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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

1 **Gender and Jewish Culture** is the first issue of **gender forum** to address the intersections of gender and Jewish culture(s) and religion from a wide range of perspectives. The issue brings together two articles which analyze stereotypical constructions of femininity in Israeli fiction and the gendering of religious narratives, respectively. Additionally, the issue features an interview with Tanya Segal, Poland's first female rabbi, in which she addresses questions of identity, culture, religion and gender.

2 In "Abortion and the single woman as literary tropes in the works of Amos Oz" Dvir Abramovich provides a gender-based reading of a large sample of texts, concentrating on constructions of abortion and single women. In regard to the former, Abramovich points out that the moral rhetoric of Oz' texts ultimately serves to construct abortion as unethical. He identifies four strategies which are employed to present abortion as a moral evil – constructing the motives of those deciding on abortion as selfish, humanising the foetus, presenting the actual operation as gruesome and finally invoking psychological risks in those undergoing abortions. Similarly reactionary, Oz' constructions of unmarried women are less than favourable, showing them as lonely, morally bankrupt and potentially dangerous. Abramovich then goes on to show that these connotations do not apply to unmarried men. Thus, his systematic analysis manages to show the prevalence of certain rhetoric strategies serving heteropatriarchal ends in Oz' writing.

3 Concentrating on the foundations of monotheistic religions, Magda Romanska's contribution "Performing the Covenant: Akedah and the Origins of Masculinity" re-evaluates the covenant between Abraham and God from a gender perspective. Drawing on Derrida and Kierkegaard, she analyses the male ethics of self-sacrifice as well as the gendered connection between death and wisdom. In an analysis of Sarah's part in the story she then describes the systematic exclusion of women from the covenant with God, and hence from the possibility of becoming an ethical subject within this logic. The mechanisms through which this exclusion is achieved are shown to be manifold – the ritual of circumcision, binding men to each other and collectively to God, is elaborated on alongside the narrative silencing of Sarah and Abrahams privilege of being able to hear the voice of God. Sarah's death, in this context, operates on a very different level than the sacrifice requested of Abraham and reveals that the only path to the divine open for women is to become the subject-object of sacrifice.

4 Rohee Dasgupta's interview with Rabbi Tanya Segal takes up questions of Jewish culture and religious practice. Being the first female Rabbi in Poland, Segal currently leads the progressive reform congregation Beit Warszawa and attempts to further the development

of progressive Judaism in Poland. Having worked as a dramatist and actor in Moscow's Yiddish theatre and having studied both theology and theatre in Israel, she elaborates on the connections between performance, cultural experience and religion as practice. Her Midrash theatre project is a method of exploring theology using art and promotes individual creativity in dealing with traditional texts. This performative re-reading also allows for multiple perspectives, enabling a 'dialogue' with traditional female figures of Judaism. However, while the position of women in progressive Judaism is much stronger than in its orthodox counterpart, the difficulties of developing a Jewish identity in Poland make this a priority for her over the aim of overcoming the patriarchal rabbinical order.

5 This issue of **gender forum** features reviews of *Africa After Gender?* (edited by Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher), *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America* (by Deborah Clarke), *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance* (by Lynette Goddard), and *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture* (by Nadia Valman).

Abortion and the single woman as literary tropes in the works of Amos Oz

By Dvir Abramovich, University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract:

This paper provides a gender-based reading of texts by Israeli Author Amos Oz, in particular Fima, My Michael, A Perfect Peace as well as several short stories. The constructions of unmarried women and of abortion are focused on as tropes betraying the reactionary gender politics in these texts. The analysis reveals that the representation of abortion is rhetorically biased, representing the decision as selfish, the operation as inhumane and the foetus as a child, while exaggerating the psychic risks for women undergoing abortion. The unmarried female characters in Oz' texts are shown to be presented according to sexist stereotypes, which is further supported by the asymmetry in comparison to their male counterparts.

1 With few exceptions, Israeli literary criticism since the country's establishment in 1948 has been concerned with the examining of the Zionist enterprise, nation and state building issues and the Arab Israeli conflict (Shaked, Megged). As a result, feminist revisions and enquiry into gender constructions in the Israeli canon have been noticeably missing. However, this paucity of gender research has thankfully changed over the last decade, with several scholars opening up this rich, diverse and exciting area.

2 In the manner of wider sociological trends, Israeli fiction has turned away from the state generation's predominant message of ideals and ideology, away from the parochial motif of the struggle between the individual and the state. After half a century, important new voices and variants are being heard, voices that do not sit within the exclusive domain of the modernist Zionist version and are not influenced by traditional canonical modes of expression and concerns. In many ways, the disassociation from the customary prisms of the literary establishment has triggered a dialectic pattern whose undercurrents are formatively shaking up the traditional Israeli identity developed by the diegesis of the mainstream writers (Bartana, Bezherano, Moked, Shamir).

3 In the introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism* we read: "Whether concerned with the literary representation of sexual difference, with the ways that literary genres have been shaped by masculine or feminine values [...] feminist criticism has established gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis" (Showalter, 1985: 3). Intriguingly and lamentably, however, the fiction of Israel's greatest living author and two time Nobel Prize nominee Amos Oz has been relatively shielded from the piercing eye of feminist discussion and from the ongoing dialogue between literature and gender hermeneutics. Despite the critical surfeit

regarding his letters, comparatively speaking, feminist reappraisal of Oz's canon is still in its embryonic stage.

4 This article, examines the motifs of abortion and the single woman in the Oz corpus. It has been informed by a methodological thematic feminist approach to re-examine several of the Amos Oz texts. At heart, the locus of this examination has been to re-evaluate the author's narratives through feminist lenses, to predominantly re-enter its fictional dimensions and strategies with the particular objective aim of uncovering misogynous presumptions and distorted images of women. In the questions raised herein we have attempted to deconstruct patriarchal ideologies and their commensurate forms of ideas, values and syntax that for so long have served to transfer cultural and social antifeminist representations of women into textual discourse.

5 Our primary concern has been to become a 'resisting reader', thereby adopting an oppositional reading stance which on the one hand encourages interpreting against the grain of fabricated truisms, and on the other, inevitably leads to the exposing of deforming stereotypes and oppressing misrepresentations that permeate the author's constructions of female characters. In other words, we have engaged in unveiling the beliefs and implicit assumptions that determine the delineation of the female, as well as the underlying premises that disturbingly identify womanliness with an array of sexist attitudes that offensively degrade its female psyche and sexuality.

6 To put it differently, the social construction of gender is still driven by a patriarchal conceptual apparatus which articulates androcentric stereotypes in the portrayal of female protagonists. Thus, Female characters are infantilised and devalued, as well as distinguished from men, by having they're entire being generically defined purely in the sexual realm. Greer underscores the importance of this phenomenon when she writes: "The universal sway of the feminine stereotype is the single most important factor in male and female woman-hatred" (261).

Abortion

7 While the very core of the passionate debate and struggle about abortion has chiefly been a social and political question that has lead to a smorgasbord of discourse and critiques dealing with this operative polemical issue, abortion and its literary manifestation have been, for the most part, unexplored in Israeli fiction and never, to our knowledge, in the stories of Amos Oz.

8 The conflation of abortion and literature bears special relevance to the critic for, as Wilt states, "The confines of art are no less grotesque and complicated than the purlieus of life when it comes to abortion. But at least the truth of the author's intention and his/her achievement remains stable enough to be looked at and argued over" (XI). Indeed, the examination of the intermingling of abortion and fiction has particular salience to Feminist theory and practice as evocatively encapsulated in Ellen Willis's declaration that, "Abortion is first of all the key issue of the new right's antifeminist campaign, the ground on which a larger battle over the very idea of a woman's liberation is fought" (12). In a similar vein, Komisar argues that the question of abortion...is closely tied to the attitude that men have traditionally held about women as people as sexual being" (82). The representation of abortion has been referenced by a constant barrage of negative attacks mirroring the crusade launched by the assortment of Right to Life movements and the Religious Bloc- forces that have attempted to promote the idea that the exercise by women of this reproductive freedom carries with it a moral taint.

9 Compositionally, the literary portrayal of abortion resonates with the bulwark of sexist oppression that characterises male authored texts: a historicized de-legitimization of images of women as models of self determination, possessing power and sexual autonomy and the foregrounding of the retrograde patriarchal belief that innately women are helpless victims who must be denied the right to choose. At heart, male writers seek to rework an old pattern of opposition to reproductive freedom by employing antiabortion iconography and concepts in a thematic strategy to elide positive female representations from their texts, embedding instead de-stabilizing messages aped from anti choice dirges. As Susan Faludi explains, in the backlash climate, abortion was has become a "[...] moral litmus test to separate the good women from the bad" (133).

10 In almost every regard, Oz's narratives reinforce pre-existing traditional dominant ideologies of the antiabortion campaign, with his sub-plots functioning as homilies to denounce women who had abortion. Noticeably absent are an evenhanded debate and a pluralistic vista articulating the divergent views involved. A pronounced failure to delineate the main factors in the crucible of the abortion controversy defines his narrative. Certainly, the attitude towards abortion disclosed in the narrative is inextricably linked to a disapproval of women's emancipation. In Oz, it is masculine cultural conventions that ground the norms of textual representations, establishing one unified position and excluding any reconciliation of the different subjective beliefs nuancing the discussion. Now, it would be foolhardy to maintain that the decision and process is the same for all, and does not carry with it a

multifarious assemblage of emotions and responses. However, the texts to be discussed tend to reject any notion that abortion encompasses a multiplex of experience and is "[...] personal to each circumstance and affects each individual differently," (Francke 43) and thus escapes any monolithic construction.

11 In decoding the authorial intent of the Oz stories dealing with the sentiment and landscape of abortion, four areas of contextual strategy can be identified. The first, depicts the decision of those to procure abortion as selfish and in violation of certain moral edicts, through its principal protagonists flashing back to their shameful episode, haunted by these past ghosts as an imprint of horror engraved on their conscience. Second, similar to the tactics the Right to Life activists were encouraged to adopt, emotive vernacular is employed to describe the foetus, humanising and renaming it as the 'unborn baby/child, portraying abortion as the murdering of a living, entity-like person. Moreover, and taking the literary manipulation a step further, the author uses the motif of 'foetus becomes a person at the time of conception' to breathe corporal life and endow the foetus with fully formed personhood, in addition to having their female and male characters sonorously speculate on the life of their potential offspring. Thirdly, the actual procedure and method of abortion is re-contextualized to present it as metonymic of a bloody and inhuman operation; frequently, the issue of the disposal of the foetuses is replicated to further activate abortion guilt. Lastly, the dark side of the abortion myth is revived through the manifestation of physical and psychic risks resulting from the procedure in one of the heroines who underwent the operation.

12 An exemplar of the first model of literary manipulation is used in the novel *Fima*. Yael, the former wife of the eponymous hero recalls back with remorse to her decision to have an abortion: "I got a child by you and you didn't want it. So, like a good girl, I murdered it so as not to mess up your poetic life" (241). Similarly: "[...] we murdered it and we shut up [...] We both murdered it. Only you didn't want to hear when or where and how. All you wanted to hear from me was that it was all over" (244). Fima, for his part, demurs: "You know very well that what you said earlier isn't the whole truth. You didn't want the baby either" (243).

13 The reflection by Yonatan Lifshits concerning his wife's abortion, in another novel, *A Perfect Peace*, merits a long citation for its sheer orchestration of a morality lecture on the evils of abortion:

She used to put my hand on her belly to feel the baby move [...] When she had that abortion? Madness. Mysteriously, Yonatan had the sensation of the baby moving in his own belly...Come on, I yelled at her, it's too soon for us to have children. The two of us are fine by ourselves. It's not my job to sire a dynasty for my father. I don't want

my parents getting into bed with us. And so one morning she went to Haifa and came back empty. (338-339)

14 Aunt Janya, the bitter and tough-talking protagonist in the novel *My Michael*, personifies the stock image of the heartless female who seeks abortion for purely economic reasons — an image cribbed from the lexicon of portraits the antiabortion movement seeks to push. When she hears that Hanna, her nephew's wife is pregnant, she is maddened by the prospect of a child endangering Michael's future career, and proposes the option of abortion. Hanna recalls the shattering conversation, "She accused me of irresponsibility. I would ruin all Michael's efforts at getting on and achieving something in life. Didn't I realise that Michael's progress was my own destiny? And right before his final examinations, too!" (49). It is, however, Janya's underlying financial reasons and the manner in which she raises the issue that brings to the simmer the emotions of horror and disdain the reader experiences. Given Aunt Janya's deportment it is not surprising that Hanna reacts with dismay to the suggestion, running into the kitchen and crying. Later, she remarks on the incident, "I remembered Aunt Janya's distasteful visit at the beginning of my pregnancy, and at times I imagined perversely that it was I who had wanted to get rid of the baby" (67).

15 As Komisar notes, "Opponents also say that someone great may have been lost to the world by abortion" (37) in protesting the imagery and semantic battle the antiabortion movement marshals to incorporate its ideology into mainstream culture. By elevating the foetus into infant status, or at an extreme, the public is in a sense asked to imagine the unborn as a fully grown child, the anti-choice camp wields enormous emotional appeal. It is in this sense, that writers and political activists become bedfellows.

16 Oz skirts along this edge most overreachingly in *Fima*: "Was it not possible that the child Yael had not wanted might have grown up to be world famous?" (284), he ponders. Elsewhere, he and his former wife Yael muse about the possibility that if Yale would not have undergone the abortion, they could have had a son or a daughter. Here are two sequences that are an excellent illustration of the technique mentioned earlier. First Yael:

He could have been a boy of twenty six by now. He could be a father himself, with a child or two of his own. The eldest might be Dimi's age. And you and I would go into town to buy an aquarium and some tropical fish for the grandchildren. Where do you think the drains of Jerusalem empty out? Into the Mediterranean, via Nahal Shorek? And the sea joins up with Greece, and there the King of Ithaca's daughter might have picked him up out of the waves. Now he's a curly-haired youth sitting playing the lyre in the moonlight on the water's edge in Ithaca. (245)

Then Fima:

As he walked up towards the Histadrut building, it occurred to him that this obsequious, overfed young man with the sausagelike fingers and starched shirt that had grimy collar and cuffs was more or less the same age as the son that Yael had got rid of two minutes away from here at some clinic [...] However, Fima thought wryly, it might have been a girl. A miniature Giulietta Masina with a soft bright hair. She could have been named after his mother Liza, or in its Hebrew mutation, Elisheva. Although it is certain Yael would have vetoed this. (270)

17 In another scene, Fima wonders whether, an aborted foetus in the clinic may not be Yoezer's (Yoezer being a phantom being Fima imagines will live in his apartment hundred years from now) father or grandfather. Furthermore, following Yael's earlier outburst, quoted in length in the previous paragraph, Fima sinks into despair, "And why does Yael assume it was a boy? What if it was actually a girl? A little Yael with soft long hair and a face like Giulietta Masina? He laid his arms on the table and without opening his eyes hid his weary head on them" (245). One could venture the observation that these meta-textual-discourses, draped in a fictional garb, emblemize quintessential antiabortion propaganda in castigating the practice and maintaining a male preserve, rather than considering both sides of this dispute.

18 Oz's novels capture in miniature, all be it in grandiose strokes, the larger conflation of personal morality and sensational psychological warfare of the antiabortion leaders. In one text Oz parades in the most prosaic fashion heart-wrenching verbose when describing abortion clinics and the simple and safe procedure, so that the reader is invited to conclude that it is executions and butchery that are taking place.

19 The specific text that resides in the centre of this discussion is *Fima*. Since *Fima* takes place in gynaecologist's clinic (termed the "abortion inferno" (195)), it is inevitable that abortion becomes an underlying subtext. For example, in one segment, Fima chances upon the operating table, detailing in not-so-subtle terms the instruments of 'destruction' :

[...] he felt a dull pang of revulsion in his stomach [...] Laid out with obsessive precision beside the speculums were long bladed scissors, forceps, IUDs hermetically sealed in sterile plastic. To the left behind the doctor's desk, on a small trolley, stood the suction pump that was used, Fima knew, to terminate pregnancy by means of suction. He shuddered at the thought that this was a kind of enema in reverse, and that womanhood was an irreparable injustice. (121)

20 At another extreme, in *My Michael* it is a female voice that is employed to present abortion as an ordinary, unemotional act: "The whole thing is just a simple matter of a twenty minute operation, now worse than having your tonsils out. But there are some complicated women who won't understand the simplest things" (49). In another passage, Fima reflects on the fate of the foetuses:

And what did they do with the foetuses? Put them in a plastic bag and drop them into the rubbish bins that he and Tamar emptied at the end of the day? Food for alley cats?

Or did they flush them down at the lavatory and rinse them with disinfectant? Snows of yesteryear. If the light within you darkens, it is written, how great is the darkness. (121)

Yael too, has similar thoughts: "To this day I don't want to know what they do with them. Tinier than a day-old chick. Do they flush them down the lavatory? We both murdered it" (244).

21 Another strategy of antiabortion rhetorics has been the paternalistic contention that women must be deprived of the option to choose because its exercise would result in severe psychological scarring, consequent miscarriages and infertility. In this regard, it may be helpful to recall the research results conducted by American doctors who concluded that safe abortion procedures carried no adverse effects on fertility, and that establishment of a uniform nexus between abortion and mental adversity was extremely tenuous (Faludi 30).

22 It is in *A Perfect Peace* that this imagery is exceedingly embodied in the character of Rimona, through which the entire narrative is presented as a cautionary tale. First, the reader is presented with the physical health effects of Rimona's only abortion: "The preceding summer, several months before Yonatan made up his mind to leave, a sad thing happened to his wife [...] Two years before, Rimona had lost a baby. Then, when she became pregnant again, she was delivered at the end of the summer of a stillborn girl. The doctors advised against her of trying again, at least for the time being (12).

23 Add to this the description of the stillborn delivery which threatened her life: "Two hours ago we decided to get Professor Schillinger himself out of bed [...] He drove all the way from the outskirts of Mount Carmel just in time to save, I mean literally save, your wife's life [...] all that matters is that your wife is alive. Professor Schillinger literally revived her" (71).

24 Moreover, it is strongly suggested that Rimona's eccentric behaviour, bordering on mental retardation (critic Gershon Shaked asserts is that she is partly insane (*Gal* 87)) was caused by the abortion and the subsequent miscarriage. She oscillates between reality and fantasy, acting as if the baby she lost during the second pregnancy, whom she has named Efrat, is still alive. For example, when she speaks of her day's work, she includes her imaginary daughter: "Efrat's crawling on all fours, the golden sand around her warm and clean. And the moonlight swaddles her with silver webs" (171). "I have put Efrat to sleep, too, and now I am all alone" (163). Elsewhere, she plans to soothe Efrat at night, and when the Military police who are investigating Yonatan's disappearance confirm his particulars with her, they are puzzled by her interjection that she and Yonatan have a daughter. At that point, Jonathan's father intervenes to explain Rimona's mental frailty and the loss of the baby.

25 The terrible punishment meted out to Rimona for the abortion, and the paralysing ghost of the child she is haunted by, suggest both on a literal and allegorical level that the moral universe that dominates *A Perfect Peace*, and the other texts under discussion in this essay, is clearly driven by a patriarchal standpoint.

The Single Woman

26 Popular culture, and particularly, the masculine perspective percolating through the literary canon, have decreed that the single woman is to be pitied and censured for her sexual unacceptability, and her failure to find a suitable mate. In the main, this has been achieved through a cruel and dispraising portrayal, in a writing tradition with a long history. As Rogers explains, the spinster has continually functioned as the subject of ridicule in mainstream literature: "The old maid has provided an even more convenient butt for hostility against women, since she did not justify her existence by being a wife and a mother [. . .] caricatured as ugly, disagreeable, and relentlessly in pursuit of men" (201). Certainly, there has been a lack of positive images of the single woman in male fiction.

27 The stock image of the unmarried woman has been one of a forlorn and frustrated figure, who due to her inability (or refusal) to wed has been derided, scorned and isolated by society as some kind of deviant. Deegan, who conducted one of the first major studies into the representation of the 'unattached' female in popular fiction, concluded, that male authors have subjected the old maid to pillorying which has not extended to male bachelors. In her investigation, she discerned certain assumed feminine qualities that these characters were assigned by the purveyors of this stereotype, qualities that recurred with disturbing familiarity and which maintained the mendacious impression that single women were desperate for a man to marry.

28 A single woman of considerable sadness and loneliness is Geula Sirkin of the stories "Nomad and Viper" and "Before His Time." The prescient male narrator loads up his characterisation with condescension and pity, depicting her as a figure of mockery in the Kibbutz and repeatedly nullifying, in the guise of sympathy, any positive attributes she may possess. As Deegan found in the portrayal of unmarried woman, "The most marked characteristic [. . .] is the repeated reference to unattractive physical qualities, more often that not to ugliness of face or angularity of form" (105). And indeed, from the very outset Geula's unpleasant appearance is accentuated: "Her face was pale and thin [. . .]. A pair of bitter lines were etched at the corners of her mouth [. . .]. On hot days, when faces are covered in sweat,

the acne on her cheeks reddened and she seems to have no hope" (Oz 27-28). In "Before His Time" the emphasis on Geula as homely and graceless continues:

Her nails are cracked, her hands are rough and scabby, and there are two bitter creases at the corners of her mouth. Her legs are thin and pale and covered with a down of black hairs. That is why she always wears trousers, never a skirt or a dress. And although she is now more than twenty years old, there are still adolescent pimples on her cheeks. (Oz 65)

29 In Kibbutz matters she is a cipher, her contribution confined to that of preparing coffee for cultural and social meetings: a participation which is not unnoticed by the narrator. With a dollop of irony he points out that although still without a husband, her ability to make the finest coffee whenever needed was always appreciated by the members'. This comment would seem to accord with Deegan's conclusions about the attitudes expressed by central or secondary characters towards the unmarried female protagonist: "Some characters express pity and ridicule [. . .] some kind of admiration is often mingled with adverse attitudes" (105). Importantly, in the main introduction the narrator fleetingly refers to her age of twenty nine, implying that with every passing day her plight is worsening and that is why she is such an embittered and morose character: "I avoid her glance, so as not to have to face her mocking sadness" (Oz, "Nomad" 28). Similarly: "Geula Sirkin, the surviving child of Zeshka and Dov, wakes up in hatred and rises to wash her face under the cold water faucet" (Oz, "Before" 65). All in all, in the phallocratic domain, Geula is seen only in terms of her marital status and not as an individual. Rightly, Bachur remarks that Geula represents the epitome of loneliness in the Kibbutz (13).

30 Conversely, her late younger brother was proclaimed a legend in the army, promoted to a commander of his own battalion at twenty three. Indeed, even after his death his military exploits are still spoken of with reverence: how he partook in all the reprisal raids, sick with pneumonia blew up an Arab police-station and alone captured a notorious terrorist and six of his crew (Oz, "Before" 66). His few visits to the Kibbutz "[. . .] had been a delight to the unmarried girls. And sometimes to the married girls as well [. . .]. He just burst out laughing and asked why they were all hanging around him, as if they had no homes to go to, as if they had nothing to do" (66)

31 In the course of the tale, the male narrator makes it clear that her solitary state is a situation she is responsible for, namely, spurning his attempts at companionship and rejecting any intimacy: "Sometimes I would rest a conciliatory hand on her neck, and wait for her to calm down. But she never relaxed completely. If once or twice she leaned against me, she always blamed her broken sandal or her aching head. And so we drifted apart" (Oz, "Nomad"

28). Thus, what befalls Geula is the fate of all the unwed literary heroines, who, having discarded wedlock, are left to be scolded and chastised by society. Characteristically, the spinster is also segregated and delineated as different, "Geula is not like the rest of the girls in the Kibbutz" (29). In a similar vein, the youngsters of the Kibbutz maliciously snicker at her nightly walks in the orchards which she takes alone and returns alone – which further compounds the depressed and dejected persona of Geula. It is clear that her status as the social 'other' in the Kibbutz is intensified by the encounter with the Bedouin nomad whom she meets in the orchard while taking one of her nightly walks the Kibbutz.

32 Finding the Bedouin shepherd repulsively attractive (despite being blind in one eye), she sets out to seduce and ensnare him. Accepting his offer of a cigarette, she asks him for another, hoping to prolong the encounter, and wants him to disrobe, excited by the prospect of physical contact, "The girl eyed his desert robe. Aren't you hot in that thing? The man gave an embarrassed, guilty smile [. . .]"(31). She twice repeats his earlier claim that he still young and therefore has no girlfriend,(intimating that she is available) and persists in asking him personal questions. Emboldened by the Arab's compliment that she is beautiful — a compliment, which Avinor argues, is the figment of her imagination (Avinor 263) — she touches his arms hoping for a commensurate reaction.

33 Throughout the encounter, Geula is nervous and thrilled by the potential for a sexual liaison. She smiles at him, and mistakes a narrowing of the eye for a flirtatious wink, "His blind eye narrowed. Geula was momentarily alarmed: surely it was a wink" (32). The young man, however, is not interested in her advances, sustaining the conversation only in an attempt to ingratiate himself to Geula and avoid being reported to the Kibbutz authority for trespassing.

34 As the story draws to a close, it is clear that even the young nomad is disinterested in the old maid: He does reciprocate Geula's advances, but retreats back to his camp. Geula is left disappointed and humiliated. It should be noted that she is filled with disgust not because he touched her but because the nomad did not touch her.

35 And indeed, the rejection by the nomad brings to the surface all the fallow hatred so patently simmering inside her. Although it is clear that no sexual or physical contact occurred, apart from Geula touching the Bedouin's arm (33), the young woman slowly convinces herself that she was attacked, and behaves as though she was the victim of an attempted rape. Clearly, no incident has taken place. Nevertheless, she devises a more adventurous dénouement befitting her expectation. At this point, her imagination takes such a strong hold of her that the supposed particulars of the attempted rape in the orchard become actual.

Fantasy intermingles with reality. Immediately after he leaves, she begins running in panic as if pursued towards her room, certain that she was attacked: "Give him a kind word, or a smile, and he pounces on you like a wild beast and tries to rape you. It was just as well I ran away from him" (35).

36 No longer able to contain her rage, she schemes to accuse him of a rape he did not commit as revenge for his rejection. Tellingly, at a meeting held to discuss an appropriate response to the nomads' incursion, one of the male members maliciously suggests that Geula desires to be raped by the Bedouins, symbolising her status as a sexual pariah in the Kibbutz: "Hereupon Rami broke in excitedly and asked what I was waiting for. Was I perhaps waiting for some small incident of rape that Geula could write poems about?" (Oz, "Nomad" 37).

37 Here, Oz employs the device of 'mirror inversing' to impress upon the reader that the young goat herder, who is a national outsider, is Geula's doppelgänger. Wilfe maintains that her mastery of brewing coffee equates her with the Bedouins who are experts at this, as well as her walking the fields barefoot (147). Aschkenasy, in an excellent article concerning the concept of Woman as the Double, elaborates: "[. . .] Geula comes to realise that, in a strange way, the Bedouin is her double. Both are outcasts, unattractive and unattached, and both seethe with unfulfilled erotic desires. The recognition that the physically revolting nomad, in his primitive existence, is a reflection of her own raging, uncontrollable self, fills Geula with nausea" (125).

38 Unable to demarcate fiction and reality, the circumstances of the event become so real to her that on the way back to her room, unable to forget her 'ordeal', she vomits and cries in the bushes, exhausted from her 'trauma'-reactions usually associated with real rape victims. Lying in the flowering shrubs, she begins to whisper poems to comfort herself, and is so entranced with her daydream that she is oblivious to the fact that she has blocked a snake's hole, preventing it from returning to its lair. After being bitten, she simply removes the fangs from her skin and remains on the ground, choosing to absorb the venom.

39 In "Nomad and Viper" Oz ups the odds by transmuting the simple tale of an unmarried woman to that of a dangerous woman, who, propelled by her sexual frustration and undesirability is driven to acts of extreme irrationality. The encounter with the nomad, the seduction and the subsequent false 'cry of rape' signify the social construct of single female characters peddled by male fiction. Sadly, Oz refrains from probing the dilemma a woman such as Geula faces being unmarried in a community like a Kibbutz, where the institution of the family is paramount. Instead, he outfits her with the archetypal qualities associated in fiction with the spinster: sour disposition, spite and lasciviousness (Rogers 203). A related

concern is that, as Geula's story is refracted and filtered through a subjective male view, what we are left with is a clichéd take on the life of a single woman- a portrayal that certainly has the ring of the literary stereotype.

40 Oz conjures up a similar image in the short story "Kol Haneharot" ("All The Rivers"¹) in the shape of its heroine Tova, the sickly poetess, who of all the author's female protagonists is the most grotesque. Here, the narrative lays bare the masculine/feminine bipolar dichotomy, once again, surrendering the narratorial medium to a subjective male voice which ruthlessly disavows female beauty and sexuality, and further reinforces the stereotype of the single woman. On the other hand, the male character is consistently favoured and his masculine virility is showcased, in this instance to exemplify the supposed differences between the male bachelor and the female spinster.

41 Analogously to "Nomad and Viper" the initial introduction to the female protagonist is a not-too-subtle attack and derogation of the character's physique, as typified in the opening passage related by the male hero, Eliezer. It is this passage that initially enables the reader a glimpse into the protagonist's consciousness and alerts us to his attitude and treatment of Tova. It is worth reciting the passage in its entirety:

Tova, a simple name, a common name, which does not suit a young poetess. The same with her body: too big. Indeed, but only a little. A young woman with the body of a mother [. . .]. There is a surplus of fat in her arms, which is not too say is not soft. The flesh on her arms is in excess [. . .]. Her hair is dull, dark, but not black or brown, but a kind of grey, very dry. Eyes which I can not remember their colour, but I can not forget their parched weariness. Tiny wrinkles encircle her eyes [. . .]. It is not from the eyes that her mocking sadness stems, but certainly from the wrinkles around the eyes [. . .]. Her nose is a little weighty and her mouth betrays loneliness and tenderness [. . .] her forehead is white and arched, too large, as that of a man not a woman, as that of a balding old man [. . .] a strand of hair vertically falls on it trying to cover its bulk, but instead only accentuates its white aridness. Enough, I shall not continue with the excessive paleness of the cheeks. (Oz, "Kol" 255-256)

42 The preceding description typifies the approach taken by the author towards Tova: all the narrative's weirdness attaches to her. She is incessantly denigrated and belittled by Eliezer, who in his recollection of their ephemeral encounter permeates his anecdote with a litany of unkind descriptions concentrating on her grotesque and odd behaviour. Tova is depicted as the 'Other' in the de-Beauvoirian sense, in that she is the stranger, and like the Arab or the nomad, encompasses disgust and seduction (9). And it is certainly true that throughout the story Tova's sickness and unflattering behaviour as the terminable spinster, isolated and desperate for a husband, is foregrounded. In fact, the narrator takes pride in his ability to

¹ All translations from the Hebrew are mine.

engage in a detached and devastating critique of Tova's mien: "I have the power to fearlessly take hold of pincers and extract from Tova's face detail by detail and present it to you with cold accuracy" (Oz, "Kol" 92-93).

43 Conversely, the narrator's self-description relentlessly stresses and magnifies his virility, positing the absurd notion that being a bachelor is diametrically opposed to that of the pathetic unwed female. Here we encounter the inherent structural prejudice in the text. As we are repeatedly reminded, Eliezer is an ideogram of the Israeli macho icon: a decorated war hero, handsome, athletic, intelligent, logical and reasoned: "I am manager of the Kibbutz factory. I was given this responsibility as I am regarded as a practical, energetic man with initiative and imagination. That is, that is what they said in the general meeting in which I chosen. Maybe they took into account my military record in the Sinai war and in 3 military operations" (137). "During the summer I spend my free time in the pool. I achieved some excellent results in this sport. On Saturdays I have a place in the soccer team" (137).

44 Single by choice, he uses women as sex toys, perversely boasting of the time he humiliated a woman who fell in love with him: "I told Tova how once a married woman, older than me, who came to visit her relatives in the Kibbutz, fell in love with me from her first glance. She was ugly as a reptile, I played with her a little, to the enjoyment of all the youngsters, until she left, ashamed of herself" (135).

45 This premier misogynist, without a miasma of compassion, treats the girls with whom he has fleeting sexual relationships as objects. Thus, when one of the women with whom he has had casual affair is emotionally hurt and comes crying, he is unmoved: "No one forced you to come, and no one shed tears so you'll stay" (137). These passages are pivotal in establishing the disparate manner in which both protagonists are presented, and the overt lopsidedness in favour of the single male.

46 Sitting in a Tel-Aviv cafe, Eliezer first notices Tova as a consequence of her ghastly coughing and spitting. Getting up to help her, he strikes up a conversation with this erratic and unpredictable woman. Immediately, she reveals her age, as if to affirm our suspicion that we are indeed dealing with a spinster: "I'm not a girl [. . .]. I am a woman, thirty three years old" (138). Although a poet and a career women, Oz avoids any meaningful exposition of her writing or work, instead choosing to demean her artistic creativity, denuding her of any redeeming attributes. He truncates the beauty in poetic composition by claiming that it is merely a vapid technique which does not involve or demand any inspiration. In fact, Tova likens her work in the advertising industry to that of prostitution: "Tova said that the commercials she draws seem to her like a form of prostitution" (153).

47 Moreover, the sinew-wrenching physical agony that Tova suffers as a result of her smoking is focused upon obsessively and deliberately, so much so that it becomes one of the nodal points of the story, and serves to debase the character and bring to the fore her rebarbative nature. Thus, the narrator often ruptures the flow of events to report her vomiting and sickly face. Also, he admits, that his attraction for her stems from a disfigurement that he finds seductive (a stump in her left finger): "The sight of the defective hand aroused me again. This time it was sharp and explicit" (155). Later, he reveals his true motive in prolonging the encounter with her: "I had a few free hours [. . .] I wanted a little adventure. And that was what happened" (159). The allure in the freakish quotient proffered by this vacuous and miserable artist, and single woman, stands as a metaphor for the other unwed female characters to grace Oz's pages.

48 Not surprisingly, Tova instantly falls in love with Eliezer, a development which is in harmony with the paradigm the author appears to be utilizing for this proverbial single woman. At first she asks him if he is married; and immediately afterwards confesses her love for him, "You're cute [. . .] you know, I love you" (152). The narrator then interpolates another description of his rugged masculinity in order to explain Tova's immediate attraction: "Her behaviour is not logical. I have to justify it [. . .]. I am tall, with wide shoulders my features are regarded as very masculine" (154). Walking towards the beach they meet an acquaintance of Tova, whom informs that Eliezer is her new lover, and on the beach she repeats her earlier declaration of love for him. Overcome by her excitement at finding a man, she without hesitation, proposes a marriage, which Eliezer immediately dismisses: "I don't know I said. It's too early. And besides, you are sick, you are coughing" (152).

49 Faced with another refusal, Tova begins to cry and in a fit of wheezing and coughing vomits on his clothes- a reaction that symbolises her fragile psychic state and sexual frustration. Without saying a further word, Eliezer flees her company, and cleans himself at the showers. The final passage depicting Tova sees a dejected and pathetic figure:

She cried, quietly. Her voice could not be heard, and her face twisted as the face of a big, ugly baby [. . .]. Suddenly Tova's throat soured and her mouth widened. She bent down and vomited. She vomited, unwaveringly, with energy, in loud wild hiccups. She vomited enthusiastically, eyes closed, and dirtied my clothes. Afterwards, she wiped her mouth with a crumpled handkerchief, clasped in her defective hand (156).

50 Ultimately, Tova is accorded the same misfortune that awaits every spinster at the denouement- abandonment by the man she seeks. Through her antics, Tova is positioned to function as the prototypical old maid — starved for a man, as clearly evinced by her anserine

suggestion of marriage to a stranger and by her efforts to snare Eliezer, who she has been yearning for, with repeated revelations of love.

51 The main inspiration for this essay has been the pivotal literary analysis that originated with Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Milet, critics who saw literature as reflective of collective subjugating male prejudices. As a result, the structure and philosophical agenda of this essay is dominated by the theory of gender binarism and imagery myths, its underpinnings first stated by De Beauvoir in her treatise *The Second Sex*, and eloquently summed up by Pam Morris:

De Beauvoir points out that a concept of 'otherness' is necessary for organizing human thought. We can acquire a sense of self — of 'me' — only in opposition to what is 'not me' — what is other [. . .]. '[W]oman' functions as the other in the same way which allows men to construct a positive self-identity as masculine. And because what is other does not have identity in its own right, it often acts as an empty space to be ascribed whatever meanings the dominant group chooses. Thus women are frail not strong, emotional not rational, yielding not virile, so that masculinity can be defined as those positive qualities [. . .] by seeing women as other to themselves, as not-men, men can read into 'femininity' whatever qualities are needed to construct their sense of the masculine. So, a mythicised 'Woman' becomes the imaginary location of male dreams, idealizations and fears. (14)

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Performing the Covenant: Akedah and the Origins of Masculinity

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Abstract:

Following Derrida's open-ended question why woman is excluded from the biblical covenant, I suggest that the feminine ethics of self-sacrifice evolved from the Judeo-Christian discourse of the sacred: the contract between man and God is grounded in the economy of sacrifice. In fact, woman's self-sacrifice, though irrelevant for the sacrificial economy, is the satellite around which the performative language of ethics and theology could revolve.

I started by reading the banner headline
The way you read the big print at the eye doctor's.
It said I AM THE LORD GOD
ALMIGHTY AND I LOVE YOU ESPECIALLY.
No problem. Very Good.
One line down it said, PACK UP, I'M SENDING YOU
OVERSEAS. It said
YOU WILL HAVE AS MANY CHILDREN AS
THERE ARE SANDS IN THE SEA AND STARS IN THE SKY.
THEY WILL POSSESS THE LAND AND
I AM PERSONALLY GOING TO BLESS THEM.
The smaller print said: I am going
To bless them as long as they obey me.
Otherwise there may be
Certain repercussions. The even smaller
Print explained how we needed
A memorable logo for our organization
And he had just the ticket, a mark of absolute
Distinction, it would only hurt for a minute.
The print kept getting smaller and blurrier,
The instructions more bizarre.
Hold on, I interrupted. I'd like to check
Some of this out with my wife.
NO WAY. THIS IS BETWEEN US MEN.
AND IF YOU HAPPEN TO BE THINKING
ABOUT LOOPHOLES
FORGET IT, MAN. It said they preferred
Not to use strong arm techniques. It said
I am already signed on.

The Story of Abraham
Alicia Suskin Ostriker

The Sacrifice of Isaac and the Religious Foundations of Patriarchy

1 The story of Abraham and Isaac, the “double gift of death” between Abraham/Isaac and God/Jesus, is crucial to an understanding of the patriarchal nature of the sacred and the role that death came to play in defining Western masculinity. Abraham is symbolically the

first father; his name means “father of nations” and “father of all people.”^{<fn>See also Hunter, A. "Father Abraham". JSOT 35 (1986): 3–27.</fn>} His story begins what are aptly called “patriarchal narratives.” It is a foundational story of the world’s three dominant monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Delaney calls it appropriately “the center of gravity, the pivotal story” (21). It is through Abraham that the divine enters human society. Delaney continues: “Abraham is imagined as the vehicle for revealing God’s splendor to the world” (21). It is with him that God makes covenant, “a sign of which is engraved on the male flesh: circumcision.” “Although the Bible begins with Creation, the narrative of Western cultural origins begins with Abraham” (Delaney 21). He is the first patriarch in a social sense as well, and his story is the first narrative to connect death with the language of the sacred in a larger socio-political context: it creates the fraternity of faith that demands and gives death as a price of belonging. Abraham’s story provides a framework for the Western understanding of the sacred, but also the performative establishment of patriarchy as a vehicle for the divine: “The story is performative, for it is Abraham’s action that gave shape and substantive reality to the God to whom the action was directed” (Delaney 21).

2 The point of the story is, on the one hand, to validate the existence of God with the gift of death (the ethical responsibility and faith interchange in the image of God who demands and man who obeys) and, on the other hand, to define an ethics that relies on the logic of sacrifice to maintain the secrecy of its sacred (and gendered) dimension. The sense of the communal is structured around the patriarchal axis—man, his son, and his male god. “Is their gender merely accidental, or is it precisely the point?,” Delaney asks (19).

3 The woman (Sarah, the mother) is absent; God speaks to Abraham alone. Since no ethical demands are made of her, she is not defined as an ethical subject. She is that which is not. Her death cements the patriarchal contract (the covenant) that marks Abraham as the one who hears the voice of God and executes God’s will. Sarah’s body, hidden “out of sight,” is the secret that binds the sacred to the language of death. The story creates God, whose laws then create human community. The familiar story, from Genesis 22, goes as follows:

After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; and he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off. Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the ass; I and the lad

will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.” And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham. “My father!” And he said, “Here am I, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” (*Genesis* 12–50: *Genesis* 22, line 1–14: 101)

4 In the Jewish conception of guilt and punishment, no one can be the sin offering of another, nor provide absolution for the other. To wipe out sin there is no go-between, forgiveness does not come via agencies” (Spiegel 86). Wiesel summarizes this view: “Had he killed his son, Abraham would have become forefather of a people—but not the Jewish people. In Jewish tradition [. . .] every man is an end unto himself, a living eternity” (qtd. in Berman 76). No person can mediate between God and the other; thus, Isaac’s death cannot be a source of redemption for all Israel. Some scholars who argue *against* the theme of redemption do suggest that even though Isaac does not represent all of Israel, he is a substitute *for* Abraham. This patriarchal interpretation assumes that the child is a mini-version of the father. Landy writes: “Abraham is sacrificed in Isaac, who transmits his seed; he is identified with God, the created image with its source, through dissolution in the flame at the sacred place” (29). Sacrificing his son, Abraham is sacrificing himself, his immortality, and his future. He is also sacrificing God’s promise that “through Isaac shall his descendants be named.”¹

5 The religious traditions of all three monotheistic religions ask one to love God more than anything else and to sacrifice, if God asks, whatever one loves most. Delaney notices that “that idea is at the heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is the standard of faith” (59).

¹ Many scholars point out that the discrepancy between God’s promise to make Isaac the son of a future Jewish nation and God’s demand to sacrifice him is the first paradox that Abraham must face.

Faith, obedience, law, and responsibility converge under the umbrella of a sacred exchange: God exists insofar as he is obeyed. Thus, one thing that most religious scholars agree on is that the purpose of the Akedah is a declaration of faith, “sanctification of the divine name (Kiddush Ha-Shem),” through absolute obedience (Jacobs). Jewish scholars argue that Abraham’s actions are incomparable with previous human sacrifices (such as those described in Greek mythology) because the latter were performed either “for the good of their nation, or to appease the gods, or in times of wars, of draughts and flood and pestilences, to make atonement for their countries” (Spiegel 9), whereas “Abraham did what he did not out of conformity to ancestral practice, or under some pressure to relieve public distress, or out of running after glory [. . .]. No, Abraham served his Creator out of love, with his whole heart, not with part of it—not as though in part his heart went to Isaac and in part yielded only out of fear of Heaven” (Spiegel 12). Because it was done out of free will, and for no other ulterior motive but love of God, these scholars believe, the binding of Isaac is the ultimate, the purest, and the original declaration of man’s faith: it is an account of unrelenting obedience and “implicit faith, of a test in submissiveness to God” (Polish, “Akedat” 21). In Talmud, “like fear, love is defined not as a spontaneous emotional expression, but as a moral obligation that leads to worship and keeping of the commandments” (Berman 29). The fear and love of God manifests itself in obedience. “[O]bedience to God’s commandments [. . .] is an expression of faith” (Berman 115). It is his unquestionable obedience that marks Abraham as an ethical person, and it is his unquestionable obedience that shows God he can enter into covenant with Abraham and bestow his laws and blessings upon him. As Westermann (1981) notices, “It is only in Gen 12–25, [. . .] and so only with Abraham that God ‘concludes a covenant’” (204).

“Fear and Trembling”: The Ethical Paradox of the Ethical Subject

6 Modern philosophy adopted Abraham as a synonym of “fear and trembling.” Kierkegaard sees the Akedah as the “teleological suspension of the ethical.” God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son and, thus, to transgress his own commandment: “thou shall not kill,” yet thou must kill. (It is actually Satan who appears to Abraham while he is on his way to sacrifice Isaac to remind him that “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.”) Between his ethical allegiance to his son and his teleological allegiance to God, who simultaneously asks him to kill and not to kill, Abraham, according to Kierkegaard, experiences the horror of moral aporia that can be transcended either by the complete rejection of God or by a leap of faith. Kierkegaard writes that in ascending Mount Moriah, Abraham “left one thing behind, took one thing with him: he left his earthly

understanding behind him and took his faith with him — otherwise he would have wandered forth but would have thought this unreasonable” (31). Abraham leaps and never vacillates.²

7 Many Jewish scholars have argued that Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Akedah as a choice between human and divine law is a strictly Christian (or post-Greek) interpretation. They specifically object to Kierkegaard’s suggestion that by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham was ready to “abandon every principle of morality.” Such an interpretation suggests that to obey God means to be immoral. “Rabbi Joseph Gumbiner has asserted that Kierkegaard used the Akedah story to portray the essence of Christian faith as rising above logic and reason and perhaps calling for the suspension of the ethical” (Berman 148). L. A. Berman represents one viewpoint on the argument, suggesting that the title of Kierkegaard’s book *Fear and Trembling* “conveys the author’s conviction that Abraham must have had a truly dreadful experience. Kierkegaard writes: ‘When I have to think of Abraham, I am as though annihilated. [. . .] I am paralyzed’” (Berman 21). Such an emotion, Berman believes, is inconceivable because being spoken to by God cannot arouse dread.³ God’s command cannot arouse “fear and trembling,” and submitting to it cannot mean sacrificing the ethical. God cannot ask one to commit the unethical because God is the ethical.⁴

8 Berman further points out that in Talmud, there is an idea of “sinning for the sake of God.” “This is a concept, translated from Hebrew *averah lishmah*, made explicit in Talmud. There it is written: ‘A sin for the sake of Heaven is greater than a commandment done not for the sake of Heaven’” (50). God is the supreme good, and one may transgress his own commandment for his own sake. Berman elaborates:

Just as secular lore includes the contradictory proverbs “The end justifies the means” and “The end does not justify the means,” rabbinical lore includes a rule that says the opposite of “one may sin for the sake of God.” The rule, *mitzvah ha-baa b-avera* means “it is forbidden to commit a sin in order to perform a mitzvah.” An example given by Maimonides is that one may not steal a *lulav* in order to properly celebrate Succoth. That is to say, the sin cannot be greater than (or even as great as) the mitzvah it permits. (50)

Though there is also a rule that forbids one to commit one sin to avoid another, God as supreme value justifies all action performed for his sake. One cannot sin for the sake of something or someone other than God. God is the end that justifies all means. Even if God’s

² See also Davidson, R. “The Courage to Doubt”. London: SCM, 1983.

³ Some Jewish thinkers do follow Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Abraham’s emotions as “fear and trembling.” For example, “Elie Wiesel describes the episode as ‘terrifying in content.’ Similarly, David Polish describes Abraham after he has heard God’s command that he offer up his son: ‘He is a shattered man, going almost trancelike toward a deadly act that he must carry out but with less than perfect faith. God commands, Abraham submits. There is no conversation, only the sentence of doom and the silent response’” (Berman 39–40).

⁴ See also Gellman, J. I. *The Fear, the Trembling, and the Fire: Kierkegaard and the Hasidic Masters on the Binding of Isaac*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994.

will remains unknown, or *especially* when his will remains unknown, to submit to him means to “express the highest ethical values.” As Berman puts it: “Even in matters that are not understood [. . .] the conduct of a God-fearing person will express the highest ethical values, and eventually in God’s own time, may know the reasons for each and every commandment” (115). God’s way may be mysterious and his commands may be paradoxical, but one who trusts him cannot feel the horror of moral aporia. God himself precludes such an emotion. Berman continues:

The Bible presents a point of view that God cannot be understood, that God is unknowable, a mystery [. . .]. The Akedah stands on the monumental paradox that God ordered Abraham to commit the gravest of sins, the sacrificial slaughter of a human being. The narrative opens with the words “God tested Abraham” as if to reassure the reader in advance: it was never intended that Isaac actually be slaughtered; this was only a test. Still, it is a paradox that God should ask for the sacrifice of Isaac, and that Abraham—who had argued with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah—should carry it out without a word of protest. (45–49)

9 Though God’s commandments may not be immediately clear, one who trusts him does not need to leap *into* this trust, as Kierkegaard framed it. To trust means to *be beyond* leaping, not having to leap because one never did question what one was supposed to leap into. Reik elaborates on this point: “The prevailing difference between the world of the Old Testament and that of the New lies in the distinction between trust and faith. Kierkegaard regards faith as an ‘action.’ Trust is, in contrast to faith, an attitude and has no aim. Abraham, who trusts, does not need to make need to make those ‘movements upward’ nor ‘the leap’ of which Kierkegaard speaks. The patriarch walks humbly before his God” (63). Humility before God makes any “fear and trembling” incomprehensible. There is one school of interpretation of Abraham’s story according to which Abraham sacrifices Isaac out of his love for his son: if at the instant he were to choose Isaac over God, he would idolize his son, thus bringing upon him God’s wrath. This interpretation, however, *presupposes* Abraham’s faith in God *a priori*. Thus, whether out of love for God or for Isaac, Akedah is an ultimate fulfillment of Abraham’s sacred responsibility—a validation of God’s very being. Trust is the highest expression of faith that one does not need to leap into. Since Abraham trusts God, he does not choose between God and Isaac: he has chosen Isaac by choosing God.

“Dying for Another”: Reciprocity and Rhetoric of the Gift of Death

10 For Derrida (1995), Abraham’s story is also a story of origins. (The cover illustration of the English edition of *The Gift of Death* is Rembrandt’s rendition of *Akedah*). Derrida sees Abraham’s story in the light of both traditions, Christian and Jewish, as both a

mystery, *mysterium tremendum*, and as an ethical paradox. What connects the two interpretations is the economy of the sacrificial exchange: death functions as an axis around which the mechanism of faith, responsibility, and ethics fashions Abraham as an ethical subject. Moreover, Derrida interprets the story as it came to stand in the popular Western tradition, that is, in connection with the crucifixion of Christ. Reading the two stories together, Derrida draws a parallel between the two sacrificial contracts: both God and Man sacrifice their sons for each other; man to prove his devotion to God, and God to save man from eternal damnation. In seeing the two stories as connected through the cognitive link, rather than through any temporal or causal relationship, Derrida is close to Auerbach's interpretation. Derrida suggests that because it reciprocates the gift of death, Abraham's story lays the foundation of Western Judeo-Christian ethics of faith and responsibility: it links the two in the image of the sacred. It is the double gift of death between God and Abraham, the nature of the double sacrificial contract that adds a divine aspect to the Platonic mystery. Without Abraham's sacrifice, there is no sacrificial responsibility, no economy of the gift of death that binds man and God through faith and responsibility; in fact, without the sacrifice, there is no God. Akedah, the binding of Isaac, has a double meaning: literally, it represents the binding of Isaac to the altar; symbolically, it operates within the sacrificial economy of the gift of death that binds man and God. Man's devotion is rewarded by eternal salvation: Christ dies *for* mankind.

11 In his analysis, Derrida's discussion of the "gift" follows from a reading of Mauss' theory of the potlatch: the gift-giving always functions under the assumption of reciprocity: "the potlatch must be returned with interests like all other gifts [. . .]. The sanction for the obligation to repay is enslavement for debt" (Mauss 42–43). According to Mauss, there is no gift as such in itself: there is only the meaning of the gift, its symbolic function that binds the giver and the receiver in the bonds of reciprocity. The gift is what the gift does; it is the impossible, "the secret [. . .] that there is no Secret" (Caputo 19). A gift veils its own negativity in the rhetoric of mutuality. In the economy of self-sacrifice, the symbolic enslavement to the terms of reciprocity of these *for* whom the suicide dies is the measure of the power of his death: the degree of his posthumous veneration.⁵ The gift of death is given with the presumption that the recipient will be forced to accept it and, thus, will be forced to repay it.

⁵ Alvarez suggests that in some primitive societies, the idea of self-sacrifice itself has a kind of magical quality: "it is as though [the suicide] were committed in the certain belief that the suicide himself would not really die. Instead, he is performing a magical act which will initiate a complex but equally magic ritual ending in the death of his enemy" (67)

12 Owing his death, Jesus offers himself *for* others; his death saves mankind, and the salvation requires reciprocity (similarly, as Isaac dies *for* Abraham). However, like other gifts, Derrida points out, the gift of death functions only on a rhetorical level; it is an impossible. One cannot die in anyone's place, one cannot die *for* anyone, and God cannot die *for* man, in his place. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines being as foremost being-towards-death, one's own:

No one can take the other's dying away from him. Someone can go "to his death for an other." However, that always means to sacrifice oneself for the other "*in a definite matter.*" Such dying for [. . .] can never, however, mean that the other has thus had his death in the least taken away. Every Da-sein must itself actually take dying upon itself. Insofar as it "is," death is always essentially my own. (§47, 223)

13 To be authentically means to be in preparation for one's death, to take one's dying upon *oneself*. Death is what brings Da-sein to its wholeness. Heidegger asks "*in what sense, if any, death must be grasped as the ending of Da-sein?*" (227). Grasping death as the ending of one's being means coming to terms with its certainty: "As a potentiality of being, Da-sein is unable to bypass the possibility of death. This *death* reveals itself as the '*ownmost nonrelational possibility not to be bypassed*'" (223). Every Da-sein has to take his dying upon himself. One cannot die for another. In this sense, death marks man's "singularity." In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida elaborates on this Heideggerian theme:

Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, "given," one can say by death [. . .]. I can give the other everything except immortality, except thus dying for her to the extent of dying in place of her and so freeing her from her own death. I can die for the other in a situation where my death gives him a little longer to live, I can save someone by throwing myself in the water or fire in order to temporarily snatch him from the jaws of death, I can give her my heart in the literal or figurative sense in order to assure her of a certain longevity. But I cannot die in her place, I cannot give her my life in exchange for her death. Only a mortal can give [. . .] to what is mortal since he can give everything except immortality, everything except salvation as immortality. (41–43)

14 To die *for* someone would mean to make him immortal. And indeed, with the death of his son who dies *for* man, God grants man the eternal immortality of his soul, the post-mortal salvation. But this immortality, like Socrates' deathbed discourse of the eternal soul, is rhetorical. Death, because it is man's own affair, marks man's ethical singularity; thus, the gift of death (dying for someone or something) has only symbolic significance. It functions only on the level of signifiers. One cannot go through the experience of death, as one cannot die for anyone else. The gift of death, thus, the impossibility of death as a possibility, signifies the paradoxical nature of language (and ethics) that signifies nothing beyond itself, nothing

beyond the self *in-itself*. The Western ethics of faith and responsibility are founded on the rhetoric of the eternal soul and mortal body because only through the rhetoric of the eternal soul can the economy of the gift of death fulfill its symbolic function. The discourse of the immortal soul marks the sacrifice as the breaking point between humanity and godliness. The sacred is the function of the gift of death.

“Woman’s Sacrifice”: Undoing the Patriarchal “Logic of Sacrificial Responsibility”

15 The sacrificial contract between God and Abraham, the paradox of the gift of death that structures the impossible of Western ethics, presumes that “no trial could be greater than that endured by the Patriarchs,” “no experience surpasses that one in sanctity” (Spiegel 25, 24). Since the sacred is a function of faith and responsibility that is embedded in the nature of the gift of death, given between God and man, literally, the language of both Western ethics and religion is necessarily patriarchal. “[T]he relationship of the patriarchs to God became the exemplar [. . .]. Only that could become the exemplar which appeared as such to the later generation from the perspective of its own religious concepts” (Westermann 119). Since Akedah is incomparable with anything else performed for the sake of God, it became an exemplar of an ethical action, with Abraham becoming an exemplar of an ethical subject. Hence, automatically, the double gift of death is a contract between the male and the divine, and only the male gains the status of an ethical subject. The covenant is structured around the patriarchal axis—man, his son, and his male god. What is then the place of the feminine in the economy of the sacred? What is the place of the feminine in the aporia of faith and responsibility? What is the place of the feminine in the gift of death? And finally, what is the place of the feminine in the structure of ethics?

16 In Abraham’s story, Derrida points out, there is no mention of women:

It is difficult not to be struck by the absence of woman in [this] monstrous yet banal story [of Abraham]. It is a story of father and son, of masculine figures, of hierarchies among men [. . .]. Would the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law, of its law, be altered, inflected, attenuated, or displaced, if a woman were to intervene in some consequential manner? Does the system of this sacrificial responsibility and of the double “gift of death” imply at its very basis an exclusion of woman or sacrifice of woman? A woman’s sacrifice or a sacrifice of woman, according to one sense of the genitive or the other? (75–76)

Derrida does not answer himself, leaving this “question in suspense,” but it is this question that demands to be answered if we are to understand the ethics of the economy of the sacrificial exchange that defines the relationship between femininity and the sacred: How would “the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law” be

“altered, inflected, attenuated, or displaced” if woman were asked to perform her sacrificial duty? What is the relationship between the woman’s sacrifice and the sacrifice of a woman?

Sarah’s Silence: The Narrative Logic of Exclusion

17 Abraham’s unquestioning response to God’s demand is both a declaration of love toward God and also a declaration of self-worth. The fact that Abraham does not offer himself in lieu of Isaac implies that his life is worth as much as Isaac’s, and hence it does not matter who dies; the judgment between the two belongs ultimately to God. Man has no power or right to judge his own life as less or more worthy than another man’s. Woman, on the contrary, does so, and by doing so, she undoes herself. Not only does she take upon herself the judgment that belongs to God, but her declaration is a declaration of her inferiority. The purpose of the binding of Isaac appears therefore twofold: it binds man to God, but it also takes away man’s right to judge his own worth *vis-à-vis* other men. Not being able to judge himself, man always remains as value in-itself in the face of God, the supreme value *in-itself*. In Abraham’s story, Sarah knows nothing about the sacrifice, and as Berman notices, “there does not seem to be a single known midrash that suggests Abraham consulted her or had advised her of his momentous journey” (65). Would the Western ethics of sacrificial responsibility and its gender relations be different if Sarah were asked directly by God to perform *her* sacrificial responsibility? Berman suggests that it is narrative necessity that excludes Sarah from the sacrificial exchange: “Perhaps Sarah’s innocence of Abraham’s intent, as well as Isaac’s innocence until the last moment, adds to the suspense and mystery and are therefore necessary ingredients of the story as a suspenseful, compelling story” (72). To maintain the narrative suspense, Isaac must be ignorant of his fate, and for Isaac to be ignorant, Sarah also must be in the dark: “If Sarah knew about Abraham’s momentous decision [. . .] how could her response to this truly terrible news, whether it took the form of support or protest, keep the goal of Abraham’s journey a secret from Isaac?” (72). For Berman, the narrative structure alone warrants Sarah’s exclusion.

18 However, I suggest that aside from the narrative structure, the story also has a performative quality; it establishes the ethical relationship between man and God, the covenant from which Sarah is excluded.⁶ The narrative structure that establishes the relationship of power between Abraham and God also establishes the relationship of power between Abraham and Sarah. Thus, one can ask whether the exclusion of Sarah is necessary to retain the narrative suspense, or whether the narrative suspense is necessary to exclude

⁶ See also Alter, R. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Basic Books, 1981.

Sarah. Would it be possible to maintain the same narrative suspense if Sarah were spoken to by God, and Abraham remained ignorant? The lack of knowledge precludes the access to the divine that bestows the laws, the blessings, and the guidance. As Tribble put it, “Patriarchy has denied Sarah her story, the opportunity for freedom and blessing. It has excluded her and glorified Abraham” (189). God does not address those whom he does not wish to test, and he does not test those on whom he has placed no stakes, those whose responses are either predictable or irrelevant.

19 In the patriarchal structure of the sacred, it appears, woman cannot be asked by God to participate in the sacrificial contract because if she did as Abraham and sacrificed Isaac without a shadow of doubt, like Abraham she would declare her love of God, thus cementing her position as an ethical subject capable of facing and transcending the moral aporia of faith and responsibility. Instead, Sarah “does not share in her husband’s glory. She has no chance here or anywhere else in her story to prove herself a woman of conspicuous faith and obedience; god has made no demands of *her*, just as he has never given her any promises [. . .]. [T]he issue of *her* faith, *her* obedience, *her* righteousness has never once been raised. In these ancestral narratives she is an abused woman” (Dennis 60–61). She is asked nothing and promised nothing. Sarah’s participation in the economy of the gift would make her equal to man “within the implacable universality of the law.”

20 If, however, she were to doubt God’s voice and refuse to sacrifice Isaac, faced with her doubt, Abraham’s action would seem “unreasonable.” Choosing between the ethical and the teleological, she would choose the ethical, and without *her* leap of faith, or without her trust, God would cease to be. Indeed, Delaney aptly asks: “Why is the willingness to sacrifice the child, rather than the passionate protection of the child, at the foundation of faith? [. . .] How our society would have evolved if protection of the child had been the model of faith” (252–253). Can one believe in God and not obey him, or is obedience a necessary part of faith? There is no God without obedience, Derrida suggests. Would, then, the ethics structured around the protection of a child be necessarily atheist? For God to exist and for man to maintain his patriarchal superiority over woman in relationship with God, Sarah must necessarily be excluded from the sacrificial exchange. God’s and man’s sacrificial contract binds them together in the sacred letter of the law, privileging man as having both the access to the divine and the right—by virtue of his faith, which he professes through his willingness to sacrifice his son—to act on God’s behalf to bestow divine laws, including those that regulate gender relations. The exclusion of woman from the sacred economy creates a condition of sacred imperialism, whereas woman’s agency as an ethical subject *vis à vis* the

divine is erased. Man allows God to rule him; in exchange, God gives man the right to rule her.

“Hearing the Voice of God”: The Power of the Sacred Absence

21 Some religious scholars (Westermann) have pointed out that one common and fundamental characteristic of most patriarchal religions is “the personal relationship to God.” The father figure in patriarchal stories is also a religious figure. He addresses God directly without any mediators: “The patriarchal stories know no priest (apart from Gen. 14), and the father of the household carries out the priestly function. He imparts the blessing and offers the sacrifice. Above all, the father receives the word of God directly, in particular the word that shows the group the way. There is no mediator of cult or word. Everything that happens between God and man happens directly, without any mediator” (Westermann 203). Only the male knows what God says, and his wife and his family (and later the community at large) learn from him what God wants. The blessings and the sacrifices are determined by the patriarch based on the divine commands that he alone receives. The patriarch asks no one to verify the voice that he hears, and there is no one to doubt his relationship with God as the law giver. In Abraham’s story, God addresses Abraham directly, and only Abraham knows what he says; God’s words cannot be verified by anyone but Abraham alone. Sacred power and the divine voice are channeled through Abraham alone.⁷

22 In fact, Landy (1989) points out that in Genesis, God is not an anthropomorphized, visible figure who speaks from above, but rather is an internal voice that only appears as coming from outside, a spirit that speaks to Abraham alone and only in his consciousness. Landy writes:

The voice is experienced externally, as the voice of God, and yet it is an inner voice, since the narrative has hypostatized in it its creative and questioning drive, and since every outer voice, especially a disembodied one, corresponds to some inner reality. Otherwise it could not be heard. [. . .] The voice has special authority here, in Gen 22:1, since it has guided Abraham throughout his life. It represents, in narrative terms, the deepest part of his consciousness, since he only exists in the narrative insofar as he responds to that voice. (2)

23 Performatively speaking, Abraham exists only as a recipient of his inner voice. Like Abraham, God’s voice is a rhetorical device: the voice is both Abraham and God. God exists

⁷ In Islam, Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son is commemorated on the day of Haji, Islam’s holiest day. A male member of the household slaughters a ram to reenact Abraham’s story and to re-perform his obedience to God’s request. Substituting the ram for the child is seen as a sign of God’s mercy: without it, men would still be slaughtering their sons. By reenacting the story, the patriarch is channeling the divine words, thus reinforcing his patriarchal power (Delaney 181). Similarly, in Christianity, transmission of the divine word could only be performed by men (that is why only they could be priests).

insofar as his voice speaks to Abraham, in the same way that Abraham exists only insofar as he is spoken to. Thus, God is a rhetorical device that sanctifies Abraham's decisions. The performativity of the story consists of the interaction between Abraham and God: Abraham's responses, his actions, are what perform God's very existence. God is Abraham, and Abraham is God. They are both what Lacan called "nothing other than the condition *sine qua non* of speech" (69). It is by his actions (readiness to sacrifice Isaac) that Abraham sanctions the voice of God, and thus God comes into being at the moment when man is willing to kill in his name. God, who exists only as Abraham's inner voice, is a rhetorical instrument of power.⁸ Entering with the omnipotent and omnipresent Being into the covenant, passing the laws which the Being has asked him to pass, Abraham himself becomes powerful, one who speaks and executes the will of someone more powerful than he is himself. In such an arrangement, the woman, who is not spoken to by voice, whom voice does not test in order to make her its spokesperson, is naturally subjugated for as long as she accepts God's order and God's word as binding.

The Law of the Father

24 It is the father's personal relationship with God that makes the patriarchal family what it is: "It is characterized by a personal relationship to God which corresponds in every single detail with the life-style of the patriarchs as they move to and from and live together as members of a family" (Berman xii). God's word imbues family relations and guides family

⁸ In Judaism, the four-letter word for God's name, Tetragrammaton, is ineffable. The word consists only of consonants, without any vowels. Since it is considered sacrilegious to pronounce it, the pronunciation has been forgotten (or perhaps was never there in the first place). The first letter of one of God's pronounceable names, *Adonai*, is a letter that has no sound. What is pronounced is the vowel under the letter. The first, silent letter veils the existence of God in the absence of language that would name it. The other name of God, *Elohim*, is purposely mispronounced, *Elokim*, so as not to say it in vain. Because they are mispronounced or impossible to pronounce, the different names of God represent different aspects of the sacred while simultaneously concealing the true name of God, which is unknown. In other words, the sacred is above the language because only there can it conceal its secret. The absence of the signifier conceals the very absence of the signified it is meant to denote. Similarly, in Islam, neither the image of the Prophet nor that of God can be represented for fear of idolatry (to avoid praying to the image instead of to God), but also because their greatness is beyond representation. The precept veils the existence of God in the absence of an image. What is not shown becomes powerful precisely because it is not seen. Representation threatens secrecy and, thus, the very essence of the sacred. Likewise, in Christian liturgy, during the mass, what is worshipped is not the body of Christ (which is not there) but the piece of communion wafer that represents it. There is no body of Christ *per se*; it exists only through the symbolic and performative gestures that define the space of the sacred and the profane. The priest has to pronounce it "the body of Christ" ("Corpus Christi") in order for the wafer to become the body of Christ (as he has to pronounce the wine to be the blood of the Christ for it to be consecrated as such). The secret is that what is worshipped is not the body of Christ, but his death symbolized by the absence of his body replaced by the wafer. The sacred is structured around the mystery of this symbolic replacement that reenacts Christ's "gift of death" via weekly liturgy. What is reenacted is the tremor in the face of the self-sacrifice, the mystery of death voluntarily taken. The economy of this gift veils the absence of God, for whom the sacrifice was made. The liturgy reenacts the absence via the performative gestures, which reenact the sacrifice.

decisions, a format that is also transferred into the community. Westermann describes the phenomena:

The patriarchal story speaks of these basic forms of human community theologically, i.e., they cannot be spoken of without at the same time speaking of God. There is neither a vertical succession of generations down the years nor the horizontal dimension of communal family life without God acting and talking. [. . .] It follows from the talk about God in patriarchal story that the foundation of all subsequent religion is the simple, unencumbered relationship to God, just as it is the natural requirement for the small community. (116)

25 Abraham as a father figure has an almost god-like status. His position as a father, the maker and the creator, passes from generation to generation creating a patriarchal lineage, which makes the presence of a son the most sought-after blessing.⁹ The father becomes one from who everyone and everything originates. Since he is the one who speaks to God, he establishes the laws that his sons have to follow, and he bestows blessings from which they benefit. The patriarchal economy thus is structured on the relationship between the father and God; it is imbued with the letter of the sacred, binding by faith and manifested through acts of supreme obedience. Westermann describes the role of father in the patriarchal stories:

What is peculiar to this extended idea of father is that it is irreplaceable: no one in the long series of generations that begins with Abraham can be father as he was. Paradoxically, Abraham remains father from generation to generation [. . .] the ancestor takes on the character of one who is unique, of the father par excellence; he remains, nevertheless, a man without the slightest trace of divinization or ancestor worship [. . .]. [Abraham] is the real, unique father of the people. (117–118)

The father becomes a law giver through the economy of the gift of death and the rhetoric of the divine voice that speaks to him alone. Thus, faith is the glue that cements the ideology of oppression: the patriarch's unquestionable faith and unquestionable obedience validate the word of the divine, which in turn validates the word of the patriarch.

⁹ "The plight of a barren woman, and God's promise that she will conceive, is another repeated biblical theme (e.g., Sarah, Hannah, the wife of Manoah, the Shunammite woman)" (Berman 44). In Abraham's story, the promise of a son and annunciation is a focal point of the dramatic structure. Westermann notices: "The promise of the son is an essential part of the sequence of motifs which lead from Sarah's barrenness to the fulfillment in birth and marriage. It occurs only in the Abraham cycle, where it is of crucial importance for the whole. . . it is an inseparable element of a self-contained narrative. The promise of the son is the starting point and center of the promise motif in the patriarchal stories." (217) The dramatic conflict usually ensues because "typically, the favored wife is barren, while the other wife bears children" (Berman 1997: 44). The annunciation and promise of a son from the favorite wife solves the dramatic tension, reinstating the patriarchal economy of reproduction as narratively logical and just. Fuchs (1985) points out that woman becomes a heroine only in those annunciation scenes when she is promised to give birth to a son: "The biblical annunciation type-scene consists of three major thematic components: the initial barrenness of the wife, a divine promise of future conception, and the birth of a son. . . [T]he most significant variations pertain to the role of the potential mother in the annunciation type-scene; these variations, . . . constitute a consistently increasing emphasis on the potential mother as the true heroine of the annunciation type-scene." ("Literary Characterization" 119)

26 Representing the most common interpretation of the story, Berman stresses that the point of Akedah is reenactment of the direct relationship between Abraham and God. Sacrificing Isaac, Abraham is asked to give up his last human connection and to sustain himself, psychologically, emotionally, and so forth only through his unencumbered relationship to God. Berman writes:

In the Akedah, God tests Abraham's willingness to separate himself—painfully and irreversibly from his son Isaac, as he had commanded Abraham to separate himself from his country, his kindred, and his father's house. Later he separated himself from Lot. At Sarah's insistence and with God's support, Abraham had separated himself from his son Ishmael. Separation is a recurring theme of the Abraham cycle, and the Akedah narrative is only one of many instances in which Abraham confronts the questions: "Can I give up every human connection—social and blood ties—and survive? Is my connection with God really strong enough to sustain me?" (44)

27 Following the same line of argument, Davidson points out that what God asks from Abraham is to separate himself even from God: "Abraham is being tested to the point of seeing whether he is prepared to live with God-given hope and faith destroyed, self-destroyed at God's command" (52). Tribble notices that the nature of faith is to put one's entire trust in the hands of the divine, the inner voice that guides him, above any family or love relations: "To attach is to practice idolatry. In adoring Isaac, Abraham turns from God. The test, then, is an opportunity for understanding and healing. To relinquish attachment is to discover freedom. To give up human anxiety is to receive divine assurance. To disavow idolatry is to find God [. . .]. Abraham, man of faith, has learned the lesson of nonattachment" (179–181). One might argue that by attaching himself to his inner voice as the only source of self-sustenance, Abraham is, in fact, attaching himself to himself; thus what Akedah also reenacts is a masculine solipsism: Abraham's inner voice is the only voice to which he is willing to listen. Faith means foremost faith in one's own infallibility; having faith means that one has chosen oneself only as a valid and authoritative source for divine authority. Yet, "How do you presume to know the mind of God?" To choose God means foremost to choose oneself as the one who chooses God. Abraham, who presumes to know the mind of God, "was before, and therefore above the law" (Delaney 68). By presuming himself to know the mind of God, Abraham made himself into the law. The Law of the Father, thus, is self-evident.

The Law of the Mother? Maternal Instinct and Divine Command

28 Abraham's leap of faith is the tipping point of female subjection; it is an anamorphic shift that excludes the feminine from the contract with the sacred and from the discourse of the law and ethical agency that the sacred structures. Woman's responsibility as an ethical

subject is erased by her non-participation in the sacrificial exchange between man and divine, which cements man's subject position toward God as a law giver. Ostriker argues that the Akedah describes the change of the regime from matriarchy to patriarchy, from the primordial Mother-Goddess figure to that of the Father-God, who promotes and advances the cause of patriarchy and who is protected by it. Ostriker also suggests that the purpose of the biblical story was to make it explicit that Abraham could dispose of Isaac in whatever way he wished without Sarah knowing or having any power to influence his decision. The Akedah is a "men's affair" between the two fathers. The conversation between God and Abraham alone emphasizes the fact that Isaac's life belongs only to Abraham; Isaac, who is Sarah's son also, is exclusively a property of the patriarch (41). Thus, the hidden motive of Akedah is to perform the "silencing of a woman," who has no say about the future and life of her offspring but functions merely as a incubator for the patriarchal lineage. Ostriker summarizes the point: The biblical story of monotheism and covenant is, to use the language of politics, a cover up [. . .] [to neutralize] female power. Biblical patriarchy [. . .] [commits] repeated acts of literal murder and oppression [. . .]. [F]or its triumph. [. . .] [T]he canonization process throughout history has rested, not accidentally but essentially, on the silencing of women. (30–31)

29 Many feminist scholars point out that the ethical contract between God and Abraham, while based on Abraham's willingness to detach himself from human emotions, assumes that a) Sarah is incapable of such detachment, and b) her ability to detach herself should not be tested. For Tribble (1991), the Akedah represents glorification of the male as a free, detached individual, an ethical subject *par excellence*. However, Tribble points out, the narrative structure of the Bible prior to Genesis 22 suggests that it is Sarah, not Abraham, who should be asked to detach herself from her son. Just as Hagar had to face the possibility of losing Ishmael in Genesis 21, in Genesis 22 it should be Sarah facing the possibility of losing Isaac. Narratively speaking, the stories pair them: Sarah/Hagar and Isaac/Ishmael. Abraham himself never makes his attachment to Isaac explicit prior to Genesis 22, so it is difficult to believe that Isaac's sacrifice would be a genuine loss for him and not merely a selfish and vain fear of not having a descendant who would pass on his name. Tribble continues:

[N]owhere prior to Genesis 22 does Abraham emerge as a man of attachment. That is not his problem. How ill-fitted he is, then, for a narrative of testing and sacrifice [. . .]. In view of the unique status of Sarah and her exclusive relationship to Isaac, she, not Abraham, ought to be tested. The dynamic of the entire saga, from its genealogical preface on, requires that Sarah be featured in the climactic scene, that she learn the meaning of obedience to God, that she find liberation from possessiveness, that she free Isaac from maternal ties, and that she emerge a solitary individual, nonattached, the model of faithfulness. In making Abraham the object of the divine test, the story violates its own rhythm and movement. (189)

30 Other feminist scholars (Fuchs, "Deceptive Women," "Literary Characterization") have also pointed out that not asking the mother to sacrifice her son presupposes that she would not be able to do so: her commitment to patriarchy and to her male child is taken for granted and requires no testing. Maternal instinct is presumed to be above and beyond divine demands; though covertly, the assumption serves the same function: never to question the possibility that a mother might not be committed to propagating the patriarchal lineage. If she is presented as being able to dispose of her male child (such as Hannah), her motives are then interpreted as vicious and selfish (Hannah sacrifices her sons out of vanity, in order to match Abraham's sacrifice in God's eyes). Esther Fuchs summarizes the point:

To acknowledge woman's disinterest in children would undermine one of the major premises of patriarchal thought: that woman always desires to be a mother [. . .]. Only father figures are presented as capable of sacrificing the lives of their children. There is no female counterpart to Abraham and Jephthah, except the mother who sacrifices her son to save her life (2Kgs 6:29), [and thus for her own benefit]. ("Literary Characterization" 133–134)

31 However, maternal love is a double bind. On the one hand, when a mother sacrifices her child, she is never viewed in the same way as Abraham, as a free individual, able to detach herself from human relations, but as selfishly focused on her own needs. Fuchs continues: "On the other hand, the 'maternal instinct' is [also] portrayed as a highly selfish and confined inclination, mostly focused on one's own child. Sarah's concern for her son Isaac is presented as her primary motivation for driving Hagar and Ishmael out" (133–134). Gellman describes Sarah's request to oust Hagar and Ishmael as a "vicious demand to usurpation and murder" (40). Thus, woman's commitment to her male child, as well as the relinquishing of such a commitment, appears always as self-motivated and malicious.¹⁰ It seems that no matter what a biblical female does with her male child, whether she chooses to protect it or to offer it on the divine altar, her actions can always be interpreted as self-seeking. She seeks either salvation, or self-validation; but essentially, she is never described as capable of acts of pure love toward God. In other words, woman can not, should not, must not, either rhetorically or performatively, enter into the covenant with the divine/the law.¹¹

"Out of My Sight": Disposing of Sarah's Body

32 Because woman is excluded from the sacrificial exchange and the rhetoric of law that this exchange structures, her access to the divine can be achieved only through the economy

¹⁰ Following Levinas, Katz points out that "had Sarah been asked, she would not have agreed to sacrifice Isaac, and second, that this response would have earned her passing marks on the test! [. . .] Thus, one's relationship to a child is still the paradigm for the ethical" (127).

¹¹ See also Dennis, T. *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.

of her self-sacrifice. When Satan failed to persuade Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac, he “fell into a fury when he saw that his passionate wish to thwart Abraham’s sacrifice was powerless. What did he do? He went and told Sarah” (Spiegel 105). In the guise of an old man, he told her that Abraham killed Isaac, to which she replied:

O my son, Isaac, my son, O that I had this day died instead of thee. [. . .] But I console myself, it being the word of God, and thou didst perform the command of thy God, for who can transgress the word of our God, in whose hands is the soul of every living creature? Thou art just, O Lord our God, for all Thy works are good and righteous, for I also rejoice with the word which Thou didst command, and while mine eye weepeth bitterly, my heart rejoiceth. (*Book of Jasher* 23 79–82)¹²

Afterward she became “still as a stone.” When she rose up, she went to the land of Hebron to look for Isaac. There, Satan appeared to her once again, telling her that Isaac was not dead after all. After hearing the news, “her joy was so exceedingly violent that her soul went out through joy; she died and was gathered to her people” (*Book of Jasher* 23 86). When Abraham found her dead, he tried to buy a piece of land to bury her body: “I pray you now, give me a burying-place with you, not as a gift, but for money.” Ephron, the chief of the children of Heth, offered him, as a gift, the field to bury Sarah. Abraham paid for the land, and she was buried and mourned for seven days.

33 To Ostriker, there is significance in Abraham’s twice-repeated comments to the Hittite land-sellers; he was looking for a burial site where he could “bury my dead out of my sight.” According to Ostriker, Sarah’s influence had to be disposed of in order for the male covenant to take place; that is the meaning of the Akedah:

Whereas the Hittite elders twice offer the patriarch a sepulcher to “bury thy dead,” he twice declares his intention to “bury my dead out of my sight” [. . .]. This interesting phrase, usually erased in modern translations, firmly emphasizes Sarah’s disappearance. The Hebrew *mi-l’fanai* literally means “from my face,” or “from before my face,” and idiomatically means “away from my presence” [. . .]. Thus the narrative of Abraham’s succession records a triple triumph of the Father over the Mother. First the power of the womb to generate life is appropriated by the Holy One, then the connective and sustaining power of the umbilical cord becomes the controlling power of the dead rope that binds Isaac, and thirdly Sarah herself must not merely die and be buried but must be eliminated from presence, that is from consciousness. Sarah’s burial signals that the defeat of maternal power is the condition/consequence of the male covenant. (42)

34 The story of Sarah’s death is poignant because it suggests that the space left by a woman as a subject of the sacrificial exchange creates a sacrificial crisis that is solved by reconfiguration of the woman as an object of the sacrifice. Someone had to die for the

¹² *The Book of Jasher* was added in the 16th Century, so its relationship to Genesis 22 is purely cognitive. Most feminist scholars treat the two stories as one, but it is important to keep in mind that although both stories are products of the same patriarchal apparatus, they have very different historical origins.

sacrificial contract to take place. Since Isaac survives, the gift of death is cemented with the death of Sarah, who cannot bear the joy of his survival. Isaac's survival, literally, kills her. Symbolically, she replaces him as a sacrificial object. The logic of the sacrificial responsibility demands that she pay for her exclusion from the sacrificial contract by being the sacrifice herself. She is the embodied gift of death that is exchanged between man and God. Abraham's first resolve, to buy the land for her burial and not to accept it as a gift, is once again a reiteration of the economy of the gift. Herself a gift of death, she is buried in a would-be gift. As Tribble put it: "From exclusion to elimination, denial to death, the attachment of Genesis 22 to patriarchy has given us not the sacrifice of Isaac (that that we are grateful) but the sacrifice of Sarah (for whom we mourn). By her absence from the narrative and her subsequent death, Sarah has been sacrificed by patriarchy to patriarchy" (190). In this biblical story, as anywhere else, Levi-Strauss noticed, "the essential gift is always a woman."

35 "A woman's sacrifice or a sacrifice of a woman, according to one sense of the genitive or the other?" — Derrida asks ("Gift" 75). In French, *sacrifice d'une femme* has an ambiguous meaning: woman can be both a subject and an object of the sacrifice. What's the difference? Does asking such a question imply that the rhetorical difference between a woman's sacrifice and a sacrifice of a woman can be erased? Paul de Man writes an account of Derrida's famous philosophical/grammatological question:

Jacques Derrida — who asks the question "What is the difference"—and we cannot even tell from his grammar whether he "really" wants to know "what" difference is or is just telling us that we shouldn't even try to find out. Confronted with the question of the difference between grammar and rhetoric, grammar allows us to ask the question, but the sentence by means of which we ask it may deny the very possibility of asking. (29)

Following de Man's separation of grammar and rhetoric, can we ask whether the difference between a woman's sacrifice and the sacrifice of a woman is, like a gift of death, purely rhetorical? Does the difference between a woman's sacrifice and the sacrifice of a woman collapse into the empty space of woman's absence? Does the difference signify the collapse of the economy of the death-gift exchange, which is solved by being displaced onto the body of a dead female? Is the female the proof of the impossibility of the gift, filling out the operational space of the gift that is not given (Isaac who is not killed)? Buried in the gift, is she the gift she (who?) gives? A woman's sacrifice or the sacrifice of a woman? The difference between one and the other is the space of female agency from which she can speak as an ethical subject. To see the difference and to deny it marks the moment of the surrender of the feminine subject attempting to reclaim her right to the sacrificial exchange.

“The Gift of Death,” Masculinity, and the Covenant of Circumcision

36 The Western ethics of faith and responsibility warranted by the covenant between God and Abraham is founded on the rhetoric of the gift of death. It is a masculine affair, finalized by the covenant of circumcision: “Obedience to God over-rides paternal affection. As a result Abraham not only receives his son but he also merits the divine ratification of the earlier promised covenant of circumcision” (Alexander 21). The act of circumcision, the physical inscription of the divine power on the male body, finalizes the bond between the men: the phallic experience of shed blood becomes a symbolic act of patriarchal unity.¹³ Eilberg-Schwartz wonders why the covenant is signed on the penis. If blood is crucial, why not another part of the body?¹⁴ And why, by the same token, is women’s blood “filthy, socially disruptive, and contaminating”? (Delaney 99).

37 Faith and responsibility, reenacted by the rhetoric of the gift of death, find their locus in the bleeding phallus. The blood of the phallus becomes the symbol of the sacred. Delaney argues that Abraham’s “penis is the site and guarantee of the covenant [. . .]. It was the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham, a promise—engraved on the flesh of the male sexual organ—that he would be a father of nations” (96). In Biblical Hebrew, there is no word for “penis”; the word used to designate it is “basar,” which also means “flesh.” Circumcision becomes a condition of the sacred, performed through the rhetoric of death and sacrifice. It is in the penis that man finds the inner voice of God: he speaks to God through and from his penis. “The rite of circumcision appears to recognize the power of the father as it is transmitted from God by means of the male organ” (Delaney 100). Boyarin, on the other hand suggests that the covenant of circumcision is actually symbolic feminization /demasculinization of the male child. Boyarin writes: “The East European Jewish ideal of [feminized male] does have origins that are very deeply rooted in traditional Jewish culture, going back at least in part to the Babylonian Talmud [. . .]. The Jewish ideal male as countertype to ‘manliness’ is an assertive historical product of Jewish culture” (2-4). As outsiders, Jewish males defined themselves against the hypermasculinity of the repressive culture, and circumcision was a symbolic act redefining that self-definition.

38 Eilberg-Schwartz points out that the feminization of the Jewish male has a larger context: “Marriage and sexuality are frequent biblical metaphors for describing God’s relation with Israel. God is imagined as the husband to Israel the wife; espousal and even sexual

¹³ See also Alexander, T. D. (). “Genesis 22 and the Covenant of Circumcision”. *JSOT* 25 (1983): 17–22; and Erling, B. “Firstborn and Firstlings in the Covenant Code.” *SBL Seminar*, (1986): 470–478.

¹⁴ According to Islam, Muhammad was born without a foreskin (a condition medically known as aposthia), and Muslims practice circumcision in order to be like him.

intercourse are metaphors for the covenant. Thus when Israel follows other god's, 'she' is seen to be whoring" (3). Eilberg-Schwartz continues:

By imagining men as wives of God, Israelite religion was partially able to preserve the heterosexual complementarity that helped to define the culture. But this also undermined accepted notions of masculinity [. . .]. The feminization of men also disrupted what the tradition posits as a natural complementarity between a divine male and human women. When male-female complementarity is the structure of religious imagery, human women are the natural partners of a divine male, but this connection also renders human males superfluous in the divine-human relationship [. . .]. [T]he potential superfluosity of human masculinity may offer additional insights into the misogynist tendencies of ancient Judaism: women were deemed impure and men were feminized in contradiction to what in this religious culture was a natural complementarity between the divine male and human females. (3-4)

Symbolically then, the circumcision binds men to each other, and Abraham to God. The sacred resides on the crossroads between rhetoric and performative: it represents the nonrepresentable of power and agency. The phallus stands in for the performative and rhetorical that exists nowhere but in language. The rhetoric of the sacrificial logic, thus, signifies nothing beyond itself. Placed outside of the economy of the sacred, femininity exposes its fundamental impossibility: the secret that there is no secret, the gift which is not.

39 Since woman's sacrifice (woman as a subject of the sacrifice) is inscribed within the sacrifice of a woman (woman as an object of the sacrifice), her death is intrinsic to her very being, and thus can never really gain the status of a gift: it is a gift that is a mimesis of a gift. It functions as a gift between men and God, but it can never function as *her* gift. Because woman functions as a gift (in Levi-Strauss' sense as well), her position as an agent of her own sacrifice is necessarily erased. As Rubin pointed out:

If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it [. . .]. To enter into a gift exchange as a partner, one must have something to give. If women are for men to dispose of, they are in no position to give themselves away. (174-175)

Woman can never "give herself" without fulfilling her feminine in-itself of the gift. She cannot transcend her *being* a gift by *turning* herself into a gift. Because she is always already *a priori* an object of the gift, her gift is not an act of will, and hence it is not a gift that would structure her position as an ethical subject. In an interview with Christie McDonald, Derrida (1997) once asked: "What kind of ethics would there be if belonging to one sex or another became its law or privilege? What if the universality of moral laws were modeled on or limited according to the sexes? What if their universality were not unconditional, without sexual condition in particular?" (35). What if. . . ?

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Of Cultural Deference. A Conversation with Rabbi Tanya Segal, Poland's First Female Rabbi — Warsaw, 12 July 2008

By Rohee Dasgupta

Rabbi Tanya Segal leads the progressive reform congregation Beit Warszawa and is currently engaged in rebuilding the infrastructure for the renewal of progressive Judaism in Poland. She also works as a travelling Rabbi in other cities in Poland, determined to help develop a meaningful dialogue in the revival of Polish-Jewish culture. Rabbi Tanya Segal, the first female Rabbi in the entire history of Poland, shares her life's experiences and work in an interview with Rohee Dasgupta. Beginning as a dramatist and actor in Moscow's Yiddish theatre she talks about the transitions in her own Jewish identity as she 'made *Aliyah*' to Israel for seventeen years and her motivation behind combining education, religion and culture to create value in society.

'I saw a woman on the street whose manner was bizarre
Some people spoke in whispers of her children and Ponar
This is the winter of our souls, the blackest hour of night
But nature's timeless wheel must turn and bring a new day's light
Then there will come another time before your eyes grow old
For us a warmer season when our foes will feel the cold
We'll greet your papa at the door, we'll be a family as before
And you will sing out loud forevermore-forevermore.'

Song by the actor in Yiddish in Sobol's Ghetto, Tamar joins her in English. [Excerpt from Midrash theatre script "And Her Name Was Heather" composed and directed by Rabbi Tanya Segal]

Introduction

Living between cultures with troubled histories is not easy — repressed memory, exilic consciousness and the realisation that all cannot be reduced to any simple reconciliation becomes an obvious consequential overlap. However, when the recollection of what's left behind is understood through art against the counter-point of the current experience, it enriches factuality — as the facts interact with the veneer of the performative to help interpret cultural, political or religious questioning and reinstate ideas of common concern. Such questioning about enduring time with a deep awareness of historicization of the circumstances evokes a renewed contestation for knowledge, imagination and identity in relation to the present condition. Rabbi Tanya Segal, the first female Rabbi in Poland, shares her story of living cultural humanism through her own Jewish identity and work — where art and religion revitalize the politics of identity.

Born in 1957, Tanya Segal was raised in a secular Jewish family in Moscow amidst anti-Semitism and troubled political times. For Tanya, art was a spontaneous medium of

expression and a means to alleviate the discomfort of her present situation. In her twenties she began to work as an actor and singer in the Jewish theatre in Moscow (KEMT). The authorities established the theatre as a substitute for the synagogues and Jewish schools it had closed. Her involvement with the theatre helped Tanya connect with Jewish heritage, the Yiddish language, her Jewish identity and provided the sense of community that was denied to her elsewhere. In the late eighties, she completed her studies at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts (GITIS) in stage direction. Although she intended to concentrate on symbolic theatre, her first independent projects were in the field of political satire, strongly criticising her country's domestic and foreign policies. As the artistic director of a cultural centre for youth, she focused on issues that were ignored and attempted to raise social awareness. She also gave performances of Yiddish songs, accompanying herself on the guitar, which she continues till today when leading Sabbath services.

Tanya made Aliyah¹ to Israel together with her son Benyamin in 1990. There she primarily worked in three areas — culture, the translation of books on Jewish themes from Russian to Hebrew, and teaching theatre. In 1997-8 she appeared in a one-woman show entitled “The Dybbuk.” The play reflected her ongoing search for Jewish identity in a multidisciplinary context. Following this, Tanya went to Riga, Latvia to work as an emissary, teaching Jewish history at the Dubnow Jewish School. After returning to Israel she began to study at the Israeli Rabbinical Programme based in Hebrew Union College (HUC), Jerusalem. Her decision to begin rabbinical studies was a profound process of addressing the religious dimension of her Jewish life. Through her years of experiences in the college she came to recognise the strength of Jewish prayer and ritual in their progressive form. Tanya gradually became a rabbi. Alongside her studies at HUC Jerusalem, Tanya studied both in the department of philosophy and the department of theatre at Tel-Aviv University. Her master's thesis is entitled “From Zoharic Text to Liturgical Performance: The Role of Weeping in the Performance of Eikha.” Her thesis combines three fields: a Midrash² on the Zohar, Jewish liturgy, and theatre — an apt complement to her interdisciplinary interests. The same theme continues in the foundation of Tanya's rabbinical thesis in which she composed a play entitled “And Her Name Was Heather,” which blends a creative Midrash on the Book of Ruth with

¹ Aliyah (plural Aliyot) in Hebrew means ascent and refers to Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel (and since its establishment in 1948, as the State of Israel). Aliyah is regarded as an important Jewish cultural concept and a fundamental concept of Zionism, enshrined in Israel's Law of Return, which accords any Jew (and some non-Jews with Jewish relatives) the legal right to assisted immigration and settlement in Israel, and entitles them to Israeli citizenship. In Zionist discourse, Aliyah refers to voluntary immigration of Jews for ideological, emotional, or practical reasons as well as mass flight of persecuted Jews to Israel.

² Midrash is a Hebrew word meaning commentary.

the story of Tamar (Heather) Havilio, an American convert; the play was first staged as part of HUC's *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* programme in 2006.

Since last December, Tanya has been working as a full-time Rabbi at Beit Warszawa reformed Jewish congregation in Poland together with Rabbi Burt Shuman, the chief rabbi of the congregation. Rabbi Tanya is helping rebuild the infrastructure for the renewal of progressive Judaism in Poland and is also developing communities in Krakow, and other cities in Poland.

Interview taken at Beit Warszawa, Warsaw, 12 July 2008

Rohee Dasgupta: Tell me about your background and how it all began...

Rabbi Tanya Segal: I was born in Moscow — since your research is about constructions of identity, it'll be interesting for you to know that I see my life as a continuous search for my own Jewish identity. From a very early age, my Jewishness was very strong. We grew up in an anti-Semitic environment. My family faced many comments, as did the other Jewish families living in our building. My Jewish origin was clear to me and I started to ask questions very early. We were a secular Russian family, but with a strong Jewish identity. When I was twenty, I joined the Jewish theatre in Moscow. I wasn't thinking about theology then, for me it was just a keen interest in symbolic theatre and metaphysical ideas, of course mingled with enthusiasm about performing arts and how it can ascribe my identity with something beyond reality. The Jewish theatre was originally based and quite popular in Birbijan³, a place Stalin wanted to capture, only things didn't work according to his plans, and eventually the theatre got relocated to Moscow. We performed in Yiddish — it was our language of production, our Jewish language was Yiddish but we did not converse in it, we just rehearsed our parts in it and studied it. We understood the grammar very well but conversed primarily in Russian, which probably was a mistake (laughs aloud), but we only saw ourselves as young actors at that time.

Following Perestroika, I decided to go to Israel in 1990 and took my son, who was two years old. We made Aliyah — it was a very long Aliyah; politically it was a very interesting time when I came to Israel. I lived in Israel for seventeen years. The period of Aliyah in Israel was a long transformation and Aliyah itself is a big question of identity. You leave everything from the past, the cultures that you grew up in, and adopt a whole new life. I was very connected to Russian culture, even though all my experience was indeed very Jewish, but

³ Located between rivers the Bira and the Birjan, Birobijan was renamed in 1923 as Birbijan and was reorganized into a working village. Birbijan became a centre for autonomous Jewish culture and evolved into a city in 1937.

without religion. In Moscow we had one synagogue, it was a famous synagogue; we went there together with our families, but not very frequently — it was more about socializing. Jews from the neighbourhood came to meet each other in the synagogue. There were police all around, especially during Jewish Holidays — Rosh Hashanah and Pesach — so for us it was more a Jewish culture of social and political opposition rather than being religiously inclined. We were Russians, but we understood we were different; our being together was different too — we have some other common culture between us — as you can imagine from the circumstances we didn't have a religious approach to life.

RD: So the migration to Israel must have resulted in a very different view of Jewish life — as after Aliyah life is not just social and political, it's religious too isn't it?

RTS: Oh absolutely, first of all Aliyah is a very painful, tedious and if I may, a traumatic process — it is all about asking intricately and very deeply *who you actually are* and *where you are*. If you are Jewish, what does it mean to be Jewish? In Russia we didn't ask these questions — we were Jewish, we had an anti-Semitic environment, so we took it for granted, but it never occurred to us to ask each other what it really meant to be Jewish. However, we asked the question in the theatre — what it meant to be in the Jewish theatre (it's important to note that not all actors with us were Jewish) and have a Jewish theatre. Yiddish theatre meant something special, something unique in the language of theatre and somewhat unique in its approach to life and performance, but in Israel I understood the vision of the world very differently. I understood that a Jewish life in Israel gets groomed together with religion and culture. To be honest, if you are not born and brought up with such an attitude, it takes years to realise and inculcate it.

RD: How long was the process of Aliyah?

RTS: I lived in Israel for seventeen years, it was a real challenge. I remember officially I had five years of psychological support — opinions change and perceptions evolve over the years; gradually after five years one starts understanding Israel, and starts thinking differently. For many years, I was a Russian to all who knew me. I will say it took me ten years to really feel Israeli.

RD: Where were you based in Israel?

RTS: I lived in Tel-Aviv. After a year I started to study and continued studying all my life (laughs). It is a stimulating University environment and indeed very different than the closed Russian society in which I grew up. I made a lot of friends, who helped me all through the years of transition; I owe a lot to them.

RD: And your long academic journey...

RTS: Ah well, I began to study theatre; I have an MA in (stage) direction from the Academy named after Lunacharsky in Moscow. I was an actor and I played the guitar — as you saw in the Sabbath. In Israel I knew I had to study Hebrew, so I took Hebrew lessons alongside the theory of theatre at the University. Knowing the language helped as I was studying philosophy at the faculty of Jewish philosophy. I had to start from the basics — introduction to Judaism, philosophy etc. — which progressed gradually all through my University years. I took many additional courses in Jewish philosophy. I hadn't finished writing my MA thesis when I decided to take a break and came to Riga with my son to teach Jewish history at a Jewish yeshiva (school). In Israel there are two degrees: an MA in Rabbinical College and an MA in Jewish studies at the University. My initial study was in Kabbalah and Jewish mystic philosophy, I was primarily based in the faculty of theatre but somehow wanted to connect all my interdisciplinary interests. For me theatre was a search both for my identity and myself. My thesis finally got affiliated with two faculties — the Theatre faculty and the Kabbalah faculty of Jewish philosophy. My thesis was about Midrash and lamentation in the Zohar⁴ as liturgical performance, so I could finally combine it all. (smiles)

RD: What made you come to Poland?

RTS: I came from Russia — I saw how hard the process was for Russian Jews like me to understand themselves as a Jewish woman besides being a Russian. When I came to Riga I first started to ask myself about religion. I taught Jewish history there and that, as you know, cannot be done without religious interventions. Every time I taught about the movements within Judaism I would ask myself where I was going with all my understandings. The second motivation was that there was only one (orthodox) synagogue in Riga, and we were friends with the Rabbi; it was an interesting set-up in Riga — the yeshiva (school), the Israeli embassy and the synagogue were three 'big' Jewish circles. And the more I realised this, the more I felt the need to close the gap — so when I returned to Israel, I went straight into the rabbinical college.

Moscow was really a very secular experience of Judaism; I was an actor and dramatist in the Yiddish theatre. It was a culture of political opposition, where one could have risked getting oneself arrested for carrying a book by Pasternak in the handbag. I was surrounded by Jewish culture, music and theatre as well as anti-Semitism (smiles). You must understand these were really troubled times — I remember we used to go to a private phonetic library of Yiddish; we went through catalogues and scripts there. Singing Yiddish songs was a criminal

⁴ The Zohar [radiance] is the greatest classic of Kabbalistic mysticism. It is a mystical commentary on the Torah, written in Aramaic and contains discussions about the divine creation process and the problem of evil. It stresses the cosmic significance of human deeds.

offence. Even in the city we couldn't read or study Hebrew or Yiddish. I carried my guitar always with me and I remember when I sometimes spontaneously sang in Yiddish, they authorities tried to check if my concert organization permitted it, where I came from etc. — it was a very hard time but still I would say it didn't quite hurt my Jewish identity; it was a hard time for Jewish life, also for any kind of Jewish cultural practice. So coming from a secular family and being surrounded by such an anti-Semitic atmosphere I really did not think about being a rabbi. For me Jewish identity then was simply Jewish culture and of course an awareness of Jewish history.

RD: How did you get in touch with Beit Warszawa and what made you want to work here?

RTS: I went to the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Jerusalem; we have four Hebrew departments — three in the US and one in Jerusalem, all offering different programmes. While studying in Jerusalem, I took an exchange semester in the US. In my second year of rabbinical practice, I did one semester in Westchester Temple in New York — though it was a part of the HUC curriculum, the method and perspectives were different so it was worth gaining the experience. When I came back, I took part in a foundation project sponsored by the Israeli Ministry of Education enabling rabbinical students to go to Russia, Ukraine or Belarus to support reformed progressive Jewish communities. I chose to work in Ukraine and travelled from Kharkov to Poltava, then to L'viv. As L'viv is Galicia, I decided I wanted to visit Warsaw on my way back. I was very excited being here, I travelled around the streets; I went to the Nożyk synagogue. I felt something, it influenced me so deeply that I wanted to live and work here. Obviously, in Twarda⁵ services are restricted only to the Torah text and women sit separately on the balcony in Nożyk. In Israel we all are allowed in the congregation I started to look for progressive Jewish congregations and found Beit Warszawa, they identified themselves as a religious reform Jewish community. When I went back to Israel from this trip, I started corresponding with them as a rabbinical student; I came here in 2007 during Rosh Hashanah, it was the last year of college and I did the last five months of my rabbinical practice here. I really enjoyed working in Beit, it was specifically about Beit Warszawa and more generally about Poland. It's very important to have such communities here. I remember, when I went back to Israel everyone was curious and started asking questions because many people have their roots in Poland. They just don't speak about it openly because in Israel we have an emotionally hard connection with Poland. Israelis come

⁵ The Nożyk Synagogue (Polish: Synagoga Nożyków) is Warsaw's only surviving pre-war synagogue on Ulicia Twarda (Twarda Street). It was erected prior to 1902 and rebuilt after World War II. The synagogue is still operational and currently houses the Warsaw Orthodox Jewish Commune, offices of the Chief Rabbi of Poland and American Jewish Joint Distribution committee.

to Poland, but only to visit the concentration camps. It's hard for them to accept that Poland has a thriving Jewish culture. However, stereotypical approaches are slowly changing. What can I say... I felt an urge to come and work here, and I followed my intuitions.

RD: Obviously when you took up this role you knew it would be a very significant step — you are the first female Rabbi in the entire history of Poland. How do you feel about it? Do you find your role contested within and outside the reformed Jewish community?

RTS: To be honest, I really did not think about it, I really wanted to come because of my religious and cultural interests. I must add that my son supported my decision — they study the history of Holocaust in high school. When I asked him whether I should work in Poland as he joined the Israeli army, he said “It is Warsaw, you have to go.” So I really didn't think about it as “I'm going to be the first female Rabbi in Poland,” because in Israel, in the circle and college I was in, the reform movement is the central cause, and we have many female rabbis in the congregations who take leading roles; so to begin with it was a very common experience for me. I know that even in Conservative Judaism in Israel they ordinate women rabbis, but they don't take the sole leading part. The Maram⁶, the Israel Council of Progressive Rabbis, has women rabbis and the gender issue is not really a big question there — so I didn't think that way. It was only when I came and settled to work here that all the publicity started. Everyone started speaking about it and I realised it was perceived as a very strong statement in Poland. I'm happy about it, the moment people see me, they learn something about the reform movement — which among many things stands for equality in gender.

Beit Warszawa is a very dynamic place; it is developing and growing very fast. People knew about Beit Warszawa earlier, but it was more a Jewish cultural organization to begin with, where people came with a bit of curiosity and without religious needs or questioning or any expectations. Rabbi Schumann came in 2006 and now I also lead the congregation, so things have definitely changed. It has become a strong religious statement with the cultural rather than a question. We get interesting feedback from people through our cultural and religious projects; you saw the interest in the Jewish festival during Sabbath.

So the reform movement will make an impact; it's certainly not a fight with anyone, but we want to impart the religion, education and culture from our perspective, which is rooted deeply in the Halakhic⁷ point of view. In the liturgical perspective, we differ from the

⁶ It is interesting to note that etymologically the word Maram is of Arabic origin meaning wish or desire and is both masculine and feminine in gender.

⁷ Halakha (Hebrew; means the way of walking) is the collective body of Jewish religious law, including biblical law (the 613 mitzvot) Talmudic and rabbinic law, as well as customs and traditions. Judaism classically draws no distinction in its laws between religious and non-religious life. Hence, Halakha guides not only religious

orthodox community. It's crucial for us to build the reform movement firmly now. Often I meet people from the orthodox community who know me on a personal level; these encounters are always normal — first people, then religion. They say “Oh, so it's you who is leading the programme; I'll definitely come to your lecture” — it's natural, I think, but again it's obvious that as a reform movement, we have some serious ideological considerations that differ from other conservative communities. Beit has to live up to the liturgical position — we are working on it. On the other hand, my being here is not much of a contestation but I would say it's a very strong statement, and that comes with a lot of responsibility as historically — even in the liberal tradition — Poland had only male rabbis.

RD: Do you travel a lot in Poland as you practice?

RTS: Yes, I am a travelling rabbi for Beit Warszawa. My role is to go to different towns and try to build the same or different models of progressive reform Jewish communities. I travel to Lublin, Chelm, Kraków, Częstochowa and try to work there. I am also involved in the Midrash theatre project, which is an obvious endeavour on my part, having started with the artistic approach to religion. The cultural approach is the first point of interest for most people. Many people in Poland choose to live Judaism through culture or study but not through any religious or liturgical events. But I always smilingly start with Sabbath (laughs aloud). Sabbath as you know is a religious ritual but the people don't realise this, for them it is a yet another cultural affair in Judaism. Many people come to Sabbath without actually knowing that it is actually from the Torah. So we start by celebrating the Torah and celebrate Sabbath on Friday; in Kraków sometimes we have additional discussion lessons. These discussions led us on to the Midrash theatre project. Studying the torah through performance has a lot to do with negotiations of Jewish identity.

I remember the first people who came and approached me during the festival; their first — almost warning — statement was “We are not religious.” I said, okay, welcome, but we can try to study a bit from the classical text and discuss themes — what it means to be Jewish and its related meanings, but most importantly we are going to check how this text belongs and relates to our lives today. People say they are not Jews at all but it is very interesting how discussion unfolds and questions give rise to relations, Jewish relations and indeed Polish-Jewish relations.

practices and beliefs, but numerous aspects of day-to-day social life. Historically Halakha served many Jewish communities as an enforceable avenue of civil and religious law, now however Jews are bound to Halakha only by voluntary consent. Among Ashkenazi Jews, there are various disagreements over Halakha, which resulted in the emergence of the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements within Judaism.

What I find different about Jews in Poland from the Jews in my earlier circle in Russia is that many people don't know about their Jewish identity here — most people are repressed about it and keep it as a distant past, but as it happens with these intensive discussion sessions, memories from the past come back. Something that they can relate to, which connects them to a forgotten part of their lives through family backgrounds or some personal stories that they remember and say “there was Jewish for me.” Though the common feeling is about rebuilding or revival of Jewish identity, I say it is about *building* Jewish identity. I remember a person from Israeli TV who came to interview a Polish-Jewish person in Beit — while talking generally he commented: “You will understand as you are Jewish,” and the interviewee was shocked. For an Israeli it is an obvious thing, but for a Polish-Jew being Jewish doesn't come as an easy acknowledgement. I had to tell the Israeli interviewer that in Poland we don't express it so explicitly. He was very surprised and I had to explain the difficulties in the best possible cultural translation. In contrast, in Russia we all knew that we were Jewish; we had Jewish friends and it was a clear fact for us. We were not religious, didn't go to the synagogue regularly, but still we had a very strong Jewish identity. In Poland, most people come to know about their roots in mid-life or some even earlier on, but many families don't want to speak about it; they are Polish Catholics with Jewish roots — they are very confused. Many were raised as Catholics but remember things that had been different in their childhood. We are thinking about writing a community book based on these stories.

To be Jewish really means to feel you are a part of some group, that you have some common knowledge. In Poland it is hard to raise that feeling spontaneously. Jews were always together through all these years of the political divide, but the last trauma of '68 left a strong impact on people. They prefer to remain at a distance and just show interest in cultural Judaism, to confess they are Jewish only much later, when they are “confident” enough. In Israel, on the other hand, there's always a place for Jewish identity — of course, the contradictions between reformed and orthodox movements are another story (laughs). But here acknowledging one's identity as Jewish is really a complicated matter. In real life many Polish-Jewish stories blur the boundary between truth and deception, and some stories have no ending — but reflection through art helps to search life again for those overlooked ideas and reconsider things “differently.”

RD: It seems like you really work through a process — before you go to these places do you have an outreach from Beit Warszawa announcing your visit? How has the response been from other cities or towns?

RTS: Yes, we announce it in advance. It generally helps to educate people through Sabbath as they get exposed to both education and culture; then, if they choose, they engage with religious questions. It was interesting in Chelm (once a famous Jewish town, now there is nothing there): two of our administrative officers advertised my visit in the local newspapers and radio — it was a pleasant surprise to see that every time we organized a visit there we had around forty people. As I said, not everyone knows or thinks that they are Jewish, and to begin with we don't ask this question openly either. In Chelm we did Sabbaths together. Some people came with their families, some came with kids and we could slowly see their interest to expose their lives to Judaism. We realised some Jewish families were still there — sometimes it becomes apparent during our discussions or while studying Jewish songs. We have good singers and musicians in the group, so they make the learning more interactive while studying the songs or texts both from the cultural and theological point of view. We also celebrate Sabbath every month in Lublin, so you see, becoming a congregational community is really a process, as you said. For them to celebrate Sabbath ritually and to feel Jewish is still a very long way to go. It'll take time for people to realize to make them feel a part of the community. For Beit Warszawa it took eight years; many things happened here to make this change, and additionally it is based in the capital with people and resources. Other towns' progress is relatively slow but the process has indeed begun.

To return to the Midrash theatre project: it started with two people. We started studying together and I worked on the theatre concept with them. Eventually more people joined and we staged *Melody of Silence* in the Jewish space at the Galicia Museum during the Jewish Festival. We tried to pose the questions of how the text speaks to the individual, what the essence of this connection in real life is, what's the traditional view on it and what's the modern view on it, how do Jews in Poland connect to *Akedat Yitzhak* (meaning traumatic or repressed memories as an ordeal of self-discovery) and how we deal with it. And as you know, Galicia Museum's *Traces of memory*⁸ exhibition presents this theme very well. I have a group of fifteen people today through this project. This year, many young University students showed interest in the Midrash theatre; they came to me and said they wanted to form a similar Jewish cultural group or association — it sounds familiar (laughs). So I let them know that I am eager to teach, give lessons if they want to learn. I know many of them have Jewish roots but they are not willing to come out in the open. It is not easy and I respect their wish.

⁸ The late British photojournalist Chris Schwarz worked in Poland since the 1980s. In 2004, he founded the Galicia Jewish Museum in Kraków — a cultural education centre and exhibition space devoted to Jewish culture and civilization in Polish Galicia. Among other installations, the museum features his photo project *Traces of Memory*, containing twelve years work on Poland's Jewish cultural past. For more information visit: www.galiciajewishmuseum.org.

RD: What is Midrash theatre?

RTS: Midrash theatre is a creative method of understanding Jewish theology; it is based on interpreting the Torah text while integrating the arts into the process of study. Drama, music, vocal improvisation, movement, dance are frequently used tools to interpret the text; however in Midrash theatre the audience is also free to ask the actor a question, and thus it sustains the traditional “question-answer approach.” Midrash theatre is also known as environment theatre as space is very important — whoever directs sets the space of performance in the best possible natural way. The spaces where workshops take place are the source of inspiration for sequence and dramatization of the plot. The presentation of Midrash theatre is unique, the audience moves along with the actor, who introduces and narrates his or her story moving from place to place in the ‘natural setting’. The matter of space and *mise-en-scène* forms the centre of discussion in the ritual manner of performance. Space is used to infuse the performance with substantial meaning, and it is examined in relation to the term *proxemics* — the study of spatial separation maintained in various social and interpersonal situations — in the plot and how this separation relates to the present cultural factors.

So you see, ultimately Midrash theatre is about encouraging individual creativity with the traditional texts, it provides an opportunity for the emerging Polish Jews to explore their Jewish roots and identity, to share the depth of Jewish traditional texts through a creative medium. It also helps to introduce Jewish traditions to the people who are interested in the intellectual understanding of Jewish culture irrespective of their academic or professional backgrounds.



RD: So Midrash theatre is really creative learning with ritual performance— how did you start working on this concept?

RTS: I first started working on Midrash theatre while writing my drama thesis at Tel-Aviv University, which dealt with the dramatic technique in Midrash Eikha in the Zohar. I developed it further in my rabbinical thesis. As I said, Midrash is about improvisation through commentary from real stories which then gets symbolically portrayed in the religious text. My rabbinical thesis in HUC is a real story of a Christian girl named Tamar Havilio in the US, who happens to come to London through an international student exchange programme for drama students and goes to see *Ghetto*, the famous play by Sobol⁹ at the London National Theatre. While watching the drama, she starts to cry. As my thesis is about lamentation, I related her crying to her revived spiritual experience (smiles). I think what happened to her is what is happening in Poland now — I'll return to this in a moment. But to finish the story: on her return back to the US, Tamar starts taking courses for conversion and ultimately converts to Judaism. She eventually goes to HUC, learns how to be a cantor, marries an Israeli and today she is the cantor of HUC in Jerusalem teaching other cantors. As Midrash theatre is about interaction, I combined her story with a text from the Torah — it was the story of Ruth set in interaction with the space of the college designed by the Israeli architect Moshe Safdia; this is environment theatre, a key concept in Midrash performance. I first staged the play on *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*.¹⁰



⁹ Joshua Sobol is a famous Israeli playwright; his play *Ghetto* surrounds the story of a theatre group in the ghetto.

¹⁰ Shavuot is a Jewish holiday that occurs on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Sivan (late May or early June). Shavuot commemorates the anniversary of the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Tikkun Leil Shavuot is the custom of staying up the entire night (*leil*) of Shavuot studying with the community in order to renew the experience at Sinai.

RD: Did the play at the Jewish festival carry the same theme?

RTS: Yes, but again it was different in its presentation and improvisation. At the Jewish festival, we performed it in the Galicia Museum. The play was entitled *The Melody of Silence* — signifying the emptiness of the once vibrant Jewish life in Poland — and carried the message that “we need to lean, to hear the sound or ‘the melody of silence.’” We built a small stage, where an actor would sit and recite the Midrashim — the story of Ruth — talking about the conversion ritual as well as serving as conduit for the performance of *Ghetto* in the play. The curator of the museum referred the story of David in the introduction — so everything connected well to the theme. Once the plot started to build up the synchronicity, the interpretation wasn’t too hard to find for the audience. Improvising interaction between the group is what modern Midrash theatre is about; each time the script and plot can be performed differently depending on the director and the kind of actors he or she has — in Kraków for example I didn’t start with the *Akedat Yitzhak* theme as I did in Jerusalem, I started with interaction with the group; after this came interaction with the space which was followed by the interpretation from the text. Finally, the connection came about with tragic memories in *Akedat Yitzhak* and how Jewish identity is built on this text. With the *Traces of Memory* exhibition all around, the ambience became even more symbolic to connect the play with the memory of Shoah.

RD: Does Midrash theatre with its links to the stories of biblical women harbour a gender perspective?

RTS: Midrash features poetic monologues and is about sensibility in interpretation, exploring relationships both from a male and female point of view. While the idea is to appeal to all and to open dialogue amongst people about Jewish identity, it can’t be denied that women have played a significant role in developing the reform movement. Most stories are about brave and wise endeavours of women who are assertive “risk-takers” and creative leaders. In Poland the reserves in the concept of Jewishness is one of the first obstacle for us to overcome before finding an answer to the patriarchal rabbinic order; however, our work has already begun. (smiles)

In the reform movement Jewish women have always had the freedom to read classical sacred texts and interpret them “their way”. This is a realistic and truthful choice of creating an unequivocal Jewish identity. As a rabbi it’s crucial for me to foster that clarity of purpose. Midrash is an intersection between an ancient (biblical) text and a contemporary story drawing out new ethical spirit of questioning that matters to society. Now whether the text is about Ruth, Sarah or Rachael, what matters most is the vitality of spirit and the thought-

provoking questions with which the audience interacts. I feel that gender equity or lessons from our intuitive fore-mothers inevitably comes out of such a strong portrayal.

RD: Can you share an instance about how you link these themes in Sabbath services to bring out discussion about Poland's Jewish past and present?

RTS: Well, we recently studied *Megilat Eikha* (the Book of Lamentations), and I introduced the Midrash Eikha in the Book of Zohar. Megilat Eikha, read on Tisha B'Av, is a liturgical documentation that commemorates the destruction of the temple in Israel, which is perceived in the Jewish tradition as a national tragedy. The mourning of destruction is a Halakhic matter and follows traditional Jewish mourning rituals and customs. The key element of Tisha B'Av is to feel a strong connection with the tragedy of the destroyed temple — to have this event in Poland, the land of Holocaust, with the 'returning' Polish Jews is a very moving experience. Following the discussion about Holocaust, we discussed the question of what kind of lesson education can provide — the knowledge of the difference between good and evil and what people can do to make the right choice. In my rabbinical thesis, I contend that emotion generated by weeping in the performance lays the groundwork for the congregation's emotional connection to mourning the destruction, the collective experience of grief and sorrow, the link between personal grief and public grief, and its connection with the metaphysical level while keeping relevant the contemporary meaning of events. In Poland, such a perception is very relevant as we overcome history to make the "right choice" — which of course can be reinterpreted in various ways in Jewish theology and in reality.

RD: As a travelling Rabbi, how has your interaction been with (non-Jewish) Poles from the smaller towns that you visit?

RTS: Oh yeah, I meet them in towns, in trains and there's a big interest among them. I have met many people in towns who later came to the Sabbath service as well — they are interested and they are curious to know how a woman can lead a congregation and how she preaches. It is a big issue for many Polish people as even in Catholicism the role of women is constrained and limited. In small towns, I have had priests attending out of curiosity when I lead Sabbath or liturgical discussions or lessons during Jewish holidays — I really welcome this, it's a very positive step. I remember in Częstochowa I was leading the Sabbath and a priest who was attending asked me about Jewish holidays, the interpretations of Sabbath songs, the role of women in Jewish liturgical life. Wherever I have said that I am a rabbi I've always had very positive reactions. I get a lot of questions, some surprising, some sensible, but overall an intriguing experience.

RD: What is your opinion about Polish civil society?

RTS: When I first came to Poland, I was very excited to be here — everyone was friendly and there was a big interest from the media towards me as the first female rabbi. I like this country; it's very friendly towards Israel, although at the same time it has some right wing responses. I think the country is still in transition, but most of all I appreciate how people here deal with the hard subject of their Jewish identity — especially the younger generation; some come to Beit Warszawa as friends, some out of cultural curiosity, some go through the process of conversion. People struggle to see their past and want to relate it to their future — it is crucial to value that inner search. Their personal quest to know themselves is unique — some may have strong answers others may not be that confident, but what I respect most in everyone is that they confront it, they don't push it away — it is a brave thing to do.

When you walk the streets, after a while you begin to feel that something happened here. In Kraków, for example, as in many other places, the empty buildings, streets, synagogues evoke a cold and sad feeling, but I honestly feel that our reform movement will give them a little 'real' life. It's a humbling feeling to learn how people reinstate their inner selves and lives — it's really a difficult experience. It's a very dynamic country; you can feel that in rabbinical terms it is the time of *hesed* — a persistent urge to confront the truth no matter how difficult it is. People want to deal with it, even people who are not Jewish; they want to deal with it as part of their own culture. Their curiosity to know more about Jewish culture, their strong support is crucial for civil society. Earlier nobody wanted to hear about Jewish life in Poland. With the revival, many people are beginning to experience this culture again. It may not be a daily experience for all anymore, but still the presence of culture matters; the sharing and the Polish-Jewish dialogue count a lot. Things are generally supportive here but still a lot of work has to be done; it is not easy to deal with such a troubled and complicated history.

RD: You bridge the cultural and the religious well when you lead the congregation. I enjoyed the Sabbath in Krakow during the festival.

RTS: Glad you liked it (smiles). Because you see, it's my way...I saw myself as an artist initially and didn't ever think of becoming religiously inclined. I often asked myself in Moscow, where I could have gone to the usual theatre, why did I choose the Yiddish theatre...?

RD: Could it have been your way to your own Jewish identity?

RTS: Exactly, it is. In the rabbinical college it was a big question to what extent culture is the promotion of religious life. I can firmly say that religious feeling grows in the person through culture — for me it was a cultural quest, it began sub-consciously when I was in the Yiddish

theatre. Sometimes I ask myself how much of me is the artist and how much is the rabbi...and am I enough rabbi now (laughs). My rabbinical practice in Beit taught me a lot too. Many a times I have come across comments such as “It’s an amazing idea to support a cultural project” — obviously I have to tell them that it is not just a cultural project, it is our project. It’s important to convey the message to people that this is as much as a part of their history as ours, and for the religious part, it’s an individual choice whether they want to explore Judaism out of their cultural interest or through in-depth study. A strong religious feeling takes time, it takes years to nurture the quest, but we have time... (laughs)

RD: Another forty years maybe? (smiles)

RTS: (laughs) Sure why not!

Nadia Valman. *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007

By Marco de Waard, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

1 Nadia Valman's book is a well-researched and cogently argued study of the image of the Jewess in nineteenth-century British literary culture. If, as the blurb on the dust jacket puts it, the author desires to challenge "the emphasis in previous scholarship on antisemitic stereotypes in this period," she impressively succeeds, as she shows how Jewish femininity could be the locus of a wide range of discursive negotiations. Through five extensive case studies, Valman demonstrates that the Jewess was simultaneously cast as an object of idealisation and an object of interventionist strategies which aimed at her conversion or "civil improvement." Whether these strategies were evangelical or emancipatory, conservative or radical in nature, the issue of gender was always a complicating factor: it confused the other "categories of difference" of the discursive formation at stake, and often revealed their instability and contradictions.

2 Valman's departure from previous scholarship is captured by her focus on what, following Bryan Cheyette, she calls "semitic" (rather than anti- or philosemitic) discourse. Concentrating on "ambivalent [forms] of representation in which the meaning of 'the Jew' is not fixed," and in which the Jewess appears as "an empty signifier onto which fantasies of desire or vengeance are arbitrarily projected," she advances the argument that the figure of the Jewess "marked out the axes of difference" through which English identity as a liberal and Protestant nation could be imagined (2-4). An imposingly wide array of texts from the 1820s to the early 1900s is drawn upon to substantiate this claim. While most of these texts are fictional, they range from the sentimental to the science-orientated, from the popular to the "highbrow," and they stem from as many different cultural contexts, both Anglo-Jewish and gentile. To trace the slippery role of the figure of the Jewess through these various contexts is no small task, but the author always seems to have command of her material, showing a particularly strong hand when she pin-points interactions between competing models of Jewish femininity.

3 That Valman knows how to organise and synthesise her material appears from the introduction. In it she clarifies how the nineteenth-century image of the Jewess developed within two "formative narrative paradigms," both of which fostered deeply ambivalent attitudes towards Judaism. On the one hand, enlightened and Hegelian narratives construed Jews as incapable of aligning with modernity because of their rigid, unreflexive adherence to

a fixed legal code. Even or especially when Jews became privileged objects of an emancipatory logic, Jewish particularism was seen as a threat to Britain's modern liberal culture and a disqualifier for emancipatory rights. Evangelical narratives, on the other hand, cast the Jew as an indispensable partner within history's providential design. Continuing seventeenth-century millennial beliefs and a concomitant conviction of Anglo-Jewish exceptionalism, evangelical authors took very literally the idea that the Second Coming was conditional on the conversion of the Jews, and they directed many christianising efforts to their association with Jewish women. After the evangelical revival of the first half of the century, metaphors of conversion would long continue to resurface in secular liberal discourse.

4 It is within these two "narrative paradigms" that Valman situates her in-depth case studies, beginning with a reading of the figure of the "repellent beauty" in secular novels. The model for this figure is Walter Scott's Rebecca: the beautiful, suffering Jewess in *Ivanhoe* (1819) whose combination of enhanced spirituality and erotic appeal secured a special place for her in the nineteenth-century imagination of Jewishness. As is well-known, Rebecca is a problematic heroine in that she resists religious conversion and finally chooses exile, while formally Scott's novel celebrates tolerance, liberality, and inclusivism as universal principles of progress. Valman's analysis of Rebecca's literary afterlife in works by Augustin Daly and Anthony Trollope, among others, leads to the identification of a pattern in which "narratives ostensibly about prejudice against Jews" are time and again seen to "shift their focus to become narratives about Jewish prejudice" (50). Apparently, these narratives displace the responsibility for the limits and shortcomings of the nineteenth century's enlightened, liberal universalism onto the "other" whom it purports to include and respect.

5 It adds to the persuasive force of Valman's study that she finds structurally homologous contradictions and paradoxes in texts of a very different kind, including conversionist literature by evangelical middle-class women (e.g. Annie Webb, Elizabeth Rigby) and the revisions of conversionist plots by Anglo-Jewish authors that followed in the 1840s (e.g. Grace Aguilar, the Moss sisters). Ironically, in both contexts, Christian notions of tolerance and care for the other found embodiment in empowering strategies of representation, while at the same time producing highly conservative constructions of gender. In two further chapters, Valman takes her story beyond the politically crucial year of 1858, when Jews gained admittance to the House of Commons. One chapter deals with novels of the 1870s which located narratives of Jewish assimilation as well as particularism in the world of commerce and capital. As Valman shows, these representations (which include Eliot's *Daniel*

Deronda) gave expression to the concern with cosmopolitanism that is typical of this decade; cosmopolitanism was as often idealised as it was feared to erode national “character,” and Jewish protagonists, inextricably diasporic, formed convenient vehicles onto which this ambivalence could be deflected. The last chapter deals with the controversial Anglo-Jewish writers Amy Levy and Julia Frankau who, informed by biological and racial theories, construed Jewishness as degenerative but the Jewess as a potential agent of regeneration and redemption. Again, this case allows Valman to prove her overall contention that Jews in nineteenth-century British literature were rarely entirely “othered”; rather, the representation of the Jewess is seen here as profoundly ambivalent indeed, the site of discursive struggles which continued to mutate as the century drew to a close.

6 All things considered, this monograph forms an engaging study of nineteenth-century constructions of the Jewess in British literature. While Valman’s scholarship has clearly benefited from gender theory and discourse-analytical approaches, she manages to wear her theoretical erudition lightly, preferring historicisation to insistent theoretical framing, in line with the place of this book in the series of “Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature.” Yet this study will not only interest period specialists. Its wider relevance resides in its analysis of gender definitions and models of femininity in relation to the constitutive discourses of a modern liberal culture: the discourses of tolerance, emancipation, progress, and a scientific modernity which define themselves through, but also meet their defining limits in, the encounter with their “relevant others.”

Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher, eds. *Africa After Gender?* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007.

By Henriette Gunkel, University of Fort Hare, South Africa

1 In *Africa After Gender?*, the editors Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher present a range of articles rooted in different disciplinary approaches — ranging from the social sciences to literary theory and history — which demonstrate the broad range of African gender scholarship. This anthology adds to a number of recent publications within African gender studies which counteract the Western hegemony of gender research by pointing to the specificity of experiences of colonialism and racism, the differences in political and economic environments, the interpretations of feminist theory as well as the importance of questions around positionality, standpoint and intersectionality — amongst others (1). In the introduction, “When Was Gender?”, the editors approach the question of what the meaning of gender in an African context can be by pointing to the temporal location within gender discourse:

Our book’s title, “Africa After Gender?” poses a provocative question, one that is deliberately ambiguous. It suggests a temporal flow of ideas (a ‘before’ and ‘after’), a possible teleology of progress (progressing through stages of development), or even the eclipse and demise of a discourse on gender in Africa that, as many know, has barely begun to take root. (3)

2 By arguing that the concept of gender only recently entered “Africa and African studies” the book explores the specificity of thinking gender in “Africa” with the aims to “make a productive intervention in the dynamics of North-South relations” (3) and to put forward the argument that the study of gender in the African context requires a transdisciplinary approach.

3 The book is divided into five thematic sections with four chapters each. In the first section, “Volatile Genders and New African Women”, Sylvia Tamale’s personal account of the responses her support for gay rights triggered underlines the editor’s argument that African gender identities today are volatile in the sense of “precarious and explosive” (5). Tamale’s analysis of homophobia in contemporary Uganda shows once again how sexuality is used as a tool to constitute the gender regime, unfortunately with the support of women’s rights organizations. Gay Seidman’s article on the history and the impact of the South African Gender Commission in “post-apartheid” South Africa forces us to rethink the question of how feminist politics can be successfully incorporated into governmental institutions. She highlights the internal dynamics in the struggle for equal rights, especially in regard to

questions of class and race. Lynn Thomas's essay explores the "New African Woman" in the shape of the pregnant schoolgirl in colonial Kenya, arguing that the question of procreation is more than a matter of anatomy and the body. Thomas points to the intimate relationship between gender discourse and gendered reproduction which needs to be understood as a combination between colonialism and pre-colonial notions about the dangers of reproduction in order to ensure "proper generational relations and secure material wealth" (57). Nwando Achebe and Bridget Teboh, themselves understood by the editors as "New African Women", explore the politics of doing research as African women on African women — in this case in Nigeria and Cameroon. Their article points to African women's role in the production of knowledge, arguing for an interdisciplinary methodology.

4 The second section, "Activism and Public Space", explores the relationship between African gender theory and activism, emphasizing the different histories of gender activism in various African countries. The first two articles examine women's engagement with activism and the public sphere in relation to popular culture. Susan Andrade explores the relationship between African gender activism and its representation within African fiction. She draws particular attention to fiction's engagement with nationalism within the project of decolonization. Adrienne MacLain's article refers to popular theatrical performance in Nigeria as primary material. She explores gender and gendered conflicts on the public stage of Yoruba popular theater in Nigeria which traditionally reproduces a patriarchal discourse. She demonstrates how gender becomes a vehicle for larger economic and social anxieties. Similarly to Achebe and Teboh, Takyiwaa Manuh points to the necessity of generating knowledge by African scholars and activists in Africa. She refers to the provocative question "Do African Women Scholars Have Theory?" (142) in order to highlight not only the fact that African theory is widely ignored by Western scholars but also to question what theory African scholars and activists consider useful. Hussaina Abdullah examines the driving forces behind the emergence of women's organization in Nigeria. She argues that Nigerian gender activism since the 1990s is highly influenced by the UN's agenda for women and a global feminist movement, which also raises questions about the impact of international funding policies on local politics.

5 The third section, "Gender Enactments, Gendered Perceptions", moves to the conception of gender as performance. By focusing on women's critical agency in particular the articles remind us that there is more to gender performance than sexualities and sex. In her work on West African documentary film Paulla Ebron points to her understanding of gender performance as discord and drama that is used both to normalize and denormalize other social

categories. Ebron understands social status itself as performance and by doing so questions the binary understanding of power relations that equates power with masculinity. Similarly, Eileen Boris also historicizes gender by pointing to the alternative meanings and ways of doing gender in the African context. By raising the question “What can Africa do for gender?” Boris argues that African scholarship not only challenges the relationship between biological and social but also forces us to rethink the privileging of gender over other social categories while arguing that gender as an expression of power cannot be separated from historical struggles such as colonization and liberation. Eileen Julien and Nana Wilson-Tagoe both address discourses of gender within the postcolonial project in African fiction. While Julien makes a comparison between Wole Soyinka’s and Mariama Ba’s writing in relation to women’s agency identifying literature as a gendered practice, Wilson-Tagoe, critiques the nationalist agenda within African literary studies by looking at the works of Ama Ata Aidoo and Yvonne Vera. Both authors challenge the existing gender regime within anti-colonial struggles by identifying the concept of culture as a social and historical construction and by including larger issues of social, cultural, and economic relations within national culture.

6 In the fourth section, “Masculinity, Misogyny, and Seniority”, the emphasis moves from gender as a discussion of issues predominantly affecting women to a discussion of masculinity and manhood. Perhaps the strongest section of the volume, the chapters take into account other categories that inform gendered identities such as seniority. Lisa Lindsay historicizes the notion of masculinity in colonial Nigeria by exploring the emergence of the male breadwinner as a gender ideal among railway men. She highlights the historical specificity of gender ideals and demonstrates how Nigerian men and women were active agents in the construction of gender norms within the colonial project. Stephan Miescher also points to multiple and often conflicting notions of masculinity during colonialism by exploring continuities around ideas of elderhood and subjectivity within a Ghanaian mission church. By arguing that the social position within society is not gender specific Miescher concludes that seniority is as central to the category of identity as gender is. In her research on West African popular theater Catherine Cole deconstructs images of misogyny and gender-based violence which are supported by the audiences. She reads this support as an indication of how cultural anxieties are negotiated through gender. Similar to Ebron’s argument she identifies gender as an aspect of personhood which is linked with other identities, forcing her to rethink the meaning of gender as a Western concept within African knowledge systems. Helen Nabasuta Mugambi also picks up the issue of misogyny and violence against women and points to the distinction between the theoretical concepts of gender and actual lived

experiences of women. She draws attention to the ubiquity of domestic violence at all levels of socioeconomic spectrum in much of Africa.

7 A criticism that can be leveled at the book is that the categorization of the articles into the different sections sometimes strikes one as a bit arbitrary. Furthermore, some of the articles do not directly focus on the key question(s) of the book project and/or are lacking a dialogue with each other. This could be due to the fact that this anthology is a selection of (revised) conference papers presented at the conference entitled 'Africa After Gender? An Exploration of New Epistemologies for African Studies', hosted by the Interdisciplinary Humanities Centre's African Studies Research Focus Group at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 2001 — convened by two of the editors, Cole and Miescher.

8 This anthology is, however, an important contribution to African gender research. Some issues raised in the book have been central to African scholarship for some time now. They have been addressed in the conceptualization of African feminisms/womanisms from the 1980s onwards (for comprehensive overviews see for example Susann Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African Feminist Literature*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2002). In fact, the editors initiate the key questions of the book around a discussion that emerged at the first international conference on Women in Africa and the African Diaspora (WAAD) in Nigeria in 1992 when the specificity of African feminism(s) and gender activism became apparent. Some of the issues are fought for today as strongly as back then, especially in relation to and in dissociation from global feminist theory and global gender activism. This anthology makes this continuous struggle visible.

**Lynette Goddard. *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance*.
Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.**

By Marlon Rachquel Moore, University of Florida, USA

1 *Staging Black Feminisms* reflects a direct influence of the theoretical framework established by lesbian feminist Barbara Smith. Twenty years after the publication of her controversial 1978 essay, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” Smith reflected that she “was influenced by the bold new ideas of 1970s lesbian feminism” (*Truth That Never Hurts*, 3) when she expressed her displeasure with the cultural illiteracy of white scholars, heterosexual blind spots and general homophobic impediments in African American literary scholarship. The recognition of a Black women’s literary tradition was yet emerging and Smith insisted that the establishment of a Black feminist framework was primary for an adequate critique of Black women’s art. Smith challenged her contemporaries to develop a criticism that “would owe its existence to a Black feminist movement while at the same time contributing ideas that women in the movement could use” (11). While much advancement has been made towards that end in American literature studies, Lynette Goddard shifts our attention to similar flaws in an arena of Black British women’s art.

2 Acknowledging her debt to Smith and other feminists, such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks, Goddard seeks to re-frame the analytical discourse surrounding Black British women’s text-based plays and non-textual, live theatrical performances. Citing her dissatisfaction with the current range of theatrical representations of Black female subjectivity in this cultural arena as her main impetus, Goddard articulates a Black queer critique aimed “[. . .] towards identifying a politics of progressive Black feminist performance for the early twenty-first century” (2). She does so in an African-Caribbean focused analysis, in which she re-evaluates texts from the 1980s to the present (and introduces some obscure voices as well) in order “to determine the extent of their feminist intervention” (4) in relation to Black feminist theory.

3 Goddard works from the premise that traditional criticism in which “[B]lack women’s very presence in the British theatre industry is seen to constitute some sort of feminist intervention” is essentialist and flawed. She argues that this perception is purely materialist, as its only criterion is the ability to overcome the double marginalization of sexism and institutional racism in a predominately white and male-controlled system. Goddard insists, as Smith before her, that even as an emancipatory representation of Black subjectivity may be in structural opposition to the status quo, it is not inherently oppositional to heteropatriarchal and Euro-centric cultural values. The quantitative approach does not take into account the content

of the work. Hence, Goddard sets out to establish a more complex standard by which to interpret critique contemporary Black women's texts and performances. Goddard seeks a "progressive" feminist aesthetic, though it should ring familiar to the student of post-Black Arts literary theory:

[...]I would suggest that black feminist work must actively engage in a consciousness-raising critique of the interlocking systems of class, gender, race and sexual oppression, which allows for a distinction to be made between black women's and black feminist plays. (40)

So the aims of the book are threefold: to add to the criticism of Black women's performance art, re-define the feminist standard of said criticism, and to identify those texts/performances which contain actual feminist content.

4 The slim volume is sectioned into four parts. The first section (chapters 1-2) provides a nuanced historicization of Black theater and Black women's theater (and why they are not the same) in Britain. Part one also includes an overview of the arguments set forth throughout the book. Section two (chs. 3-5) provides an in-depth analysis and evaluation of the text-based or narrative plays by Winsome Pollock, Jacqueline Rudet, Jackie Kay, and Valerie Manson-John. The third section (chs. 6-7) reviews other non-text-based shows, including dance, live art and performance poetry. It includes the work of Black Mime Theatre Women's Troop, Patience Agabi, and Dorothea Smartt, among others. Part four concludes with the eighth chapter in which Goddard explores "black feminist futures" through notions of "multicultural feminism" and "millennial black women's theatre."

5 Goddard's feminist rubric is contained in the book's subtitle: identity, politics, and performance. As the quote above states, Goddard divides Black women's art from Black feminist productions that promote socio-political change. While she finds that many texts show "feminist impulse" or "feminist potential" in their portrayals of Black womanhood, many fall short of the much-needed neo-millennial discourse of Black female sexualities and relationships. In each case, the analysis is governed by a desire for an aesthetics that counters hegemonic depictions of black female racial and sexual politics, and de-centers white culture. Through these filters, the content of each play/performance is examined for its relevance to contemporary Black British contexts and its distance from essentialist or stereotypical characterizations. For example, she presents a balanced critique of Winsome Pollock's continued production of high profile anti-racist and anti-sexist plays. Pollock famously "exemplifies feminist disruptions of realist form" (77) but because of the constant use of archetypal, heterosexual characters, Goddard finds that the plays fall short of a "valuable feminist effect."

6 Also, representations of contemporary Black identity are examined for the recognition of mixed race, bi-cultural, migrant experiences, and diverse sexualities. That is to say, the contemporary critical performance practice imagines Black female subjectivity in a variety of contexts, and as queer, bisexual, or same-gender-loving as well as heterosexual. Plays authored by lesbian-identified writer Jackie Kay are submitted as “some of the firmest examples of a distinct black British feminist drama” (105) in that they deal explicitly with stereotypes of black and mixed-raced lesbian identities. Kay is studied alongside playwright Valerie Mason-John’s representations of lesbian sexual experiences that “destabilize simplistic understandings of black women” (109). In her analysis of live performances, Goddard necessarily moves beyond narrative content to present a nuanced dissection of the practitioners’ dramatic choices, including stage direction, props, and vocal inflection. Aspects of performance are also evaluated for feminist techniques relevant to African Diaspora oral traditions, belief systems, and interactive practices.

7 Goddard’s articulation of “progressive” feminist practice does not actually add anything new or different to Smith’s formulation of the role of Black feminist critique. Indeed, it is the flawless practice of it. By calling into question the assumption that all Black women’s plays/performances are inherently oppositional, Goddard raises the bar for interpretation and analyses of these works. The success of *Staging Black Feminisms* is the light it shines on the under-represented multiplicity of neo-millennial Black identities in Britain. This text performs a queering of Black women’s art in its emphasis on hybrid cultures, queer voices, and representations of unfixed or contradictory sex roles, thus contributing to African Diaspora Studies, gender & sexuality disciplines, and performance/media studies.

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Deborah Clarke. *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007

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1 An association between automobiles and masculinity has existed in American popular mythology since the earliest days of motoring. The association relies upon understandings of gender that have been subject to negotiation throughout the twentieth century — in part due to social changes linked to the rise of car culture. Deborah Clarke’s *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America* examines how cultural portrayals of women and cars have registered and participated in shifting conceptions of female identity and female agency.

2 Clarke begins her study with an examination of the first decades following the invention of the automobile. Driving may have initially been understood as a male activity, but women “were quick to claim its potential” (10). Among the automobile’s disruptions to traditional gender categories was the way it further destabilized the separation between private and public space: “No longer relegated to the home, women now drove into the public sphere, exercising control over the latest technology” (10). Clarke’s analysis of automobile advertisements of the era reveals an effort to reassert gender difference by, for example, marketing certain kinds of cars to women only. The myth of the incompetent woman driver (repeatedly debunked by insurance company statistics) emerged during this era and mitigated anxiety about female incursion into male territory.

3 While the automobile industry has often presented essentialist understandings of female identity in its marketing, women writers, Clarke argues, have offered more complex portrayals of women’s relationships with cars. For example, she examines ways in which women’s road narratives disrupt “the old associations of woman as home, woman as place” that are so central to classic road stories such as Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (117). They do this not by merely putting a woman in the driver’s seat, but by restructuring the standard narrative itself. In the stories Clarke discusses, women motorists “do not escape attachments, domesticity, or responsibility. They cannot head out wherever their fancy takes them, with a blithe disregard for money or family, as does Dean Moriarty, leaving wives and children (four by Sal’s last count) behind” (117). In Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Bean Trees*, for example, the protagonist may drive away from her small Kentucky hometown; however, as Clarke notes, she is not enacting the classic romantic American escape narrative of a free-roaming self

liberated from all social constraints and commitments. Kingsolver's protagonist experiences material limitations on her freedom (e.g. she does not have much money, and her car is prone to breakdowns) and maintains familial bonds. She remains strongly attached to her mother and becomes a mother herself when she adopts a Native American child she finds abandoned in the front seat of her Volkswagen Beetle.

4 One of the main strengths of Clarke's study is that it examines familiar territory from a productive new angle. For example, Clarke analyzes press coverage surrounding an auto race between Jack Johnson, fresh from his famous 1910 boxing victory over Jim Jeffries, and auto-racing champion Barney Oldfield. Johnson's defeat of Jeffries had created a kind of racial hysteria: if the boxing championship represented the highest achievement of the male physical body, what did it mean that the white Jeffries could be defeated by the African-American Johnson? Oldfield's later defeat of Johnson on the racetrack was widely heralded as a reaffirmation of white male superiority — but not, Clarke argues, without attendant anxieties. There were undeniable differences between a boxing match and an auto race. Clarke writes, "the car opened the door to rethinking the very boundaries of race and gender by driving a wedge between identity and the physical body" (58). It was, in other words, not merely Oldfield's body that defeated Johnson. The victory he achieved for white masculinity was one involving body and car. The victorious figure of Oldfield fused the white male body with technology — technology that was also accessible to African Americans and to women.

5 To climb behind the wheel of an automobile, Clarke thus argues, has served as a means of blurring boundaries — between public and private, male and female, white and nonwhite. Clarke seeks to demonstrate that American women writers have long been attentive to this potential — and to its limitations. In developing this argument, she references a large number of women writers, including Dorothy Allison, Julia Alvarez, Joan Didion, Louise Erdrich, Jessie Fauset, Cristina Garcia, Zora Neale Hurston, Cynthia Kadohata, Barbara Kingsolver, Erika Lopez, Bobbie Ann Mason, Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, Flannery O'Connor, Marge Piercy, Leslie Marmon Silko, Mona Simpson, Jane Smiley, Gertrude Stein, and Edith Wharton. While most of these authors are contemporary, Clarke draws upon works spanning a century of American literature, from the Motor Maids and Motor Girls stories of the 1910s to Erika Lopez's 1997 lesbian biker novel *Flaming Iguanas: An Illustrated All-Girl Road Novel Thing*.

6 Clarke's insistence on the importance of women's relationships with cars to our understanding of twentieth-century American culture is affirmed both by her nuanced readings and the sheer number of texts addressed in her study. *Driving Women* combines

breadth and depth to offer a compelling examination of gender and American car culture. It merges and adds to the large number of studies on American mobility narratives and gender and technology that have been published in recent years.

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