

In Between Life and Death:

Antigone as a Model of Resistance for Theories of Invisible Disability

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Sophocles' *Antigone* has been more influential in contemporary political thought than almost any other play in history. Theorists from Hegel to Bonnie Honig have turned to it for guidance on issues such as sovereignty, the roles of kinship and the state, and even more contemporary concerns with gender and sexuality. Though *Antigone* has been interpreted time and time again, the play continues to hold rich relevance for the present day. In this paper, I hope to show how *Antigone* can provide a model of resistance for theories of invisible disability. To do this, I'll incorporate two recent sets of commentary on the play – books by Judith Butler and Bonnie Honig – to advance my own understanding.

In the first section of this paper, I will begin by showing how Judith Butler's situating of Antigone as a figure of liminal identity has relevance for contemporary disability theory, and in particular, for emerging scholarship on invisible disabilities. In the second section, I will show how Butler and Honig's conceptions of Antigone as "conspiring with language" – actively seeking to frame the meaning of her life and death from a space of cultural unintelligibility – help us to make sense of contemporary developments in emerging scholarship on invisible disabilities. In the final section, I will take Butler and Honig's ideas further to demonstrate the ways in which *Antigone* can be read as a model of resistance for theories of invisible disability. It is my hope that, as Butler suggests, this reading of Antigone will provide "a critical perspective by which the terms of livability might be rewritten" (2000, p. 55).

## **I. Antigone in the Borderlands: Issues of Identity in Sophocles' Play and Contemporary Disability Theory**

To understand *Antigone's* relevance for scholarship on invisible disabilities, we must first explain how invisible disabilities have been conceptualized within the broader study of

disability. Today, the ADA defines a disability as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). Contrary to this understanding, disability scholars and activists have been using a social constructionist definition since the early 1990s. In *The Politics of Disablement*, Michael Oliver proposed a distinction between *impairment* and *disability* in which an *impairment* is a loss of psychological or physiological function, and a *disability* is the resulting restriction or limitation of opportunities to take part in society. On this understanding, an impairment may not necessarily be disabling if a person receives the accommodations necessary to function on equal footing with others in the world.

An *invisible* disability, on the other hand, is typically defined as a disability that cannot be observed in the course of a casual social interaction (e.g. checking out at the grocery store, greeting an acquaintance at a restaurant, passing someone in a hallway). Despite the apparent simplicity of this definition, a wide variety of disabilities may be considered invisible. Conditions including (but not limited to) chronic or terminal illness, sensory impairments, cognitive differences, and mental illnesses have all been theorized as forms of invisible disability. Though these different conditions give rise to a wide variety of experiences, the literature surrounding these issues focuses on the common struggle that surrounds the *invisibility* of these impairments.

In recent years, researchers studying invisible disabilities have sought to distinguish their work from the broader disability rights movement by moving away from a politics of *visibility*. For decades, activists have struggled for the right of people with disabilities to be seen, heard, and legitimized in society – or in other words, for people with disabilities to be visible. Contrary to this tradition, scholars studying *invisible* disabilities are attempting to move disability theory

and activism beyond disability marked visibly on the body (Cosenza, 2010). This movement seeks to undermine assumptions about the correlation between appearance and identity, and in doing so, seeks to move beyond *visibility* as the basis for social change.

Based on this shared theoretical framework, research on invisible disabilities has repeatedly emphasized the way in which invisible disabilities fall into a sort of “interstitial space” between the binary identity categories of ability and disability (Caldwell, 2010). Because people with invisible disabilities appear able-bodied in most contexts, they “pass,” and so are able to avoid some of the stigmatizing experiences shared by people with visible disabilities. However, people with invisible disabilities face their own set of challenges: they must make unique decisions about disclosure (when to “come out” and when to “pass”), aren’t always able to connect with the resources provided by broader disability community, and often face a higher burden of proof in securing accommodations. Because of the lack of connection with the broader disability community, and because impairments limit normal life activities, people with invisible disabilities frequently speak of the way in which they live in an ambiguous space between able-bodied and disabled cultures.

Because of these shared experiences, the “interstitial space” between identity categories has been alternately conceived of as a space of categorical ambiguity (Titchkosky, 2009), a type of borderlands (Cosenza, 2010), a space of indeterminacy (Samuels, 2003), or a “category crisis” (Samuels, 2003). To make sense of this space, several theorists have turned to alternative modes of expression including poetry (Nielsen, 2016) and performance art (Cosenza, 2010). In this paper, I hope to show how Sophocles’ *Antigone* shares in a similarly liminal space. In *Antigone’s Claim*, Judith Butler positions *Antigone* as an ambiguous figure operating in the space between multiple identities (between life and death, between kinship and the state, and

between the social and pre-social). By exploring Antigone's orientation within each of these areas, we may come to better understand what it means to successfully navigate and create meaning in such a space. As I will argue in the next section, Antigone's actions within her own liminal space point a way forward for theories of invisible disability.

### *Between Life and Death*

In *Antigone's Claim*, Judith Butler begins with an argument about the way in which Antigone's death is always double: on top of her death itself, there is also the life she has not lived, or the way in which she is "serving death" for the length of her life. This way of "serving death" (p. 23), or being "dead while living" (p. 47) for Butler, places Antigone at the limits of life. Though this aspect of her identity stands in sharpest relief when Antigone is sent to her tomb while still alive, Butler argues that Antigone has been oriented towards death all along. To explain Antigone's unique position, Butler cites Lacan, who also wants to call attention to the "simultaneous and irresolvable coincidence of life and death that she brings into relief for her audience" (Butler, 2000, p. 49-50).

Developing these ideas further, Butler argues that another way in which Antigone is implicated in death while living is through her abrogation of the "intelligible conditions for life" (p. 53). Because her love has no "viable and livable place in culture" (p. 24), Antigone has "no place within the terms that confer intelligibility on life" (p. 23). Developing this idea further, Butler appropriates the term "social death" from Orlando Patterson to explain how Antigone is "dying within life" (p. 73). Citing Lacan, Butler argues that Antigone is situated in this way because of her desire for Polynices. On this understanding, Antigone's orientation to death is caused by the ways in which her desire is rendered socially unintelligible.

From here, Butler suggests that, because of her unique position, Antigone can provide “a critical perspective by which the terms of livability might be rewritten” (p. 55). For Butler, this is meaningful because Antigone helps to open up an intelligible space for alternative kinship structures. Like people with invisible disabilities, many LGBTQ people exist in a similarly ambiguous space between binaries that Butler derives from her reading of Antigone. People in these spaces often lack the “cultural intelligibility” to make meaning out of their lives. Taking a cue from Butler, might we use Antigone in a similar way to render intelligible the “space between binaries” inhabited by people with invisible disabilities?

*Between Kinship and the State*

To further elucidate Antigone’s unique position, Butler turns to Hegel’s reading of Antigone. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel reads Antigone as representative of kinship in its ideal form. Creon, on the other hand, represents, “an emergent ethical order and state authority based on principles of universality” (p. 3). And, on this reading, when Creon’s sovereign power comes in conflict with the laws of kinship and the gods of the household, Creon wins. Kinship ultimately gives way to state authority, and Antigone is surpassed without ever being preserved.

Against this reading, Butler argues that kinship and the state are not as separable as Hegel supposes. Throughout the play, Antigone’s power comes from the way in which she makes her claims within the language of the state. And further, she cannot be read as the sole representative of kinship, because Creon also makes claims that have to do with kinship (for example, his very right to the throne is a matter of his status within kinship). Neither character can be read as a simple representative of kinship *or* the state. Based on this analysis, Butler implies that

Antigone's ambiguous position – which doesn't fall clearly within either category – puts her in a position to reiterate and subvert the very intelligibility of each institution from within.

Drawing from Butler's approach, might we say that theories of invisible disability make their claims within the dominant discourse (e.g. within the language of disability theory or within the context conventional ethical norms) in a similar way? Just as Antigone makes her claims within language of sovereignty, theories of invisible disability often appropriate available discourses in order to make a space for themselves in the world. Though I will explore these issues further in the next section, it is, at this stage, enough to point out the interesting resonances between the way in which Antigone navigates her liminality and the way in which theories of invisible disability do the same.

#### *Between the Social and Pre-Social*

While Hegel reads Antigone as representative of kinship in its ideal form, Lacan reads her as bordering “the spheres of the imaginary and the Symbolic” and understands her as figuring the inauguration of the Symbolic (p. 3). Because the Symbolic is “the realm of law that regulates desire in the Oedipus complex” (p. 18), and also the “sphere of laws and norms that govern the accession to speech and speakability” (p. 3), family members are defined by their lack of sexual relations relative to one another. A mother is, for example, defined in terms of the absence of desire for her children. Based on this understanding, Lacan departs from Hegel by making this concept of kinship into a “presupposition of cultural intelligibility” (p. 3). Or, in other words, because Lacan's concept of kinship is a function of language, it is not yet social. To explain this concept in greater detail, Butler uses Levi-Strauss' terminology to show how

Lacan's situating of Antigone can be alternately conceived of as somewhere between the social (a space governed by rules) and the pre-social (a space of universality).

Evaluating the ideas put forth by each of these theorists, Butler asks whether rules (of the sort discussed by Levi-Strauss) produce conformity or social configurations that "exceed and defy the rules by which they are occasioned" (p. 17). Ultimately, she doesn't think that the distinction between the social and Symbolic (or pre-social) can hold – for Butler, the Symbolic is merely the "sedimentation of social practices" (p. 19). Unlike Levi-Strauss (who saw cultural rules as universal) and Lacan (who argued that the Symbolic isn't socially constituted or alterable, but timeless) Butler thinks that the Symbolic is a contingent norm that has been "rendered necessary, a form of reification with stark consequences for gendered life" (p. 21). Accepting such a law "as a final arbiter of kinship life" merely resolves, by tautological means, "the concrete dilemmas of human sexual arrangements that have no ultimate normative form" (p. 21).

For Butler, this means that kinship norms are open to "reiterative and transformative articulation" (p. 21) – they can be subverted from within. On this reading, Antigone trespasses on the norms of kinship and gender in a way that exposes the precarious nature of those norms in all of their "sudden and disturbing transferability, and their capacity to be reiterated" (p. 24). This makes Antigone a figure who represents the deformation and displacement of kinship, rather than kinship in its ideal form. Looking at all of this together, Butler asks what the "conditions of intelligibility" would have had to have been to make Antigone's life livable. This question is especially poignant in the context of Butler's larger desire to create a space for alternative kinship structures. In the present day, what conditions of intelligibility need to be in place to render LGBTQ family arrangements meaningful and livable?



Drawing on this analysis, how might research on invisible disability do more to expose the “precarious character” of norms surrounding ability and disability (especially insofar as disability is construed in terms of visibility)? How might Antigone help to deform and displace existing norms in order to open up new “schemes of intelligibility”? Though these complex questions require deeply nuanced answers, I’ll do my best to explore these issues in the pages that follow.

*The Space Between Binaries: Identity and Invisible Disability*

As I mentioned at the start of this section, scholarship on invisible disabilities has repeatedly emphasized the way in which invisible impairments fall into a sort of interstitial space between able-bodied and disability cultures. Now, having explained Antigone’s unique position between identity categories, I believe we have the resources that we need to say more about this. Through this section, I hope to show how Butler’s situating of Antigone as a figure of liminal identity has relevance for emerging scholarship on invisible disability.

In a widely-read article published in 2003, Ellen Samuels referred to this liminal space as a “space of indeterminacy” in which individuals experience a discontinuity between their “appearance, behavior, and identity” (p. 247). In her paper, Samuels cites feminist scholar Marjorie Garber who calls this space a sort of “category crisis” (p. 244). Though Samuels’ larger point is about the limits of “coming out” discourse as a way to conceptualize decisions about disclosure, she repeatedly emphasizes the difficulty of navigating a space between binary identity categories. Unfortunately, in Samuels’ work, this question is left largely unresolved.

Several articles published in 2009-2010 draw on the theme of “ambiguous identity” and attempt to develop it further. In an article about the intersections between bisexual and invisible

disability identities, K. Caldwell argues that the concepts of ability and disability “should extend beyond a reductionist binary definition to include interstitial spaces” (para. 8). By this, Caldwell means to say that both disability theorists and other scholars have perpetuated and solidified the binary between disability and ability, and further, that they have repeatedly focused on *visibility* as a platform for disability activism. She goes on to say that, for those who pass as able-bodied, the rigidity of this dichotomy can make it difficult to appropriate the rich world of meaning available in and through disability discourse.

To further develop these ideas, Tanya Titchkosky has examined the social constructedness of disability by “performing blindness” with a pair of sunglasses, a cane, and a guide dog on the streets of New York. Through her ethnographic research, Titchkosky has attempted to show how people interact with people who are visibly versus invisibly disabled. And, though Titchkosky does not cite Samuels herself, both theorists share a focus on the *performative* nature of disability in general, and invisible disability in particular. On this topic, Samuels cites the experience of Megan Jones, a deaf-blind woman who became “so frustrated with strangers not believing in her visual and hearing impairments, and so oppressed by their refusal to respect her assistance dog’s status, that she began to use a white cane she did not need” (2003, p. 241). Thinking about this within the context of Titchkosky’s work, we can identify this problem as one of “categorical ambiguity” (Titchkosky’s language). As Titchkosky explains, “there are no conventions that tell us how to relate to people who are between the major status categories that constitute a discernable identity” (Titchkosky, 2009, p. 224). These ambiguities make it especially difficult for people with invisible disabilities to successfully secure accommodations and navigate the world successfully.

In another recent piece, Julie Cosenza refers to this liminal space as a type of “borderlands.” Taking a unique and interesting approach to this issue, Cosenza staged a performance piece in which she explored the ways in which people with invisible disabilities navigate the “borderlands” to interpret and make meaning out of their lives. To explain the need for such a project, Cosenza explains how her own experience as a woman with an invisible disability means navigating the borderlands in her daily life:

“There are many ways that I perform ablebodiedness according to the *dominant perception* of ablebodiedness; I am physically able to walk, carry out physical tasks and access public spaces. On the other hand, I share in the medicalization of disability – the doctor visits, special rehabilitative classes, documentation/proof of diagnosis, endless frustration and struggle over accommodations. I share in the socialization of disability – the alienation, public ridicule, (mis)judgment – therefore, I also share in disability activism, advocacy and rights movement.” (p. 7-8)

Through her performance piece, Cosenza demonstrates how people with invisible disabilities share the need to frame the meaning of their own lives. She hopes that those who attend her production or read her published work will develop a more nuanced understanding of the identity challenges that people with invisible disabilities face.

Thinking about each of the different ways that the liminal space between ability and disability has been conceived, how might Antigone – who is situated in a similarly liminal space – speak to the issues that these theorists face? Samuels, Caldwell, and Titchkosky share a focus on the need for a unified sense of identity for people with invisible disabilities. Though these scholars write on a diverse range of issues, each acknowledges the difficulty in navigating the

“liminal space” that they encounter. As I’ll argue in the next section, I believe that Cosenza’s performance art points to one possible solution, prefigured by Antigone’s own approach in the play.

## II. Antigone’s Conspiracy with Language: Implications for the Politics of (In)Visibility

In *Antigone’s Claim*, Butler argues that, “If kinship is the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human, achieved through political catachresis” (p. 82). In this section, I hope to show how a similar “political catachresis” is taking place in the language surrounding invisible disability. Building on Butler’s interpretation of Antigone’s language, I’ll argue that N. Ann Davis’ approach to understanding invisible disability can be understood as an exercise in “speaking the language of sovereignty.” Building on Honig’s interpretation of Antigone as “working the interval,” I’ll try to show how Julie Cosenza’s performance art and Emilia Nielsen’s poetry stage a similar form of resistance.

### *Butler: Antigone Speaks in the Language of Sovereignty*

In Butler’s analysis of *Antigone*, Antigone navigates her conflict with Creon by asserting her own sovereignty. When Creon asks if she buried her brother, she doesn’t answer the question in any unambiguously affirmative way – “I did it, I don’t deny a thing” (492). She refuses to deny that she did it, and in doing so, refuses a forced confession. Butler thinks that, in answering the question in this way, Antigone is defying Creon’s sovereignty and assuming for herself the voice of the law. On this account, what gives her act its power is the operation of power that it embodies. As Butler explains, Creon “expects that his word will govern her deeds, and she

speaks back to him, countering his sovereign speech act by asserting her own sovereignty” (p. 11). Antigone not only does the deed, but does it again by refusing to deny that she has done it.

To further explain just how Antigone speaks in the language of sovereignty, Butler argues that Antigone “attempts to speak in the political sphere in the language of sovereignty that is the instrument of political power” (p. 27). Butler argues that Antigone’s words “are chiasmically related to the vernacular of sovereign power, speaking in and against it, delivering and defying imperatives at the same time, inhabiting the language of sovereignty at the very moment in which she opposes sovereign power and is excluded from its terms” (p. 28). Through this speech act, Antigone manages to carve out a space for her own autonomy.

Applying these ideas to the study of invisible disability, we turn to an article published in *Ethics* in 2005. In this article, N. Ann Davis explores the effect of able-bodied standards on people with invisible disabilities. Throughout her essay, she appeals to accepted ethical norms (what I would call “the language of sovereignty”) in order to subvert and reinterpret those very norms. Throughout her work, she tries to “show how our continued subscription to a human paradigm that assigns primacy to meeting able-bodied standards...may lead to our living lives that are *less good by our own lights*” (p. 213 italics added). Rather than arguing for the equal treatment of people with invisible disabilities via existing literature on invisible disability, Davis appeals to what she calls “publicly professed values” or “commonsense views” about ability, disability, and morality. This approach is, arguably, a form of appropriating the language of sovereignty (or, in this case, the dominant discourse) to carve out a space for a rival autonomy.

*Honig: Antigone “Works the Interval” Through Citational Language*

While Butler frames Antigone's response to Creon as appropriating sovereignty, Honig frames the same act as a simple rejection of Creon's proposed frame. In this moment, Antigone makes a forced choice (the choice to affirm or deny her act) in such a way that forces others to choose, or confronts them with their own forced choice. This is something that Honig sees as creative and political, a form of resistance that creates new possibilities even where possibilities seem to be exhausted. Moving beyond Antigone's dialogue with Creon, Honig examines the ways in which Antigone puns, mimics, and parodies her way through her dirge. Using Ranciere's concept of "working the interval," Honig argues that Antigone is actively seeking to frame the meaning of her life and death (from what Cosenza would call the "borderlands," or what Butler would call a "space of cultural unintelligibility").

Examining Antigone's dirge, Honig first points out the way in which Antigone calls attention to the "coldness of an emergent civic ideology that offers the bereaved the cold comfort of replaceability" (p. 129-130). When Antigone insists on the specific irreplaceability of her brother Polynices, she is opposing the fifth century Athenian claim that past lives may be forgotten if future ones take their place. In these actions, Honig reads Antigone as parodying Pericles' funeral oration, an appropriative act that is lost on modern readers. For the original Greek audience, Honig thinks that this passage would have been funny. Antigone doesn't just cite Pericles, but actively lampoons the ideology that treats men as replaceable.

In her analysis of Antigone's dirge, Honig next points out the way in which Antigone mimics Creon's language, performing something like the "appropriation of sovereignty" that Butler refers to in her work. Here, Honig argues that a passage that is normally interpreted as cold and calculating – where Antigone claims that husbands and children are replaceable – should actually be read as mimicking Creon's earlier claim that there are other fields for Haemon

to plow. Through her subversively citational language, Antigone claims for herself a privilege that Creon would prefer to reserve for his son.

Continuing to analyze Antigone's dirge, Honig argues that, in another passage, Antigone is citing the story of Intaphrenes' wife. In doing so, Honig believes that Antigone is actively seeking to frame the meaning of her own death by shifting the frame of the viewer from herself to Creon, and in doing so, putting Creon on trial to his face (highlighting the fact that he is a less gifted ruler than Darius). Honig sees this as a form of *adianoeta*, or conspiratorial communication. With this covert reference, Honig believes that Antigone is indicating that the issue at hand is political, and that it is not merely about whether and how to bury Polynices, but rather about "rather about sovereign efforts to move subjects from the infinitude of loss and violent abyssal vengeance into a finite and more governable economy of wants, appetites, and their satisfactions" (137). Through these passages, Honig attempts to show that how we mourn is a deeply political issue.

Next, Honig shows more generally how Antigone used her dirge to frame the meaning of her life and death. Here, Antigone first tries to compare herself to the goddess Niobe. When the chorus doesn't accept this frame, it proposes another – that of Antigone as the daughter of Oedipus. Though Antigone partially accepts the validity of this frame for her life, she cites the story of Intaphrenes' wife in an attempt to secure an additional set of meanings for herself. This proposed frame is uncontested. It goes unremarked by the Chorus and unnoticed by Creon. Despite this, Honig thinks that Antigone fails, in the end, to secure the meaning of her life and death. The other characters in the play – Creon, the chorus, and others – do not accept many of the frames that Antigone proposes for the interpretation of her life.

I would argue, however, that though Antigone was ultimately unable to convince others to accept every frame she proposed, she *was* able to successfully frame the meaning of her life for herself *and* for many readers. Though her ability to successfully frame the meaning of her life *for herself* has been largely unremarked in the literature surrounding *Antigone*, I would argue that this accomplishment was foundational for her uncanny resolve and determination in the play. And aren't these the characteristics for which Antigone is admired most? Had she been unable to successfully make her life meaningful *for herself*, it seems unlikely that Antigone would have exhibited the remarkable qualities that have brought her such renown. And further, if Antigone had been entirely unsuccessful in framing the meaning of her life, it seems unlikely that we would continue to read her as a model of meaningful resistance to this day. Though Antigone may not have secured the approval of Creon or the chorus, she managed to secure the meaning of her life for herself and for many of those who read the play.

With these issues in mind, I would recommend that we examine recent developments in the invisible disability literature as a form of "working the interval" to frame the meaning of life and death from a place of unintelligibility. First, I'd like to look at Julie Cosenza's performance art in more detail. As a graduate student at San Francisco State University, Cosenza wrote, choreographed, and performed a theater piece entitled *The Turtle Walker: Staging Disability, Crip and Queer Theory*. Through her performances, Cosenza highlighted the intersections between invisible disabilities and invisible queer identities. It is noteworthy that the title of her play, *The Turtle Walker*, is based on a story about 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris in which members of the queer community saw a local "turtle walker" as a symbol of resistance. For this community and for Cosenza, the turtle's pace represents the subversion and disruption of the "rhythm of normalcy" (p. 2).



Speaking about her work, Cosenza writes that her process of deconstructing identity formation “involves analyzing interpellation and the systems of power that police the performance of identity” (2010, p. 1). To accomplish this goal, Cosenza used a combination of “theater, dance, mime, television, YouTube clips, visual images” and scholarly narrative to “[insert] difference into an unyielding system” (p. 2). Throughout the piece, Cosenza cites phrases commonly used in academia (“You have 45 minutes to complete this section”) and mass media (“Are you smarter than a fifth grader?”), combined with other visual media to try to give her audience a sense of the anxiety experienced by people with learning disabilities. Ultimately, Cosenza hopes that her project was able to build on and exemplify the ambiguity of the borderlands, and in doing so, provide “a space for transformation and new meaning” (p. 4). This, I would argue, is fundamentally like what Antigone was doing as she attempted to frame the meaning of her life and death. Both Cosenza and Antigone appropriated available discourses to create meaning from a space of cultural unintelligibility.

Like Cosenza’s performance of *The Turtle Walker*, Emilia Nielsen explores her own chronic illness through poetry. In a hybrid critical-creative paper published in 2016, Nielsen attempts to make space for a poetics of chronic illness. As she states early in the piece, her goal is to actively destabilize the binary that divides able bodies from disabled ones. And, like *The Turtle Walker*, Nielsen’s poetry is brimming with citational, appropriative language. In one set of poems, each verse is titled after a piece of medical terminology. Nielsen writes about hypertension, hyperreflexia, polyphagia, and other terms with which she has become familiar in her own medical history, attempting to subvert the received understanding of each term by adding something of her own personal experience. In doing so, she disrupts the hyper-medicalized way in which her body has been viewed by doctors and surgeons, replacing it with a

critical aesthetic that “exploits the dissonances” in her own lived experience. This is, arguably, a form of “working the interval,” not unlike what Antigone attempts through her dirge.

Thinking about Cosenza and Nielsen’s work together with Davis’ more conventional analysis, I would argue that Butler and Honig’s readings of Antigone (as “conspiring with language” to frame the meaning of her life and death) illuminate what it is that each of these theorists are trying to accomplish. All three theorists claim to be navigating a liminal space through their work, and each use citational, appropriative language in order to subvert hegemonic discourses. If we allow Antigone to serve as a model of resistance for this emerging field, classicizing her for this purpose, we might see more work emerge along these lines. Based on the success of Davis, Cosenza, and Nielsen’s respective projects, I would argue that this Antigonean model is immensely promising for the still-young field of scholarship on invisible disabilities.

### **III. Navigating the Space Between Life and Death: Antigone as a Model of Resistance for Theories of Invisible Disability**

In the first section of this paper, I tried to show how Judith Butler’s situating of Antigone as a figure of liminal identity has relevance for a set of issues explored within contemporary disability theory. In the second section, I explored how Judith Butler and Bonnie Honig’s conception of Antigone as “conspiring with language” can help us make sense of emerging scholarship on invisible disability. In this section, I hope to provide a re-reading of Antigone that focuses on the ways in which Antigone navigates the space “between life and death” and attempts to frame the meaning of her life from a place of what Butler would call “cultural unintelligibility.”

In order to resist the meaning assigned to her life by other actors in the play – including Ismene, Creon, and the chorus – Antigone frames her life as a “living death.” She knows that she occupies an ambiguous space – “no home on earth and none below, not with the living, not with the breathless dead” (941-942) – and in from this space, she frames her death as a choice. She argues that she has always been bound for death, and makes it clear that *this* death is her choice. She won’t accept Creon’s frame for her life (as a traitor sentenced to death), but insists on telling her story *her way*. Antigone’s narrative about her life and death has been seen as a model of resistance for feminist and queer theory for decades, but in this section, I hope to show how Antigone is promising for theories of invisible disability as well.

### *The Opening Dialogue with Ismene*

In the opening dialogue with Ismene, Antigone appears resigned to her death. She approaches Ismene with her mind made up, determined to bury Polynices even at the cost of her life. Because she recognizes that she is no longer entirely in or of the world of the living, Antigone has shifted her attention to the world below: “I have longer to please the dead than please the living here: in the kingdom down below I’ll lie forever” (88-90). In these opening passages, Antigone acknowledges the uncomfortably liminal space she occupies, and from the beginning, decides to navigate this space *her way*. Despite early opposition from Ismene, Antigone remains determined to carry out her plans. By burying Polynices instead of obeying Creon’s edict, Antigone believes that she has found a way to make her otherwise miserable life meaningful.

In the very first verses of the play, Antigone begins to frame the meaning of her life. She speaks of the griefs handed down by Oedipus, and asks whether there is “one grief that Zeus will

not perfect for the two of us while we still live and breathe?" (3-5). All her life, she has been defined by her father's curse. And here, Antigone seems ready to break with tradition and frame her death as a glory, rather than a disgrace – "And even if I die in the act, that death will be a glory" (84). She feels that, because she is bound for death anyway, she ought to seize upon the opportunity to make her life meaningful outside of this limited space.

Later, as Antigone explains her plans to Ismene, she rejects other potential frames in advance. When Ismene asks if she would bury Polynices despite Creon's edict, Antigone replies that "No one will ever convict me for a traitor" (57). Here, Antigone seems to foreshadow Creon's later condemnation and subverts his diagnosis of the situation by defining a "traitor" as one who defies the gods. When Creon later casts Antigone as a traitor, she has already primed the audience to reject Creon's frame, based on her earlier subversion of the term. In doing so, Antigone shows how masterfully she is able to weave a narrative for her life that makes a glory of her death.

### *The Confrontation with Creon*

In the confrontation with Creon, Antigone proposes a series of frames as a way to render meaningful the space she occupies between life and death. When Creon first demands how Antigone had the gall to break his law, she replies, "Die I must, I've known it all my life – how could I keep from knowing? – even without your death-sentence ringing in my ears. And if I am to die before my time I consider that a gain" (512-516). She goes on to say that she gave herself to death long ago – "I gave myself to death, long ago, so I might serve the dead" (630-631). With this ambiguous space between life and death as the backdrop – which Antigone is aware she occupies – Antigone proceeds to insist on a glorious death. Responding to Creon's accusations,

she insists on framing the situation on her own terms: “Give me glory! What greater glory could I win than to give my own brother a decent burial?” (561-562).

In subsequent passages, Antigone explains that she was “born to join in love, not hate” (590) and insists that this is her nature. In response, Creon sentences Antigone to death. But in doing so, Creon appears to tacitly accept the meaning that Antigone has proposed for her actions. He replies, “Go down below and love, if love you must – love the dead! (592-593). Here, we have evidence that Antigone is not only actively seeking to shape the meaning of her life, despite all odds, but that some of her proposed frames are accepted by others.

As Ismene enters the scene and attempts to confess, Antigone rebukes her with the phrase: “You chose to live, I chose to die” (626). Here, Antigone is continuing to frame her death as *her own* choice, not Creon’s. To explain her actions, she tells Ismene that “Your wisdom appealed to one world – mine, another” (628). Here, Antigone continues to justify her actions in terms of the law of the gods, as she has from the beginning. From the first moment in her confrontation with Creon, Antigone has insisted that the gods’ laws trump Creon’s edict – “Nor did I think your edict had such force that you, a mere mortal, could override the gods, the great unwritten, unshakeable traditions” (503-505). By citing the gods’ laws as the foundation for her claim, Antigone reinforces the glory and grandeur of her actions. And, by contrasting this higher law with the law of a mere mortal, Antigone makes Creon’s edict seem rather small.

In the dialogue between Haemon and Creon, Haemon cites the spread of Antigone’s version of events – “‘No woman,’ they say, ‘ever deserved death less, and such a brutal death for such a glorious action...Death? She deserves a glowing crown of gold!’” (777-782) – as a reason to halt her execution. Haemon pleads with Creon to consider the outrage Antigone’s death will cause, given that so many people see her actions as glorious and warranted. Here, we can see

further evidence that some aspect of Antigone's proposed frame has taken hold. Though Creon refuses to acknowledge it, Antigone has succeeded not just in making her own life meaningful for herself, but has managed to secure the approbation of others.

Despite Haemon's appeals on Antigone's behalf, Creon eventually sentences Antigone to a living death – "I will take her down some wild, desolate path never trod by men, and wall her up alive in a rocky vault" (870-872). Given the way that Antigone has positioned herself up to this point – as occupying a place between life and death, and choosing to make that space glorious – Creon's sentence seems to tacitly accept some of the meaning that Antigone has proposed for her life. Rather than killing her at the moment that she confesses her crime, Creon allows Antigone to continue with her dirge, and eventually leaves her buried alive – and while still alive, Antigone can continue to frame the meaning of her life.

### *Antigone's Dirge*

In her dirge, Antigone continues to frame her position as somewhere between life and death. She says that "The god of death who puts us all to bed takes me down to the banks of Acheron alive" (904-905) and that she goes "to wed the lord of the dark waters" (908). Here, the chorus accepts this frame and repeats back to her, "You go down to the halls of Death alive and breathing" (913-914). Continuing her dirge, Antigone states that she goes to her "rockbound prison, strange new tomb – always a stranger, O dear god, I have no home on earth and none below, not with the living, not with the breathless dead" (939-942). Here, Antigone's liminal position is strikingly clear. She feels that she has no home with the living or the dead, and thus operates in the ambiguous space in between. When the chorus asks Antigone if she finds herself here because of her father's ordeal, Antigone replies that, though she goes now to the home of

her parents, she is a stranger there – “I am a stranger!” (956). This reinforces the liminality of Antigone’s position and provides the backdrop for the ways in which she attempts to frame the meaning of her life. Though Antigone knows that she “descend[s] alive to the caverns of the dead” (1012), she will not cease to frame her actions as glorious.

At first, Antigone compares herself to the goddess Niobe, who died a similar living death. The chorus does not accept this frame, but Antigone herself may find it comforting, which may contribute to the meaning she is making of her life in these final moments. From here, Antigone bemoans her unjust fate – “But if these men are wrong, let them suffer nothing worse than they mete out to me – these masters of injustice!” (1019-1021). In framing Creon’s actions as unjust, Antigone reinforces the glory and grandeur of her death. She sets herself up as martyr for a holy cause, and claims that she has acted “all for reverence...for the gods!” (1034). By framing her life in this way, in the last moments before she is whisked away to her death, Antigone successfully navigates the otherwise ambiguous space she occupies. Rather than accepting Creon’s assessment of the situation – which would be easy for her to do, given his disproportionate power to frame the meaning of the events as they transpire – Antigone insists on the glory and grandeur of her actions. From her place between life and death, Antigone carves out a home for herself where none was provided for her.

### *A Model of Resistance*

Despite everything – despite the Oedipal curse, the ambiguity of her life, and her own tragic fate – Antigone never ceases to make her life meaningful. From the very beginning of the play, in the opening dialogue with Ismene, Antigone insists on living her life on her own terms. She knows how ambiguous and precarious her position is – and knows how difficult it will be to

render her actions “intelligible” to the world – but still presses forward in her plans, despite opposition from every side. Throughout her interactions with Creon and the chorus, Antigone cites the gods’ laws to reinforce the grandeur and glory of her claims. Though these claims are only partially accepted by her audience, Antigone succeeds in framing the meaning of her life and death for herself.

With these passages in mind, how might this reading of Antigone provide a model of resistance for theories of invisible disability? Thinking back on the creative work of Cosenza and Nielsen, we can see how scholars are attempting to situate issues of invisible disability within a larger discourse, while at the same time struggling to overcome the ambiguity of the space and render it meaningful. But, taking a cue from Honig, who discusses the risks of classicization in her book, we ought to ask ourselves: If we classicize Antigone for this area of study, what might we illuminate and what might we obscure?

We know that Antigone doesn’t share the same liminal space with the invisibly disabled. Antigone is healthy and able-bodied. Reading Antigone as a model of resistance for the invisibly disabled necessarily obscures the discontinuities between Antigone’s liminality and the liminality present in theories of invisible disability. However, despite these discontinuities, Antigone navigates the space between life and death in a way that is rich with relevance for those who struggle to make meaning in a similar space between ability and disability. For some, this space may be quite literally “between life and death.” Individuals with multiple sclerosis, for example, may experience their quality of life deteriorate rapidly at any time, which can sometimes lead to premature death. For those who live in a similarly ambiguous space between ability and disability, or between life and death, Antigone’s narrative opens up plentiful opportunities for classicization.



What does it matter that the story of Antigone is, ultimately, a tragedy? Antigone doesn't convince Creon to budge on his death sentence. She may succeed in making her life meaningful to herself and a few others, but her life *does* end prematurely. Thinking about this within the context of the reading provided thus far, Antigone's death doesn't seem to detract from the resistance she staged while still alive. On the contrary, Antigone's death may add to the depth and relevance of the play, especially when read as a model of resistance for those who themselves come face to face with the possibility of death in their own lives.

However, the fact that Antigone's death is ultimately her own doing – she chooses to defy Creon's edict with a full knowledge of the consequences – does present a striking discontinuity between Sophocles' Antigone and existing theories of invisible disability. Though some people who are invisibly disabled may make choices that lead to an exacerbation of their condition, most people experience a disability as something beyond their control. Here, we can see a potential limit to classicizing Antigone for theories of invisible disability. With this in mind, I would argue that reading Antigone as a model of resistance for this emerging field illuminates far more than it obscures. Ultimately, reading Antigone as a model of meaning-making and glorious resistance sheds light on one way in which it is possible to navigate the “interstitial space” that would otherwise exclude people with invisible disabilities from the “terms that confer intelligibility on life.” Following in Butler's footsteps, I would argue that Antigone provides a powerfully critical perspective that we can use to rewrite the “terms of livability” that shape the lives of the invisibly disabled.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In the first section of this paper, I tried to show how Judith Butler's situating of Antigone as a figure of liminal identity has relevance for contemporary disability theory, and in particular, for emerging scholarship on invisible disabilities. Because scholarship on invisible disabilities has repeatedly emphasized the way in which invisible disabilities fall into a sort of "interstitial space," Antigone's own liminality shares an interesting resonance with these concepts. By exploring Antigone's orientation within her own identity categories – between life and death primarily, but also between kinship and the state, and between the social and pre-social – I tried to show how we can better understand what it means to successfully navigate such a space.

In the second section, I evaluated Butler and Honig's conceptions of Antigone as "conspiring with language" – actively seeking to frame the meaning of her life and death from a space of cultural unintelligibility – to show how these conceptions can help us to make sense of contemporary developments in emerging scholarship on invisible disabilities. I argued that Davis, Cosenza, and Nielsen's work typifies what I would call an "Antigonean" model of resistance. Each of these theorists claim to be navigating an ambiguous, liminal space in their work, and each uses citational, appropriative language in order to subvert dominant discourses. Like Antigone, these theorists are concerned with making meaning of a life (or of lives) that would otherwise be unintelligible to the world.

In the final section of this paper, I took Butler and Honig's ideas further to demonstrate the ways in which *Antigone* can be read as a model of resistance for theories of invisible disability. I tried to show how, despite everything, Antigone insisted on living her life on her own terms. Though she knew how ambiguous (or "culturally unintelligible") her position was, and knew how difficult it would be to render her actions intelligible to the world, she was unceasing in her attempts to define her life as meaningful, grand, and glorious. Though

Antigone's frame may not have been convincing to other characters in the play, or even to audiences at the time, her words have been coaxing readers to her side for over two millennia now. Despite her own tragic fate, her words continue to inspire readers to navigate their own challenges with Antigonean strength.

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