, loses his family.

Kreon has overstepped the mark by preventing the mourning of the dead. What Antigone witnesses in this excess is the symbolic death brought about by the decree forbidding her brother's burial. Kreon's decree is not merely a prohibition concerning a specific event or act. This prohibition has created an area of uncertainty. Creon's decree is a decision about which lives can be mourned, remembered, or spoken of. While the law determines what can be mourned, it also determines who can be killed, that is, who can be considered *homo sacer*. Therefore, fragility is not merely a calamity that can befall anyone, but rather the inherent logic of the law of

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<sup>32</sup> Loraux, 1998:64.

<sup>33</sup> Plescia, 1976:133.

the polis<sup>34</sup>. Antigone witnessed not only her father and brother being declared *anomos*, but also the logic of the police. Her grief cannot, therefore, be assessed within the context of kinship. Antigone is, above all, an indirect victim of a law that dangerously intertwines the personal and the social. When Creon orders her to be buried alive, he has in fact declared Antigone herself *anomos*. Deprived of mourning her brother, Antigone herself becomes someone who cannot be mourned. Antigone is killed before she is killed; pushed outside the law of the polis, made unforgettable, and transformed into a body that cannot be mourned, she shares the same fate as her brother, who is labeled a 'traitor'. However, the fundamental difference between Antigone and Polyneikes is that Antigone faces this while she is still alive. Her brother will not be remembered after his death, nor will he be mourned; Antigone, however, has learned while still alive that she too will be impossible to mourn. This is what makes Antigone's testimony traumatic: Antigone has been labeled an unmournable body by being cast outside the law, but she has also been deprived of language and speech. Antigone cannot speak because her words have no meaning, and she cannot convey her experience because no one before her can understand her. Antigone, like her brother, has been declared outside the law and thus excluded not only from the city's legal order but also from its collective existence. In this state of lawlessness, Antigone is a *homo sacer* whose killing is not a crime. And the tragedy ultimately leaves us with this question: who will bear witness to this traumatised testimony, killed while alive, silenced while able to speak?

### 3. Bearing Witness to the Witness

Antigone, unable to find a place for her father and brother in the community's world of partnership, or realizing that no such place exists, is a victim of her own traumatic experience. The source of Antigone's trauma lies not only in the inability to convey the feelings created by the event; Antigone experiences that she does not belong to a world where she can express herself. Viewed

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<sup>34</sup> Agamben, 2001:164-166.

from this perspective, the tragedy expresses that the origin of personal trauma lies in the traumatic establishment of the political community. It becomes apparent that the absoluteness of the city's law, embodied in Creon, derives from brute force. It also becomes clear that the law is merely an apparatus of political power relations, far removed from the ancient principles of justice and truth. The fact that Oedipus and Polyneices remain unburied is also an indication that all members of the community are potentially vulnerable to being left unburied.

I believe it is important that the *Antigone* tragedy deals with mourning and trauma through the metaphor of being left without a grave. The grave is a symbol that a place is provided even for those who no longer exist in the world of community. It not only makes the dead visible and known within the community, but also provides a support function for the other members of the community. In this respect, being left unburied excludes not only the dead but also the owner of the dead from belonging to the community. In this interval, where the difference between legal and illegal bodies becomes blurred, everyone experiences their own death in the mourning they hold for another. The reality that we ourselves may be exposed to the pain we feel for another accompanies us. This is essentially what makes *Antigone's* experience traumatic: *Antigone* experiences death in her living body because she is deprived of the ability to convey her mourning. For a human being who, as a linguistic being, understands themselves by opening themselves up to others and to others, not being able to speak is death itself. Heidegger defines speech as *logos ousias*; that is, speech is speaking with another about something<sup>35</sup>. As a reader of Heidegger, Agamben also draws attention to the connection between language and the idea of community: living within a community is a linguistic experience in the sense of expressing one's being within it<sup>36</sup>. This linguistic experience is the condition for defining humans as beings who speak with others. What Agamben says with reference to Heidegger does not actually emphasize only the speaking characteristic of humans as political beings. The Heideggerian interpretation of speech says that humans are also audible beings. Speak-

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<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, 2009:15.

<sup>36</sup> Agamben, 1999:35.



ing to another means being heard by another; but this is not hearing; it is understanding<sup>37</sup>. What distinguishes humans from animals—and makes them 'more' political—is not that they produce sound, as animals do, but that they produce meaningful speech (*logos*)<sup>38</sup>.

Human existence, as expressed by Aristotle as an activity, is fundamentally defined by the idea of reciprocity or partnership. Man is human not only because he can speak with others, but because he can be understood by others. This is what distinguishes Antigone's symbolic death from that of Oedipus and Polyneices: while the others experience death as a natural consequence of life, Antigone experiences death within the community as a way of life. Therefore, what Antigone bears witness to cannot be reduced to mere family loss or an insurmountable sovereign power. Above all, Antigone has witnessed the impossibility of community. To witness the impossibility of community, following Aristotle, is to witness the impossibility of one's own existence. Agamben, in *Witness and Archive*, draws attention to this point when he distinguishes testimony from the archive, which is based on the rigid distinction between "the said and the unsaid". According to Agamben, testimony is situated in the distinction between "the possibility and impossibility of speech"<sup>39</sup>. Therefore, the witness is not merely someone whose words are 'heard'; since the witness's speech is the saying of the unsaid, one must look at their words from a different perspective. What makes the witness's speech meaningful is not that they present the event as a documentary, but rather that they convey the event with elements that add to it. Without these additions, the event is merely a historical image; however, through testimony, the event can permeate beyond history, into the present and the future. In this sense, the witness is a sign that the event will not remain a limited experience belonging only to those subjects related to it. The witness is the only person who can speak about the unspeakable and thus make the unthinkable thinkable. The speech of the witness also includes those who cannot speak, who have not been able to speak. In other words, the unspeakable becomes a subject of speech, that is, of shared existence, through

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<sup>37</sup> Finlayson, 2014:114.

<sup>38</sup> Aristotle, 1991: 1-980b23; Aristotle, 1997: 1253a7.

<sup>39</sup> Agamben, 2017:151.

testimony. Testimony can therefore be thought of as an opportunity where those who cannot speak meet those who can, where the idea of community becomes open to being conceived in ways that can encompass different times – and, of course, different legal orders.

This article argues that testimony—and its traumatic experience—possesses a complexity that cannot be reduced to the subjectivity of experience. This is why what Agamben describes in Levi's testimony can be related to Antigone's experiences. For Levi and Antigone, the traumatic experience is not limited to the impact that the events they experienced had on their individual worlds. Both are linguistically alien to the community to which they could convey their experiences -setting aside legal and political elements. Although there is a community to which they could convey themselves, they do not share a common language and universe of meaning with this community. The traumatic nature of the experience, which is particularly evident in Antigone, is the simultaneous occurrence of being able to speak and not being able to speak. The reason for this is that, despite being able to speak, Antigone feels incomprehensible. It is precisely at this point that Honig places another dimension of commonality at the root of Antigone's traumatic experience. According to Honig, the tragedy of *Antigone* shows that the commonality of all humans is not death, but fragility<sup>40</sup>. This fragility recalls a state of exception, as Agamben shows, in which everyone can potentially be accused of being lawless (*anomos*). However, fragility and human suffering are represented on a plane that transcends language. Antigone's tears, lament, and cry are her incomprehensible yet audible voice. Antigone is not a speaking creature (*zoon echon*) but merely a creature that can make sounds.

So, how should we consider the possibilities of bearing witness? This question requires an answer in today's world, where fragility and vulnerability have become almost universal norms. The experiences of refugees, migrants, the insecure, and those deprived of their social and political rights cannot be assessed merely as isolated incidents. These people bear witness to not being considered human, both in their own lives and in the lives of others. Feeling that one may be forced to leave one's home at any moment is not merely a traumatic symptom of living under the fear of war and

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<sup>40</sup> Honig, 2013:17.

violence. This fear encompasses the anxiety of whether one can still preserve one's humanity in the eyes of others when forced to separate from the social and political world. Therefore, the Antigones of our time are 'normal' people who bear witness to fragility and social death in others, but who encounter their own repressed anxieties in this witnessing. Bearing witness to witnesses, then, can be thought of not only as an ethical responsibility, but also as a step towards understanding the existential relationship between oneself and the world. The following lines, in which Kristeva approaches narrative, or transmission, as a kind of 'revelation of who one is', perhaps make it possible to rethink responsibility: "The art of narrative resides in the ability to condense the action into an exemplary moment, to extract it from the continuous flow of time, and reveal a who..."<sup>41</sup>.

### Conclusion

This article, which examines the tragedy of Antigone based on Agamben's thoughts on the witness and testimony, aims to show how the traumatic context of testimony can be addressed at the ethical and political levels. The witness, as Agamben argues, is not so much the subject of an event as the person who experiences the event beyond language. This places the witness in a traumatic situation: the witness is the only person who can convey an incommunicable experience. The witness's words are the sole authority that can document the reality of the event, yet in their speech, the witness conveys the way they experienced the event rather than its reality. This practice of speech is the constitutive effect of a linguistic split between the reality of the event and subjective experience. Although the witness appears to be conveying an event in all its reality, they project themselves outside the event through speech, through which the experience seeps. Like *homo sacer*, positioned as an exceptional figure outside the law, the witness also lives in a zone of uncertainty. The witness does not merely assume the responsibility of transmission or bear the burden of its possibility; they 'await understanding' because they carry the excess of expe-

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<sup>41</sup> Kristeva, 2001:17.

rience that cannot be incorporated into language. Therefore, bearing witness to the witness is the ethical-political responsibility of the community.

What emerges when the witness cannot be witnessed is traumatic. However, this trauma develops on two levels: firstly, the traumatic experience of the subject who experiences the impossibility of transmission. The second is the collective trauma of those who 'hear' the event but cannot fully comprehend its destructive impact or its potential consequences for the future because the experience cannot be incorporated into language. The community, which sees what has happened only as events that have taken place but cannot grasp their place in the experiential world because it cannot incorporate them into language, is therefore unable to make room for the subject of the event or to understand them. The division within the community occurs through the failure to assume the ethical responsibility arising from the linguistic impossibility of transmission. Yet, from the outset, witnessing bears traces of responsibility for the experience towards others rather than the transmission of the event. When the witness conveys the experience they have lived through or witnessed in another, using a language that does not belong to the present, they reflect a sense of duty to prevent the experience from being repeated in the future. In other words, the witness demands to be understood simply because they witnessed it and are the only one who can convey it to us. Without this understanding, the experience would be meaningless, and the witness would be deprived of the opportunity to speak – and to be 'heard' – that is, they would no longer be human.

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