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## Enigmatic, Tragic, Crip; or, Crip Time in Sophocles's Oedipus and Aristotle's Poetics

### Cover Page Footnote

This essay was originally developed as a seminar paper for a disability studies seminar of Dr. Elizabeth B. Bearden in the English department at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Thank you to Dr. Bearden for encouraging the project. Years earlier, in the midst of injury, surgery, and physical therapy, Dr. Vinay Dharwadker and Dr. Max Statkiewicz in the comparative literature department taught me how to read Sophocles together with Aristotle and Longinus. Thank you to Dr. Dharwadker and Dr. Statkiewicz for supporting me and my work over many years.

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**ENIGMATIC, TRAGIC, CRIP; OR, CRIP TIME IN SOPHOCLES'S *OEDIPUS* AND  
ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS***

MAXWELL GRAY<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

Tragedy represents a classical literary genre that the field of disability studies often prefers not to approach too closely, lest disability also be called a tragedy by association. At the same time, my thinking is organized around my personal experience of chronic illness, pain, and disability that appear in early adulthood, when it's maybe least expected and most difficult to comprehend; or, in a word, tragic. I turn to the literary genre of classical Greek tragedy to think about/with more enigmatic and tragic forms of disability and crip temporality. In particular, I read Sophocles's classic tragedy *Oedipus* and Aristotle's foundational interpretation of the tragedy's plot in his *Poetics* together with theories of crip time—and also crip times, plural—from disability studies and crip theory. One way I offer here we can faithfully translate and do justice to the broken, fragmentary poetics of sick and disabled bodyminds is allowing ourselves the complex pleasures of sitting down and staying awhile with the classic tragic emotions of pity and fear. An Aristotelian interpretation of the end of the tragedy can help us understand Sophocles's *Oedipus* as an essentially human drama of shared disability identity and problems of disability recognition internalized in the psyche of its tragic hero.

**Keywords:** tragedy, disability, chronic pain, illness, crip time, enigma, recognition

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### **Disability, Tragedy, and Time**

Tragedy represents a classical literary genre the field of disability studies often prefers not to approach too closely, lest disability also be called a tragedy by association. People with disabilities prefer not to imagine their lives and bodyminds as tragedies, and I am no exception. But at the same time, I also cannot help thinking disability often represents real tragedy in people's lives, at least disability that takes place in what we imagine the "prime of life," as was my own personal experience of impairment and disability in my mid-twenties. Of course, one of the lessons disability studies teaches us is to reimagine normative ableist ideas and timelines of life, health, and ability. For example, my own personal healthcare research taught me what we imagine as the "prime of life" is in fact a period of life especially "prime" for disability, when many physical and mental disabilities first begin to appear and develop in early adulthood.

In this essay, I read classical literary and philosophical texts as theoretical exercises of this kind of reimagination of time and disability. Inspired especially by disability studies scholars like Susan Wendell, Tobin Siebers, Margaret Price, and Ellen Samuels, my reading and thinking are in response to what Siebers identifies as the challenge of pain for disability studies.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, my work is organized around my personal experience of chronic illness, pain, and disability that appear in early adulthood, when it's maybe least expected and most difficult to comprehend; or, in a word, tragic. When disability feels most intensely and/or most protractedly painful, then it feels most like tragedy. Here I turn to the literary genre of classical Greek tragedy to think about/with more enigmatic and tragic forms of disability and crip temporality. In particular, I read Sophocles's classic tragedy *Oedipus* and Aristotle's foundational interpretation of the tragedy's plot in his *Poetics* together with theories of crip time—and also crip times plural—from disability studies and crip theory.

### **Crip Time and/as "Chronic" Disability**

If disability is sometimes a tragedy, then it is one disability studies reminds us we may all experience at/on some "stage" of our lives. With this vision in mind, of disability always "in the wings," Alison Kafer defines crip time this way:

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<sup>2</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 59–64.

Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of “how long things take” are based on very particular minds and bodies. We can then understand the flexibility of crip time as being not only an accommodation to those who need “more” time but also, and perhaps especially, a challenge to normative and normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.<sup>3</sup>

In my mid-twenties I experienced a serious disc herniation in my lumbar spine. Since then, I have suffered from chronic sciatic nerve pain and numbness. Like many of us—some of whom claim disabled identities and others of whom do not—I have had to reimagine what I can accomplish and/or hold myself responsible for in a single academic semester or year, and redesign my days, weeks, and plans to incorporate periods of rest, recovery, and relapse that are specific to my bodymind. I have also experienced strong feelings of relief at the recognition and acceptance of real limits of my physical and mental abilities to keep up with the speed and performance of academic work and life.<sup>4</sup> But at the same time, I also believe if crip time bends our clocks, then crip time remains fundamentally out of our control and beyond our abilities to imagine and design for in our daily lives and in our social and political communities. My own, often painful, experience of crip time is it can never be completely anticipated or planned (to be flexible) for in advance of its own happenstance arrivals. Experiences of illness are also often experiences of what Arthur W. Frank calls “narrative wreckage” that are unforeseen and temporally disorienting.<sup>5</sup> For me, crip time represents a specifically “chronic” interruption (in the sense of “lasting a long time, long-continued, lingering, inveterate”) of normative expectations of ability, rhythm, and pacing.<sup>6</sup> I’m interested in how crip time may also include under its umbrella more uncomfortable and indeed often fatiguing, exhausting, and depressing forms of crip temporality. The flexibility of crip time is often exciting and empowering, but it can also often bend us to or past our breaking points.

My thinking is closely aligned with and influenced by Susan Wendell and individuals she calls the “unhealthy disabled,” as well as Margaret Price and what she identifies as the “badness” of pain for

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<sup>3</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 27.

<sup>4</sup> An important source for disability in higher education is Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013), 53–59. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer for recommending Frank’s book.

<sup>6</sup> A helpful source for crip time and chronic pain is Emma Sheppard, “Performing Normal but Becoming Crip: Living with Chronic Pain,” *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 22, no. 1 (2020): 39–47. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer for recommending Sheppard’s article.

disability studies and identity politics.<sup>7</sup> Both Wendell and Price challenge disability scholars and activists to do justice to medical and other physical hardships and discomforts of disabled bodymind experiences that may not sit especially well inside dominant social and cultural models of disability in disability studies and political activism. My thinking is also closely aligned with Ellen Samuels where she reads crip time as a scene often of grief and loneliness. Among other words for it, she identifies crip time as “broken time.” She writes,

It requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world. It forces us to take breaks, even when we don’t want to, even when we want to keep going, to move ahead. It insists that we listen to our bodyminds *so* closely, *so* attentively, in a culture that tells us to divide the two and push the body away from us while also pushing it beyond its limits. Crip time means listening to the broken language of our bodies, translating them, honoring their words.”<sup>8</sup>

Crip time may always be broken time, and indeed often breaks disabled, crip, and other queer bodyminds into figurative and/or literal pieces, located at crowded intersections of history, culture, and physical and mental pain.

### **Tragic Emotions and Effects**

One way we can faithfully translate and do justice to the broken, fragmentary poetics of sick and disabled bodyminds is by allowing ourselves the complex pleasures of sitting down and staying awhile with the classic tragic emotions of pity and fear. Frank writes, “Many people with chronic illness, especially multiple sclerosis, have written about the diagnostic uncertainty and the relief when some physician validates how much is actually wrong, as devastating as that diagnostic news can be.”<sup>9</sup> Just as devastating diagnostic news may be relieving and validating, pity and fear may be pleasurable and indeed educational. In the *Poetics*, pity and fear are the two emotions Aristotle identifies as the essence of classical Greek tragedy (II.6).<sup>10</sup> His teacher Plato says emotions like these are dangerous because they threaten to overwhelm and obstruct the faculties of the rational mind. However, Aristotle argues that tragedy, in fact, effects a strategic intellectual purification and/or refinement of these emotions, and of course he takes Sophocles’s *Oedipus* as his prime example of this so-called “tragic effect” (*catharsis*). Contra Plato, tragedy has things to teach and/or remind us of about illness, disability, and

<sup>7</sup> Susan Wendell, “Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities,” *Hypatia* 16, no. 4 (October 1, 2001): 17–33; Margaret Price, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 268–84.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen Samuels, “Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, xv.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, Oxford World’s Classics, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Aristotle, *Poetics*, Penguin Classics, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Books, 1996).

enigmatic and tragic forms of crip temporality. Disability is not always or simply a tragedy, but oftentimes it feels like it is, and so tragedy is part of disability. At the same time, the classical genre's "tragic effect" is also part of reimagining disability futures. Emma Sheppard writes, "We need the time to be sad, to be frustrated, even as we acknowledge that the reason for our sadness and frustration is ableist structures, norms, and expectations about how bodyminds work and move through places and times."<sup>11</sup> For many of us, the way out of or beyond ableism is out through the other side of pain, sadness, and frustration.

### **The Enigma of the Sphinx**

Maybe the most famous lines of the Oedipus myth are not actually lines from Sophocles's tragedy, however. I am thinking of the famous riddle or enigma of the Sphinx, whom Oedipus finds laying siege to the city of Thebes when he arrives there traveling from Delphi. In return for solving the Sphinx's riddle, Oedipus frees the city and wins the crown of the king and marriage to the queen Jocasta. The standard, classical version of the riddle is preserved by Athenaeus: "There walks on land a creature of two feet, of four feet, and of three; it has one voice, but, sole among animals that grow on land or in the sky or beneath the sea, it can change its nature; nay, when it walks propped on most feet, then is the speed of its limbs less than it has ever been before."<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the standard, classical version of the riddle's solution is preserved by Apollodorus: "Oedipus found the solution, declaring that the riddle of the Sphinx referred to man; for as a babe he is four-footed, going on four limbs, as an adult he is two-footed, and as an old man he gets besides a third support in a staff."<sup>13</sup>

Henri-Jacques Stiker interprets the riddle as a reflection or retelling of the hero's childhood deformity.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, David Mitchell reads the riddle as the beginning of a story about disability and prosthesis: the three legs being the feet and cane of a person with a physical impairment.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, French classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant identifies the riddle as a premonition of the hero's own trans-generational status as husband of his own mother, and father of his own brothers and sisters.<sup>16</sup> However,

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<sup>11</sup> Sheppard, "Performing Normal but Becoming Crip," 45.

<sup>12</sup> Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueter*, vol. X, ed. and trans. S. Douglas Olson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 456b.

<sup>13</sup> Apollodorus, *The Library*, vol. 2, bk. 3, ed. and trans. by James George Frazer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 3.7.

<sup>14</sup> Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 52.

<sup>15</sup> David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 61.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 138.

a specific crip temporality of the riddle has gone largely unnoticed by the myth's interpreters, and indeed also by the hero himself.

### Disability's Enigmatic Temporality

On the one hand, Oedipus's explanation of the riddle's solution traces a normative timeline of three progressive stages of human life and mobility: humans begin their lives as children and crawl on all fours, grow up into adulthood and walk upright on two feet, and then at the end of their lives enter into old age and walk with the help of a cane. The timeline ties progressive stages of life to their own specific normative modes of mobility. It represents a prime example of what Kafer calls "normative and normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling."<sup>17</sup> But on the other hand, the riddle itself is far less invested in the distinction and order of progressive periods of life than it is in the different modes of mobility themselves. Part of the riddle's difficulty is, in fact, its interest in a grammatical temporal suspension and the collapse of these different modes of mobility. The riddle challenges its listeners to imagine they may themselves, at any time—over the course of any single day—always change the number of "feet" on which they walk. Indeed, the last line of the riddle imagines a human who graduates from crawling on their hands and knees to walking upright on two and then three "feet," but then returns again to crawling, most slowly this time, on hands and knees sometime later in life ("when it walks propped on most feet, then is the speed of its limbs less than it has ever been before"). The riddle seems to say the arc of one's life is, in fact, often not always exactly a smooth and one-way street from crawling on all fours to walking on two feet to walking with a cane or other prosthesis. Oedipus's explanation of the riddle's solution entirely glosses over and represents an ableist normalization of the riddle's "enigmatic" crip temporality.

So, yes, Oedipus arrives at the riddle's correct solution, but seemingly not for the correct reason, or rather not for the only possible reason. If we want to give him a little more credit, then key to his solution of the riddle may be his own personal experience of physical injury and impairment, as variously suggested by Stiker and Mitchell. But in Sophocles's tragedy, Oedipus himself insists to Tiresias and Creon he solved the Sphinx's riddle by his mental intelligence (*sophos*) alone—a key word in the Greek text.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Sophocles's tragedy tells a very different story: the hero enters onstage at the beginning of the tragedy walking on two feet, and exits blind at the tragedy's end walking on

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<sup>17</sup> Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, ed. R. D. Dawe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).



three or more “feet” with the help of human prosthesis, his two daughters Antigone and Ismene. Between the hero’s entrance and exit, Sophocles’s *Oedipus* dramatically performs an ironic unpredictability of disability that exceeds and confounds the hero’s own intelligence of exactly how many “feet” he himself may walk on at day’s end. (The critical unit of time in Greek tragedy is always a single day.) Indeed, at the end of the tragedy, the chorus’s last lines juxtapose the hero’s solution of the Sphinx’s riddle and his tragic fall: “People of Thebes, my countrymen, look at Oedipus. // He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance, // he rose to power, a man beyond all power. // Who could behold his greatness without envy? // Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him. // Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day, // count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.”<sup>19</sup>

These lines compare and contrast the heights and depths of human intelligence and ignorance. They recall the “brilliance” of the hero and his solution of the Sphinx’s riddle of humanity (*anthrōpos*), right before they end the tragedy with a statement (in the form of an imperative) of humanity’s profound ignorance of individual human happiness. The last line represents an exemplary expression of the common Greek elegiac and tragic trope: “count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.” Francis Fergusson puts it this way: “For the particular virtue of Sophocles’ presentation of the myth is that it preserves the ultimate mystery by focusing upon the tragic human at a level beneath, or prior to any rationalization whatsoever.”<sup>20</sup> Contra Bernard Knox’s classic reading of the play, Sophocles’s tragedy represents a deeply religious, philosophical rebuttal of the new scientific intelligence (*sophos*) the hero preaches. At the end of the tragedy the chorus effects a turn away from the hero and toward the audience, implicating them and their own bodyminds in the hero’s tragic fall. They identify human happiness with freedom from pain, while at the same time placing no faith in any endurance of this freedom. Robert Cohen writes of the end of the tragedy: “Man’s feebleness, ruthlessly demonstrated, is crushingly and unambiguously confirmed.”<sup>21</sup> The tragedy of Oedipus in the last lines of Sophocles’s drama is this “one-two punch” of tragic human ignorance and “feebleness.”

Indeed, Cohen’s “crip” choice of words here invites further comparison of the last line of Sophocles’s tragedy and the common disability studies dictum that says impairment and disability are “only a matter of time.” Both lines represent an ironic holding of one’s breath that anyone can live life

<sup>19</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, Penguin Classics, trans. Robert Fagles, with introduction and notes by Bernard Knox (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), lines 1678–84.

<sup>20</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Norton Critical Edition, ed. Luci Berkowitz and Theodore F. Brunner (W. W. Norton and Company, 1970), 185.

<sup>21</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 181.

in the absence of human pain and impairment. Instead, they both withhold judgment of anyone's simple health and/or happiness until a later time, and imagine the two are always only temporary human phenomena. But whereas the disability studies dictum identifies itself as a special knowledge of life and disability, the last line of Sophocles's tragedy imagines itself as an existential ignorance of crip futures and what disabilities they may bring—"four-footedness?"—although it does have its safe bets of pain and suffering. Werner Jaeger writes, "To know oneself is thus for Sophocles to know man's powerlessness; but it is also to know the indestructible and conquering majesty of suffering humanity."<sup>22</sup> The tragedy's end enacts this sublime aestheticization of humanity's horrifying ignorance of its own pain and suffering and ironic enigmas of crip temporality; or, in the words of the tragedy's last choral ode: "You are my great example, you, your life // your destiny, Oedipus, man of misery— // I count no man blest."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, H. D. F. Kitto reminds us: "If we contemplate, as we should, the whole play and all its aspects, we see that Oedipus is not a special case, except in the degree to which he suffers; he is, as the Chorus says, typical; what has happened to him is part of the whole web of human life."<sup>24</sup>

### **Tragic Reversal and Recognition**

In this reading of the tragedy's human significance, disability represents a singular site of tragic reversal and recognition. In *Poetics*, Aristotle identifies "reversal" and "recognition" as the two narrative forms tragedy uses to produce its "tragic effect" of intellectual-emotional purification (II.6). He calls reversal a "change of direction in the course of events," and recognition a "change from ignorance to knowledge."<sup>25</sup> He identifies the best kind of tragic narrative as the coincidence of both forms, and points to Sophocles's classic tragedy as the prime example of this overlap. Here is the critical moment in Sophocles's drama: "Oh god— // all come true, all burst to light! // O light—now let me look my last on you! // I stand revealed at last— // cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage, // cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands!"<sup>26</sup> In this moment, the hero experiences a traumatic recognition of his own horrible identity that represents its own tragic reversal of his fortunes from husband and father to son and sibling, as well as from sacred king to sacrificial exile. Here I want to use these critical terms (reversal and recognition) to analyze the hero's blindness and disability at the end of Sophocles's

<sup>22</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 134.

<sup>23</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, lines 1318–20.

<sup>24</sup> H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 145.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Kenny, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, lines 1305–10.

tragedy. At the same time, I also want to inflect Aristotelian recognition with some of what disability studies teaches us about disability identity and identification.

### **Disability Identification and Recognition**

Tobin Siebers interprets scenes of overt verbal and visual disability self-identification as representations of different ways disability is performed, lived, and viewed in public spaces. For example, someone who uses a guide dog may also use a cane to more overtly visually identify and represent their disability to otherwise misunderstanding business owners; or, the same person may also sit down on a bus and begin reading a book, thereby disrupting essentialist assumptions of what exactly blindness means in different contexts.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, Ellen Samuels describes personal struggles to gain recognition of invisible disability identities that resonate with the complicated scenes and characters examined by Siebers. She writes, “In the absence of recognized nonverbal signs, we often resort to the ‘less dignified’ response of claiming identity through speech. The complex longing, fear of disbelief, and internal dissonance caused by coming out in this form resound through the narratives of all people who pass by default. Passing subjects must cope with a variety of external social contexts, few of which welcome or acknowledge spontaneous declarations of invisible identity.”<sup>28</sup> If rights, access, and accommodation require successful disability recognition, and indeed they often do, then recognition represents a critically charged psychological, social, and political landscape for thinking about/with impairment and disability identity.

### **Blindness and/as Recognition**

Following his traumatic self-recognition and tragic reversal of fortunes, Oedipus immediately exits the stage. When he returns back onstage at the tragedy’s end, the hero has blinded himself by his own hands. He cries out: “Dark, horror of darkness // my darkness, drowning, swirling around me // crashing wave on wave—unspeakable, irresistible // headwind, fatal harbor! Oh again, // the misery, all at once, over and over // the stabbing daggers, stab of memory // raking me insane.”<sup>29</sup> The language of these lines represents the tragedy’s dramatic and rhetorical collapse of the hero’s tragic reversal and recognition and physical blindness (“horror of darkness”). The classic allegorical reading of the scene interprets the hero’s literal blindness as a material manifestation of his metaphorical “vision” (knowledge) of his tragic birth and marriage. For example, Charles Segal writes, “By the end of the

<sup>27</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 96–119.

<sup>28</sup> Ellen Samuels, “My Body, My Closet,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 9, no. 1/2 (January 2003): 241.

<sup>29</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, lines 1450–56.

play, Oedipus exchanges his external, physical vision for a blindness that brings with it, at last, freedom from illusion and a clear sight of the truth about himself.”<sup>30</sup> In Aristotelian terminology, the hero’s blindness reflects his traumatic recognition of his horrible identity and marriage. At the same time, an Aristotelian interpretation of the end of the tragedy can also help us understand Sophocles’s *Oedipus* as an essentially human drama of shared disability identity and problems of disability recognition internalized in the psyche of its tragic hero.

The hero’s self-blinding also represents its own desperate, performative act of recognition of the true significance of the “enigmatic” crip temporality of the Sphinx’s original riddle. Indeed, it tragically enacts a postlapsarian, prophetic recognition and fulfilled metaphorical “vision” of disability’s ultimately mysterious revelation. In the tragedy’s last scene, the hero’s own ironic change of disability fortunes coincides with this belated, tragic recognition of humanity’s existential disability identity and crip timeliness. He says to the chorus: “Now I’ve exposed my guilt, horrendous guilt, // could I train a level glance on you, my countrymen? // Impossible! Now, if I could just block off my ears, // the springs of hearing, I would stop at nothing— // I’d wall up my loathsome body like a prison, // blind to the sound of life, not just the sight. // Oblivion—what a blessing . . . // for the mind to dwell a world away from pain.”<sup>31</sup> Rather than a simple lesson about essentialist sensory deprivation, blindness seems to effect in Oedipus a more nuanced recognition and uncomfortable acceptance of the impossibility of walling off one’s bodymind and self-identity from the outside world and its different bodily sensations and sufferings. “Oblivion” may seem like a blessing, but it is one that always remains beyond the possibilities of human life. At the end of the tragedy, the hero’s own crip-temporal disability recognition represents this difficult knowledge of existential human embodiment, suffering, and disability.

Indeed, this is the message of the emotional climax of the tragedy, where Oedipus speaks to his daughters Antigone and Ismene. He says to them: “You, little ones, if you were old enough // to understand, there is much I’d tell you. // Now, as it is, I’d have you say a prayer. // Pray for life, my children, // live where you are free to grow and season. // Pray god you find a better life than mine, // the father who begot you.”<sup>32</sup> Scholars and editors dispute the authenticity of this scene, but these lines

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<sup>30</sup> Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, Everyman’s Library Classics Series, trans. David Grene, with an introduction by Charles Segal and notes by James P. Hogan (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), xxiii.

<sup>31</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, lines 1516–23.

<sup>32</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, 1655–61.

seem the essence of the human tragedy of the drama. In the words of Kitto's description of the scene: "Such is life, such are the gods. The innocent suffer with the guilty."<sup>33</sup> The scene dramatically represents the problem of reimagining disability futures discussed by Kafer. She writes, "The task, then, is not so much to refuse the future as to reimagine disability and disability futures otherwise, as part of other, alternative temporalities that do not cast disabled people out of time, as the sign of the future of no future."<sup>34</sup> At the end of the tragedy, the task is left to Creon to take care and keep watch over Antigone and Ismene. But the scene may also return us to the crises of the plague and reproductive, political futurity that open the drama.

### **Crip Times and Futures**

Coming to an ending of my essay, I want to transition from thinking about/with crip time (singular) to thinking about/with crip times in the plural form and shared together in common. Robert McRuer calls crip times our moment of neoliberal global austerity politics and its crip subjectivities, communities, and forms of resistance.<sup>35</sup> But I want to think more broadly about/with crip times as a social, political, and temporal overlap of innocence and suffering, or of innocence and reversal.<sup>36</sup>

The speech of the priest at the beginning of the tragedy paints a verbal picture of reproductive, political futurity in crisis. He says to the hero:

Our city—

look around you, see with your own eyes—  
our ship pitches wildly, cannot lift her head  
from the depths, the red waves of death . . .  
Thebes is dying. A blight on the fresh crops  
and the rich pastures, cattle sicken and die,  
and the women die in labor, children stillborn,  
and the plague, the fiery god of fever hurls down  
on the city, his lightning slashing through us—  
raging plague in all its vengeance, devastating  
the house of Cadmus! And black Death luxuriates  
in the raw, wailing miseries of Thebes.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 145.

<sup>34</sup> Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Robert McRuer, *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> Important sources for disability at the intersection of history, culture, society, and politics include Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals: Special Edition* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1997); Aurora Levins Morales, *Kindling: Writings on the Body* (Cambridge, MA: Palabrera Press, 2013); and Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>37</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, lines 27–38.

The memorable metaphor of the city as a ship imagines the plague as waves of disease coming crashing over the sides of the ship of state, but the lines that follow imagine a more complex political-temporal ecology of illness, death, and dying. Crops grow sick, pastures of cattle are afflicted by disease, and childbirth means death for mother and child, representing a breakdown of the city's reproductive futurity. All that grows and takes pleasure in the city is "black Death." At the end of his speech, the priest says to the king: "Rule our land, you know you have the power, // but rule a land of the living, not a wasteland. // Ship and towered city are nothing, stripped of men // alive within it, living all as one."<sup>38</sup> Here the ship of state is no longer adrift on crashing waves of disease, but rather an ecology of unhealthy, living, and dying bodies that obliges the hero's political and environmental care for its future survival as a "land of the living, not a wasteland."

The tragedy's first choral ode vividly echoes the priest's speech: "Thebes like a great army dying // and there is no sword of thought to save us, no // and the fruits of our famous earth, they will not ripen // no and the women cannot scream their pangs to birth— // screams for the Healer, children dead in the womb // and life on life goes down // if you can watch them go // like seabirds winging west, outracing the day's fire // down the horizon, irresistibly // streaking on to the shores of Evening."<sup>39</sup> Again, in these lines, nature is unnatural, mothers cannot give birth, and the womb is a scene of death. But rather than a ship at sea, these lines figure the city's dead like a flock of seabirds crossing over the horizon. The metaphor imagines the city as a natural collection of singularities of the unhealthy, dead, and dying. At the same time, it also imagines the city in a race against the time of day. The birds appear out ahead of time crossing toward or over a horizon between day and night. This is an image of the city out on the edge of futurity itself where the future begins to literally disappear over the horizon of the sky, in a poetic figure of life becoming or flying toward death and darkness. Meanwhile, the ode also seems to anticipate the tragic hero's "I'd wall up my loathsome body" speech at the drama's end: "I call Apollo, Archer astride the thunderheads of heaven— // O triple shield against death, shine before me now! // If ever, once in the past, you stopped some ruin // launched *against our walls* // you hurled the flame of pain // far, far from Thebes—you gods // come now, come down once more!"<sup>40</sup> Here the plague breaches the city walls like flaming arrows shot overhead. The image is one of political susceptibilities in the forms of penetrability and flammability that trouble the boundaries and

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<sup>38</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, 66–69.

<sup>39</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, 194–203.

<sup>40</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, 184–189 (emphasis mine).

differences between the city's inside and outside. The flame of the plague may come in from the outside, beyond the city walls, but then like a city caught on fire the plague spreads and burns, fed by the bodies of the citizens.

With the arrival of the oracle from Delphi, the disease of the plague rhetorically transforms into the corruption of Laius's murderer. Oedipus commands: "I order you, every citizen of the state // where I hold throne and power: banish this man— // whoever he may be—never shelter him, never // speak a word to him, never make him partner / to your prayers, your victims burned to the gods. / Never let the holy water touch his hands. // Drive him out, each of you, from every home. // He is the plague, the heart of our corruption, // as Apollo's oracle has just revealed to me."<sup>41</sup> But of course, like the Sphinx's riddle before it, Apollo's oracle is more enigmatic and opaquer than the hero can understand, and so the gauntlet he throws down for himself and the city is of his own sacrificial exile from its walls. If Sophocles's tragic hero has a single "tragic flaw" (*hamartia*), then scholars and critics agree this seems to be it: in the words of the chorus, "Pride [*hubris*] breeds the tyrant // violent pride, gorging, crammed to bursting // with all that is overripe and rich with ruin— // clawing up to the heights, headlong pride // crashes down the abyss—sheer doom!"<sup>42</sup> Pride of what exactly? One answer at least is clear: his tragic ignorance of humanity's "enigmatic" crisp timeliness, that is, its existential embodiment, suffering, and disability, regardless of guilt or innocence. Or maybe, in conclusion, Sophocles's tragic hero's single "tragic flaw" may be simply his singular heroism, his liberal imagination of himself offboard the ship of state, or outside the flock of citizens, or the city's walls. Sophocles's *Oedipus* teaches and/or reminds us: you cannot simply wall up your body—or your city—as if it were a world away or apart from impairment and disability, including their uncomfortable enigmas and tagedies. Ultimately, no scapegoats will serve.

When we allow ourselves the complex pleasures of spending time, indeed often painful, depressing time, with the classic tragic emotions of pity and fear, I think classical Greek tragedy reminds us of this impossibility of walling off our identities and bodyminds from the ecologies we call our homes and communities, and from our shared bodily sensations, and indeed often the sufferings we hold in common together, especially and most importantly when they're unfairly distributed among us. This is what doing justice to the broken, fragmentary poetics of our disabled bodyminds must mean:

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<sup>41</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, 269–77.

<sup>42</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, 963–67.

not forgetting freedom and independence from pain and suffering may sound like a blessing, but it is one that always remains beyond the possibilities of human life and living. In turn, Sophocles's *Oedipus* steers our attention back to the possibilities of the lives we share together: another way of saying, back again toward politics, and alternative futures of illness and disability, always at the intersection.



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