

Peace-in-Arrears: Sacrifice, Memory, and Order in Sophocles' *Antigone* and Komunyakaa's "Facing It"

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Abstract

This paper argues that peace—whether civic or geopolitical—is financed by sacrifice and accrues interest in memory. Through a paired close reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* and Yusef Komunyakaa's "Facing It", we theorize a three-stage economy of sacrifice: the forfeiture of joy, affection, and finally the self. The paper contributes: 1) a reframing of Antigone's burial as liturgical correction rather than mere defiance; 2) a reading of Komunyakaa's speaker as an unwilling conduit, wherein survival functions as protracted martyrdom under racialized optics; and 3) the concept of *peace-in-arrears* to name how the costs of concord migrate from public edict to private nerve. We conclude by extending the analysis to various other writers, including Shakespeare, Fanon, and Du Bois, and situate it in the context of the classical-contemporary relay.

Keywords

Comparative Literature, Antigone, Sacrifice, Memory and Trauma, Necropolitics

1. Introduction: Concord, Sacrifice, and Peace-in-Arrears

Grief and order are purchased at the steep price of human offering; every civilization, whether the ancient polis or our own modern republic, erects its peace upon someone's forfeiture. However, the scar of sacrifice reverberates well beyond the moment of surrender, inscribing itself upon each memory as indelibly as upon stone. Both Sophocles, Greek playwright and author, and Yusef Komunyakaa, eminent American poet, speak to those who are torn and are grappling at the precipice of duty and desire, who are haunted by the unfinished dirges of war, who are searching for a peace that will not erase and dissipate the names of the fallen.

While both authors leverage powerful literary devices to assert that true concord is never granted without loss, in *Antigone* Sophocles casts sacrifice as an act of principled rebellion that seeks to harmonize divine and civic law, whereas in “Facing It” Komunyakaa lays bare a post-war landscape in which sacrifice lingers as an involuntary haunting, revealing that the cease-fire of guns seldom stills the battlefield within.

Guiding the argument is a staged model—joy → affection → self—which unfolds across the body of the paper: Section *The Economy of Joy* reads Antigone’s claim to *equal rites* alongside the poem’s opening “stone/flesh” crisis; *Collateral Love* follows how devotion becomes collateral damage across kinship and comradeship; and *The Final Tribute* examines self-offering and postwar unmaking of identity as the model’s terminal horizon. At the same time, I acknowledge two dominant frames that often organize Sophocles’ play—either a strictly political agon between sovereign and dissident or a familial drama of sisterly piety. Building on (and departing from) those lines of inquiry (Butler, 2000; Hegel, 1977), I propose that Antigone’s act is best understood as a *liturgical correction* that restores funerary *nomoi* (laws) to civic grammar rather than as mere defiance or private loyalty.

2. Related Scholarship

This paper enters the messy intersection of discussions about tragedy, mourning, and political order by placing Sophocles’ *Antigone* in conversation with Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Facing It.” On the classical side, Judith Butler’s account of kinship and law reads Antigone’s defiance as an exposure of sovereign legitimacy itself, where the *oikos* presses against the city’s claimed universality (Butler, 2000). Nicole Loraux’s philology of lament likewise shows how tragic mourning is not merely affective overflow but a civic technology that unsettles, and occasionally re-founds, the *polis* (Loraux, 2002). René Girard’s sacrificial anthropology clarifies the state’s appetite for pacification through exemplary victims; yet Antigone complicates a strictly Girardian paradigm by insisting on ritual parity rather than cathartic substitution (Girard, 1977).

On the modern side, memory studies have recalibrated how we read war’s afterlives. Cathy Caruth names trauma’s belatedness, the way an event insists in consciousness after the fact (Caruth, 1996); Marianne Hirsch’s “postmemory” helps parse how images and gestures—like the woman “brushing a boy’s hair” in Komunyakaa—mediate grief across generations (Hirsch, 2012). Jahan Ramazani’s theory of the modern elegy, alongside Paul Fussell’s analysis of the Great War’s representational rupture, illuminates how lyric forms metabolize mass loss without resolution (Fussell, 1975; Ramazani, 1994). Pierre Nora’s lieux de mémoire, James E. Young’s counter-monumentality, and Kirk Savage’s history of memorial form provide a material vocabulary for reading the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as an active surface where public memory and private nerve continually abrade each other (Nora, 1989; Savage, 2009; Young, 1993).

Recent work extends this frame: Woodley demonstrates how memorial design

can stage communal mourning without closure (Woodley, 2023), while Sylvester theorizes future-oriented memoriality that repositions memory as an ethical project rather than a settled archive (Sylvester, 2023).

Against and across these archives, the present paper contributes three interventions: it reframes Antigone's burial not as sheer defiance but as a *liturgical correction* that naturalizes civic equality; it reads Komunyakaa's speaker as an *unwilling conduit* through whom the dead commute, rendering survival a protracted martyrdom under racialized optics; and it proposes *peace-in-arrears* as a name for the afterlives of sacrifice, whereby the costs of concord migrate from edict to nerve. These moves re-suture classical philology and contemporary memory studies without dissolving the specificity of either text (Garland, 2001; Morris, 1992).

3. Method and Terms

The analysis is anchored in close reading but keyed to three cross-disciplinary terms. First, *economy of sacrifice* designates a triadic progression—joy, affection, self—through which the texts stage what peace demands and where its debt accrues. The term activates both dramaturgical features (stichomythia, choral refrains, scene arrangement) and micro-stylistic devices (anaphora, chiasmic pairings, personifying verbs such as “longs”) as accounting operations that tally loss. Second, *liturgical correction* names Antigone's claim to funerary parity not as idiosyncratic piety but as a normative restoration of right ritual, aligning divine grammar with civic equity; the phrase foregrounds how rite functions as ethical syntax. Third, *peace-in-arrears* denotes the migration of sacrificial cost from public order to private memory: concord appears achieved at the level of law or monument precisely because its unpaid balance is carried on the body and in recollection.

By “*stone/flesh dialectic*” I mean the poem's alternating identifications—“I am stone. I am flesh”—where the Wall's polished granite returns the viewer's image to the field of names, folding bodily presence into inscription (a design premise Maya Lin explicitly articulates) and vice versa (Studio, n.d.; Young, 1993).

Finally, describing Komunyakaa's speaker as an *unwilling conduit* tracks the poet's own testimony about “responsibility in surviving” and survivor guilt, rather than resting on inference (Asali & Komunyakaa, 1994; Komunyakaa, 2010).

These terms let philological precision and cultural theory meet on a common plane. Readings of diction and lineation in Sophocles (e.g., the isocolon “same rites for all”) are yoked to an elegiac-material reading of Komunyakaa's memorial (stone as archive, touch as mnemonic trigger), while insights from trauma and Black studies specify the ethical stakes of visibility and erasure. The goal is not to allegorize tragedy through modern theory but to let each text test the other's claims about order, grief, and the price of concord.

4. Methodology

Corpus and Editions. Primary analyses draw on Sophocles' *Antigone* (Fagles

translation; line citations) and Komunyakaa's "Facing It" (as collected in *Dien Cai Dau*). Secondary materials are cited selectively to frame, not govern, interpretation.

Analytic Steps. 1) *Philological close reading*: attention to verbal texture (e.g., the personifying verb "longs"), syntactic balance (isocolon, parataxis), and dramaturgical pacing (messenger speech, scene placement) to expose how sacrifice is patterned. 2) *Figural and prosodic analysis*: chiasmus, anaphora, caesura, and enjambment are treated as ethical operators—devices that enact equality, partition, or irresolution. 3) *Material-semiotic reading of monumentality*: the Wall's reflective granite is read with memorial studies to show how stone solicits touch, returns reflection, and reorganizes witness. 4) *Trauma and race frameworks*: concepts of belatedness, postmemory, necropolitics, and weathering specify why survival may constitute a slow martyrdom for the racialized veteran (Caruth, 1996; Hartman, 1997; Hirsch, 2012; Mbembe, 2003; Sharpe, 2016). 5) *Comparative synthesis*: the three-stage economy (joy → love → self) is tested across the classical and contemporary scenes to elaborate *peace-in-arrears* as a portable but historically sensitive heuristic.

Scope and Limits. The method privileges textual immanence and readerly phenomenology over comprehensive historicism. It does not claim to exhaust Greek ritual history or the full sociologies of the Vietnam War; rather, it offers a theoretically explicit pair of case studies to refine how we understand the costs of concord across epochs. Ethical guardrails include avoiding aestheticization of harm and foregrounding the differential distribution of grievability that the texts themselves expose.

5. The Economy of Joy: Equal Rites and the Ethics of Concord

Sophocles inaugurates his tragedy by placing sacrifice in an economy of joy, inviting us to watch Antigone wager her own earthly contentment against a vision of celestial equilibrium. When Creon brands her fidelity to Polynices futile, she answers, "Death longs for the same rites for all" (Sophocles, 1989: p. 20). The verb "longs" animates Thanatos with an appetite that outstrips human jurisprudence, while the isocolonic cadence "same rites for all" tolls like a liturgical refrain, erasing every social hierarchy the polis depends upon. In those five syllables, ritual and rebellion collude: Antigone does not merely appeal to divine precedent; she naturalizes equality, rendering Creon's decree ontologically absurd. This syntactic poise dramatizes an ethical axiom, that concord parcelled out by convenience is not concord but blasphemy, so that her refusal of Creon is less an act of insubordination than a liturgical correction. With that being said, that correction demands payment. Namely, by abdicating the ordinary pleasures of life, including marriage, laughter, and continuance, Antigone converts her body into legal tender; her impending ruin is thus neither tragic miscalculation nor heroic flourish but the predictable surcharge the state exacts when private conscience unsettles public order. Sophocles forces us as readers to grapple with the idea that every

city, ancient or modern, subsidizes its peace with a scapegoat's blood. Komunyakaa gorgeously extends this axiom across centuries, revealing through the speaker that the ledger of sacrifice never closes: "My black face fades/hiding inside the black granite... dammit: no tears/I'm stone. I'm flesh" (Komunyakaa, 1988: lines 1-5). Here, the chiasmic twinning of "black face" and "black granite" sutures the veteran's racial identity to the monument's polished surface, exposing how the republic's commemorative optics swallow Black bodies into an opaque facade of nationhood. The sudden "dammit" detonates the lyric hush; its monosyllabic heat registers the failure of wartime stoicism, now curdling into self-reproach. Komunyakaa's enjambed confession, "I'm stone. I'm flesh," fractures subjectivity into opposing states: heroism petrified into public memory, trauma still pulsing in cartilage and nerve. The veteran therefore becomes an unwilling palimpsest on which history overwrites private dread; even the supposed stillness of a memorial cannot still the battlefield within. Meaning, if Antigone surrenders her life in one incandescent gesture, Komunyakaa's soldier sacrifices himself by degrees, donating visibility, pride, and psychic coherence to a nation that records his name only after it has siphoned his future. Together, these texts expose a grim symmetry: Antigone trades happiness for metaphysical justice, while Komunyakaa's veteran discovers that such justice, once secured, cannot redeem the interior wreckage of war. This idea of personal joy thus signifies that while concord may indeed be purchased by sacrifice, its lingering psychic residue of grief, invisibility, haunted flesh, continues to accrue interest in our private hearts and our collective memory. As such, the promise of peace seems to be a promissory note forever in arrears, demanding eternal payment.

6. Collateral Love: Devotion and Ethical Contagion from Thebes to the Wall

While both works expose sacrifice as a levy on personal joy, they also reveal love as the collateral the macrocosm invariably repossesses, a tender currency surrendered whenever divine equity or national allegiance demands tribute. Sophocles crystallizes Antigone's loss in her abrupt severance from Ismene: "No, Justice will never suffer that—not you... I never brought you in" (Sophocles, 1989: p. 21). Here, each successive negative from "no" to "never" to "not" functions like the tightening windings of a funerary cloth, mummifying and shriveling erotic possibility so that a rigor mortis of principle may stand erect. In those clipped syllables, Sophocles stages a profound irony: Antigone's rutilant passion for her brother incinerates every other form of fervor, verifying that fidelity to sacred law can only flower in soil richly composted by personal dreams. Sophocles then enlarges that paradox through the domino suicides of Haemon and Eurydice, a tragic antiphony that transposes Antigone's chosen immolation into unintended grief. By alternating terse stichomythia with sudden narrative excess, Sophocles dramatizes how the "pure" martyrdom that once seemed the apex of moral clarity metastasizes into a plague that devours all familial bonds. In doing so, Sophocles suggests

that justice is divorced from mercy and cannot discriminate between its foes and its own children. Komunyakaa transfers this contagion to a modern reliquary of patriotism, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, where affection is fossilized in unforgiving stone. As the speaker's fingers crawl "down the 58,022 names/half-expecting to find/[his] own in letters like smoke" (Komunyakaa, 1988: lines 14-16), the act of touch mutates into an act of bookkeeping, each embrace a ledger entry balancing survival and loss. The simile "like smoke" suspends every inscribed life between ephemerality and permanence, implying that camaraderie itself has been volatilized: drawn skyward, dispersed, impossible to gather again. But, the moment he brushes "Andrew Johnson," the marble gleams like Italian Pavonazzetto, "white" with a booby-trap's sensation and after-taste (Komunyakaa, 1988: lines 17-18). In turn, Komunyakaa discerns that memory refuses the cold existential stillness of the monument, thereby detonating a chromatic burst that dissipates decades into a gruesome synaptic flare. That is, Komunyakaa's memorial becomes a macabre palimpsest, as the polished granite serves as a mirror whereby each and every visitor can glance inward at their spectral comrades, elucidating that love conscripted by war survives only as shrapnel lodged deep in the psyche, forever threatening to pierce the veneer of hard-won peace. In other words, Sophocles and Komunyakaa both declare that devotion cannot remain good-natured once it is yoked to an absolute cause. Antigone weaponizes filial love to safeguard divine ordinance, thereby annihilating every intimate tie; Komunyakaa testifies to a nationalism so voracious it consumes lovers and loved alike (Mbembe, 2003). They both thus elucidate that true concord, whether juridical or geopolitical, exacts a holocaust of affection: the very bonds meant to humanize us become the first casualties enlisted in war's grotesque reasoning, proving that any peace negotiated through blood carries an interest that compounds in the quiet recesses of heart and memory.

7. The Final Tribute: Self-Offering and the Unmaking of Identity

If Antigone's earlier refusals mortgaged joy and affection, her last gesture forecloses the very deed of selfhood, inaugurating a harrowing economy in which the body becomes both collateral and covenant (Scarry, 1985). That is, Sophocles beautifully positions Antigone's telos not on Creon's public gibbet but within a sepulchral bridal chamber where she was "hanged by the neck in a fine linen noose" (Sophocles, 1989: p. 47). Every lexical choice here compounds the irony: linen, emblem of nuptial purity, now cinches the throat in a perverse wedding to death, while the participial "hanged" suspends her between worlds, literalizing liminality. In repurposing what should have swathed conjugality into a ligature of dissent, Antigone converts her flesh into an anti-decree palimpsest, a silent parchment whose script is written in the torque of her own spine. However, Sophocles refuses a solitary martyrdom; Haemon's self-inflicted blade, "buried... in his body," (Sophocles, 1989: p. 48) stains Antigone's shroud with lover's blood, stag-

ing an inverted consummation wherein eros completes what thanatos began. The bard thus sutures political defiance to erotic despair, arguing that the currency of revolutionary virtue accrues compound interest in innocent bodies; justice, when unmixed with mercy, fertilizes a landscape where every tomb begets another. Komunyakaa refracts this extreme renunciation through the prism of a survivor's afterlife, suggesting that to live on can be to die piecemeal. At the poem's close, a "white vet's image floats/closer" until "His pale eyes/look through mine. I'm a window" (Komunyakaa, 1988: lines 24-27). Here, the verb "floats" elongates the line, mimicking the spectral drift of memory, while the racial adjective "white" glints against the poem's recurrent obsidian palette, dramatizing how national remembrance privileges certain faces even in grief (Hartman, 1997; Nguyen, 2016; Sharpe, 2016). Declaring "I'm a window," the speaker relinquishes corporeal solidity, recasting himself as a pane through which ghosts commute; identity thins into transparent medium, its opacity forfeited to the traffic of the dead. The veteran's partial vision of the amputee, "He's lost his right arm/inside the stone," literalizes the monument's appetite for flesh, as if the granite wall continues to harvest fragments of those it was built to memorialize (Komunyakaa, 1988: lines 27-29). Meanwhile, the idea that a woman who seems to "erase names" is in fact "brushing a boy's hair" (Komunyakaa, 1988: lines 30-31) functions as a chiasmic feint that unveils the impossibility of grooming innocence free of war's residue. The gentle domestic act collapses into futility, for the engraved roll call resists erasure. Komunyakaa therefore insinuates that devotion is an endless labor that will never resurrect the intact bodies it mourns and cries for. Overall, both Sophocles and Komunyakaa expose the terminal horizon of sacrifice, beyond corporeal slaughter, rather the radical unmaking of the self by the slow corrosion of haunted survival. In turn, the authors illuminate that idea of "bodily surrender" in sacrifice metamorphoses into a broader meditation on peace and war as conjoined arenas that each demand the self as tribute. Meaning, one absorbs identity in a flash of principled obliteration, while the other extracts it slowly and incrementally, engraving absence upon memory until the living themselves become apertures for the dead. In both texts, the promise of concord is therefore inseparable from the relentless expenditure of personhood, confirming that the wages of harmony are exacted neither once nor fairly, but ceaselessly and with tragic interest.

8. Conclusion: Peace-in-Arrears and the Ethics of Remembrance

Civilizations, like the monuments they raise and the laws they codify, are like ontological tabula rasas of relinquished flesh. Sophocles and Komunyakaa teach that every claim to order, be it the polis' edict or a republic's marble ledger, rests upon a hidden arithmetic of loss, a sum tallied in bodies and recollections rather than in drachmas or dollars. And, this sum evinces how their paired visions form a chiaroscuro. That is, Antigone's fervent act of rebellion flares one time and is vanquished, while Komunyakaa's veteran smolders, fiery across a lifetime. However,

both authors manifest the same paradox that peace always extracts more than it appears to give. What is truly enthralling to us as readers, though, is that several other authors across time periods contemplated this curious postulation. Shakespeare sensed this tension when he let Antony and Cleopatra “make death proud to take us,” revealing how erotic grandeur turns fatal once subsumed by imperial calculus (Shakespeare, 1990); Othello, similarly, offers up Desdemona at the altar of a counterfeit honor, only to discover that the imagined equilibrium of vengeance breeds an afterlife of insatiable remorse (Shakespeare, 2016). Fanon (2004) and Du Bois (2003) diagnose the psychic aftershocks of national and racial sacrifice, where the colonized or color-marked self must daily negotiate and struggle with the “double consciousness” of stone and flesh. Even Stephen King’s haunted landscapes, be them Derry’s blood-slick gutters (King, 2016) or the Overlook’s echoing corridors (King, 1977), derive their terror from what cannot be buried: the spectral surcharge on seemingly placid towns. Stunningly, across genres and centuries, writers keep circling the same funeral pyre that Sophocles first lit and Komunyakaa still tends: the cost of concord is never paid off; it merely migrates like a flock of birds from public squares to private nerves. Our own moment is no less beholden to this grim economy. We chant “never again” while scrolling past fresh roll calls of the dispossessed. We commission gleaming memorials even as we widen the distance between combatant and civilian. The specter of sacrificial logic circulates everywhere, from city streets to corporate boardrooms, from hospital triage to climate triage, asking ever subtler forms of tribute, of mental health, data privacy, ecological and environmental integrity. To read *Antigone* beside “Facing It” is to feel history’s ledger slide beneath one’s unkempt fingernails, the marble cool yet throbbing. It is to recognize that a society’s greatness is measured not by the monuments it erects but by the debts it refuses to conceal: grief unacknowledged, bodies uncounted, names half-erased. With all that being said, these texts also whisper a fugitive hope. Antigone’s linen noose, though lethal, briefly converts an individual conscience into a public reckoning; Komunyakaa’s trembling line “I am stone. I am flesh” shatters the illusion that memorials can ossify grief without remainder. Literature is therefore our counter-ledger; as readers, we must recognize that it is like an accountant that tallies what marble and statute omit. Taken together, by inviting us to jointly live at the juncture of the tomb’s hush and the veteran’s heartbeat, Sophocles and Komunyakaa enlarge our ethical aperture, urging a vigilance among individuals that refuses to let sacrifice slip into abstraction. If we listen to them, we might be able to construct societal systems that act honestly with the blood in their mortar. We might be able to craft forms of civic love that do not require the perpetual recruitment of scapegoats. And, perhaps, in that relentless honesty, we might glimpse at peace less purchased than shared. A harmony sustained through the unflinching remembrance of all.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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