In this paper, I discuss Genesis 22, the section of the Hebrew Bible in which the Biblical patriarch attempts to sacrifice his only ‘legitimate’ son Isaac to God. Drawing on philosophical discussions of this passage from Søren Kierkegaard and Jacques Derrida, I argue that the very idea of sacrifice has already excluded from the frame Isaac’s brother and mother. I suggest that this reflects a broader exclusion from religious sacrifice marginalised populations such as gay, lesbian and transgender people, whose lack of societal value may be found in punishment rather than sacrifice.

The Biblical passage of Genesis 22, known in the Jewish tradition as the Akedah or the Binding of Isaac, has a renewed sense of importance for critical theory. The reading of the chapter by Jacques Derrida in The Gift of Death directed scholarly attention to the passage and its implications for a philosophy of the gift, as well as the very nature of the subject’s relation to God. Numerous articles and book collections have responded to Derrida’s writings, building on his work, as well as that of 19th century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and 20th century philosopher and Talmudist Emmanuel Levinas—two of Derrida’s chief interlocutors in The Gift of Death. Kierkegaard and Derrida’s works allow us to see the difficult story anew and to ask significant questions about the nature of faith, love and fatherhood. However, I have found myself haunted by the other Others of the story, and of the questions that have not been raised in the critical discussion of the gift. Genesis 22 is a seminal text for Western culture, for as literary critic Gil Anidjar astutely notes,

with the Abrahamic […] what is to be read is the condition of a certain religion, of a certain politics, the condition of the theologico-political and of a history “as such,” of autobiography, and of literature.

If the common role of the patriarch Abraham in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is to be understood as the precondition of a certain kind of culture, then Genesis 22 is undoubtedly the catalyst for this mythic founding moment. As such, it requires us as critical writers to investigate the norms that regulate the gift, and the foreclosures at work that condition what does and does not appear as culturally legible in this story.

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4 Judith Butler defines norms as ‘governing intelligibility, allow[ing] for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the
While Derrida rightly suggests that every ethical fidelity is a betrayal of innumerable others,\(^5\) I would like to sketch out the shape of some of the other betrayals in Genesis 22. What I will do in this paper is build on the significant feminist research on the Binding of Isaac and problematise the assumptions upon which the philosophical discussion is built—the ‘wifeless, daughterless, womanless world of Genesis 22 and \textit{Fear and Trembling}’ as theologian Yvonne Sherwood\(^6\) put it. Sherwood’s response to this masculine bias is an intriguing re-reading of Kierkegaard’s ‘Attunement’ section, finding in its repetitions and re-negotiations a kind of \textit{écriture feminine} (female writing) reminiscent of the writing of feminists like Hélène Cixous. In order to further this discussion, I will bring Genesis 22 into conversation with Judith Butler’s recent work on ethics and grief, most notably her \textit{Precarious Life}.\(^7\) As Butler points out, Jewish hermeneutics has long understood that ‘the text was precisely “living” to the extent that it was interpretable and that something of the text was extended and augmented with every interpretation’.\(^8\) Indeed, the commandment \textit{la’ asot} (lit: ‘to obey, to fulfil’) in the Torah is a kind of performative itself, constructing the Torah in the reader’s mind.\(^9\) Butler’s speculations provide a rich, alternative framework through which to re-read the passage and its network of familial relationships with God. While this will lead back to Levinas (whom Butler cites heavily) and his notion of ‘the face’, it is important to also acknowledge the ways in which Butler’s gloss on Levinas has influenced my reading. Finally, I will pose questions about the ethics in the cultural norms and forms of legible personhood at work in the Abrahamic gift.

The gift

In Genesis 22, God commands Abraham to take his only ‘legitimate’ son Isaac to Mount Moriah and burn him alive as a sacrifice.\(^10\) Abraham obeys, traveling for three days with the boy to the mountain, telling neither Isaac nor his wife Sarah of this terrible duty conferred upon him by his God. Indeed, as they are cutting up wood, when Isaac asks him where the lamb is for the sacrifice, Abraham tells him, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son’,\(^11\) an ambivalent response that Derrida will later devote considerable attention to. Abraham then ties Isaac to the altar and prepares to kill him, but at the last second, God ultimately

\(^5\) Derrida, \textit{Gift of Death}, p. 70.
\(^10\) Abraham also had, of course, an ‘illegitimate’ son named Ishmael, with his handmaiden Hagar (Gen. 16).
\(^11\) Gen. 22:8, NIV. While I will primarily use the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation of the Hebrew Bible, the English translation of Derrida’s \textit{The Gift of Death} makes much of the word ‘provide’ which is used in the King James and New International Version (NIV) translations.
suspends his commandment, telling Abraham to untie the child and offer instead a ram as substitute for this sacrifice:

And he said, do not raise your hand against the boy, or do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld from me your son, your favored one, from Me.\(^{12}\)

Whilst earlier in Genesis 4 God had shown a preference for animal sacrifice over plant, here, a new kind of sacrifice emerges—a primeval substitution in which it is clear that the animal is being sacrificed in the place of a human, a move that sets the tone for much religious discourse thereafter. Abraham’s reward for his fidelity to God’s commandment is to be blessed with ‘descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore’,\(^{13}\) the founding of the Jewish people.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard finds this story an ongoing scandal. Rather than ignore the connotations of this potentially embarrassing story of a homicidal God demanding of his follower a sacrifice made of his child, Kierkegaard finds in it a model for moral conduct, an idealised version of faith embodied in Abraham’s relation to God. On the basis of Genesis 22, Kierkegaard draws up a schema of ethical and religious categories through which to read Abraham’s actions. For him, the ethical is universal, ‘and as the universal it applies to everyone’;\(^{14}\) so that when the individual asserts their own particularity against the universal, it is a sin. In this schema, Abraham, who is preparing to kill Isaac, is ethically a murderer, whether or not God suspends the commandment or not. He is asserting his particular right to murder over the universal right to existence. Kierkegaard admits that this is, by any moral standard, a sin. Kierkegaard equates the universal ethical with the pagan morality of tragic heroes like Oedipus and Agamemnon,\(^{15}\) but it is not until he moves to the category of the religious that we find a stark contrast to the ethics of giving espoused by pagan writers like Seneca.\(^{16}\)

Kierkegaard argues that we have ‘need for a new category for understanding Abraham’—pagan ethics, laudable as they are, are not helpful in reading Genesis 22.\(^{17}\) Instead, he makes a clear-cut distinction between the ethical and the religious, and it is with regards to the latter, he argues, that Abraham’s actions fall. The counter-intuitive position that Kierkegaard takes is that the individual of faith makes a religious suspension of the universal ethical law, and instead, stands ‘as the particular [...] in an absolute relation to the absolute’; that is to say, God.\(^{18}\) While both assert the individual’s particularity, the difference between sinning against the universal ethical and the religious suspension is that in the latter the knight of faith stands in a one-on-one relationship with God, and is thus bound to obey his commandments but not communicate them (for to do so is to break the unmediated nature of the absolute

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\(^{12}\) Gen. 22:12, JPS.

\(^{13}\) Gen. 22:17.

\(^{14}\) Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 83.

\(^{15}\) Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 87.


\(^{17}\) Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 88.

\(^{18}\) Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 85
relation). For Kierkegaard, faith is a secret that cannot be communicated to the social, and it is this aspect that Derrida draws particular attention to in *The Gift of Death*.

Kierkegaard frames the religious as an absolute fidelity to the absolute, mediated through sacrifice. The sacrifice of one’s child to God is horrific beyond belief, and as Isaac was Abraham’s only ‘legitimate’ son with his wife Sarah, which in a patriarchal world is the most precious of things, the sacrifice is intensified. It makes all the difference that Isaac is Abraham’s only ‘legitimate’ son with Sarah. Although Abraham has another son, the Christian interpretation in the King James Version, God instructs Abraham to ‘take now thy son, thine only son Isaac’. To lose Isaac is to lose the familial line; the story would lose its symbolic dimensions if it were Abraham’s ‘illegitimate’ firstborn son Ishmael who was to be sacrificed. Indeed, born to Sarah after she had gone through menopause, Isaac is himself a gift from God, which Abraham is commanded to sacrifice. Moreover, Isaac is not merely a son, but a ‘legitimate’ son who will provide other sons, an avatar of what queer theorist Lee Edelman has called ‘reproductive futurism’, the promise of future heterosexual familial reproduction.

So it is a rare and unlikely form of patrimony that is at risk with the sacrifice of Isaac, for it would require another miracle for Sarah to conceive again. It would be understandable then, for Abraham to disobey God and not sacrifice Isaac, out of love for his son. This would, of course, be the ethical thing to do, as Kierkegaard describes it. Indeed, Kierkegaard describes the ethical as a kind of ‘temptation’ for the knight of faith. Yet, love is the precondition for sacrifice; it is that (and faith) that separates the sacrifice from murder. Abraham chooses to go through with the sacrifice of his beloved son and it is that which, for Kierkegaard, constitutes the religious suspension of the ethical.

For Derrida, however, it is that particular moment that constitutes the impossible possibility of the gift. The gift as Derrida describes it is a paradox, built on its own non-appearance. Derrida argues that

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19 Gen. 22:2 KJV, italics added. Interestingly, the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi recounts a more extended conversation from the Talmud between God and Abraham in Rashi, *Commentaries on the Pentateuch*, trans. C. Pearl, New York, Viking, 1970, p. 50:
- God: your son
- Abraham: I have two sons.
- God: your only one.
- Abraham: Ishmael is the only son to Hagar, and Isaac is the only son to Sarah.
- God: Whom you love.
- Abraham: But I love them both.
- God: Even Isaac.

20 Kierkegaard states that the ‘glorious memory of the human race’ is located in ‘Abraham’s seed’, that it will be eradicated by the death of Isaac, Isaac’s value for humanity, therefore, lies in his ability to father children, in Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 53.


22 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 89.
giving has to be an event. It has to come as a surprise, from the other or to the other; it has to extend beyond the confines of economic circle of exchange.  

And so Derrida concludes, in his most extended meditation on the subject, *The Gift of Death*, that the only true gift is death itself, which is un-returnable. In his reading of Genesis 22, he states that

God decides to give back, to give back life, to give back the beloved son, once he is assured that a gift outside of any economy, the gift of death—and of the death of that which is priceless—has been accomplished without any hope of exchange, reward, circulation, or communication.

Death appears to exit the economic in all its anxieties about the counterfeit, the true, and the authentic; for while death is certainly not foreign to capital, it maintains a relation of foreignness. Like Kierkegaard, Derrida finds in Genesis 22 a story of fidelity, of silence, of sacrifice—Abraham’s ‘gift of death’ as Derrida so evocatively terms it. Since the economic is fraught with the danger of the simulacrum, a gift must instead be given in silence. Derrida underlines the secret nature of Abraham’s actions and its incommunicability to the social: to speak is to be social, to enter the economic sphere.

And yet, we can clearly see a certain kind of economics at work here. If it is patrimony that is risked, it is patrimony that constitutes Abraham’s reward for his fidelity to God. By abandoning economy, Abraham is ultimately rewarded with descendants beyond counting; however, this is not an investment, for Abraham’s reward could not be anticipated or calculated ahead of time. As Derrida points out, it is only when calculation has been suspended that God will stop the sacrifice to reward Abraham in the same patrilineal terms. The relation of foreignness that the gift has to economics is its impossibility, for to sacrifice his son, Abraham’s actions are undoubtedly impossible.

The face

If Genesis 22 seems largely cloaked in silence, then what kinds of ethical demands can be made in the passage? As I have previously noted, Butler draws heavily on the work of Levinas, who takes a very different approach to sacrifice to Kierkegaard. For Levinas, what comes first is responsibility to the Other—the unconditional ethical response to the vulnerability of the Other, which was most notably set out by his notion of ‘the face’. The face installs an ethical relationship between the self and the Other, a relation in which the ethical response to the Other, as Levinas puts it, is ‘a responsibility without concern for reciprocity’. It is

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important to note here that a face itself is not the face. The face is not reducible to that of a single person, what Levinas calls a ‘character’, who would be individualised and have various traits like job, sex, parents and so on.27 Instead, the ‘the face is signification, and signification without context’.28 The face signifies humanity, singular in its ethical dimension but unmarked by the specifics of subjectivity.

More intriguingly, Levinas suggests that the body may act as a face—it may be vocalised. He describes a ‘face’ that operates from body parts—shoulder blades, necks that cry, scream and sob.29 The unconditional call to responsibility is a language-without-language, a signification without context as Levinas would put it. Butler underlines this in her reading, arguing that ‘[o]ne would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life at stake’.30 In other words, the face makes an ethical demand in silence, just as Abraham operates in silence in Genesis 22. And so, one could say that, like the silence of Abraham, which both Kierkegaard and Derrida make much of, Isaac’s vulnerability, his face, may be vocalised by and through his body, and that this makes an ethical demand. We do not know if Isaac cried out while being tied down, or if he talked more with his father after asking where they were going; Genesis does not say precisely. We are forced to imagine because the drama is focused on Abraham.31 But even if one does not imagine Isaac crying out at some point, there is still an ethical demand embodied, encoded in his very flesh. Isaac’s bound arms and feet,32 as much as his face (which may or may not be operating as a face, or a countenance, in Levinas’s terms), nevertheless contain an injunction against murder. In contrast to Abraham, who is in silence even when he speaks,33 even in silence, Isaac speaks. Indeed, it is arguable that it is only when he is in silence, when Abraham has ‘picked up the knife to slay his son’,34 that the true precarious nature of Isaac’s life is clear, and the ethical demand spoken by ‘something other than language’35 can be made.

The philosophical differences between Butler and Kierkegaard’s readings of ethics are thus rather stark. For Butler, the demand from alterity stems not from God, but from an Other (though Levinas’s work ultimately problematises the strict demarcation between the two). Differences in conceptualisations of ethics similarly separate the two. Levinas suggests that Kierkegaard mistakenly identifies the ethical relationship with generality, and instead argues that ‘far from losing you in generality, [ethics] singularizes you, poses you as a unique individual, as I’.36 Ethics in this sense is far from the benevolent universality of the pagans, but the intense one-to-one responsibility of the self-Other relationship, that is, of the kind embodied by the Isaac/Abraham relation. As Derrida argues, Levinas ‘institutes responsibility

28 Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, p. 86.
29 Cited in Butler, Precarious Life, p. 133.
30 Butler, Precarious Life, p. 151.
31 Some of the rabbinical sages suggest that the reason for this is that Isaac is not tested in Gen. 22 in the same way that Abraham is, that self-sacrifice is laudable but not exceptional.
32 Gen. 22:09.
33 Gen. 22:08.
34 Gen. 22.09, JPS.
35 Butler, Precarious Life, p. 51.
as a putting-oneself-to-death or offering-one's-death, that is, one's life, in the ethical dimension of sacrifice'. So sacrifice is, in that sense, about the responsibility inherent in the universal ethical. Rather than sacrificing what is precious, one puts oneself to death. Levinas suggests that this responsibility consists of saying, 'here I am [me voici]. To do something for the Other. To give'. Thus, Abraham’s 'here I am' becomes instilled as the paradigmatic ethical response—but in response to God not to Isaac (let alone to Sarah). Levinas suggests that, rather than fidelity to the transcendent that leads to the movement towards sacrifice, it is in fact 'Abraham’s attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical high order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, [that] is the highest point of the drama'. Levinas faults Kierkegaard for focusing on the monologic moment of the gift and not on the earlier conversation with God where Abraham tries to dissuade God from destroying Sodom and Gomorrah.

For Kierkegaard, the absolute relation can only be between God and Abraham, but Levinas is less clear about this. The infinite alterity of God for Levinas—and indeed, Derrida on this point—differs little in the end from the infinite alterity of any other Other (tout autre). As Derrida explains, ‘everyone else [...] is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessibility, solitary, transcendent’. Therefore, ‘what can be said about Abraham’s relation to God can be said about my relation without relation to every one (one) as every (bit) other’. The opacity of the Other—any Other—prevents us from making any hard distinctions between God and Other. Thus the call from the transcendent, the absolute relation to the absolute, emanates from the face embodied through Isaac as much as from the transcendent.

Butler also highlights the universal particularity of the kind of precarious life that Isaac represents, suggesting that

[to the extent that we commit violence, we are acting on another, putting the other at risk, causing the other damage, threatening to expunge the other. In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot pre-empt.

Butler frames violence as a ‘sudden address from elsewhere’, a striking turn of phrase. This ‘suddenness’ of the violent ‘address’ recalls the way Abraham is taken by surprise in Genesis 22 by the irruption of alterity in the form of God’s voice. If we follow Butler’s thinking, it is possible to suggest that if violence is a form of address, perhaps God’s address is a form of violence. At the very least, it solicits a violent

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37 Derrida, Gift of Death, p. 48.
38 Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, p. 97.
39 Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, p. 77.
40 Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, p. 77.
41 Derrida, Gift of Death, p. 78.
42 Butler, Precarious Life, p. 29.
43 It is here that the narrative imagined in the Talmud is insufficient. In Sanhedrin 89b, Satan taunts God, saying, 'This old man—You granted him fruit of the womb when he was a hundred years old. And yet of all the feasts that he made, he did not have a single turtle dove or a young bird to sacrifice to You!' Cited
response. It draws a potential violence out from Abraham’s relationship with his son that may itself be embodied in the face, which simultaneously forbids violence. And yet, Butler argues that it is from this impossibility that ethical conduct must nevertheless begin.

Thou shalt not kill

It is important to note that at this point in the Torah, God has not yet formalised the interdiction against killing. It has, of course, been raised numerous times already, for instance, in the story of Cain and Abel, but has not been codified in the commandment of Moses that ‘thou shalt not kill’. Nevertheless, it is still there, not yet spoken but exerting an influence; and it is Abraham’s violation of this that Kierkegaard finds scandalous. I think it is well established that the Decalogue exerts a moral demand prior to its formulation, not merely on Abraham (the pre-Israel) but on interpretations of his actions, which are profoundly mediated by the Ten Commandments and the commandment, ‘thou shalt not kill’, most of all.

It is here that the great medieval Jewish Biblical commentator Rashi falls flat in his interpretation of the chapter. Citing the Genesis Midrash Rabbah, Rashi suggests that Isaac becomes aware of his sacrifice through Abraham’s statement ‘God will provide’. In other words, though Isaac began the journey unaware, ultimately he knowingly goes to his death—‘but if there was no lamb, then for a burnt-offering, my son’; and Isaac then understood that he was to be slaughtered. Furthermore, the verse concludes, ‘they went both of them together’, i.e. with one mind. By contrast, the Kierkegaardian reading is that Isaac remains unaware, a sacrifice against his will, an interpretation that is undoubtedly more scandalous, but also more compelling. ‘God will provide a lamb’, as Derrida suggests, is an ambiguous reply, one that seems unlikely to have provoked a full understanding of the coming sacrifice. Indeed, if the point of the story is that Abraham is being ‘tested’, then surely the test would be moderated by Isaac’s assumption of his own death?

Although Kierkegaard is compelling in portraying the drama on Mount Moriah, it seems to me that one can interpret Abraham’s actions through a different (but perhaps similarly monstrous) interpretative framework. Far from representing a movement of the religious, perhaps Abraham’s actions originate in his apprehension of Isaac’s vulnerability, and in the aggression that Levinas suggests vulnerability produces for ‘the face of the Other in its precariousness and defenselessness [is] at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the “you shalt not kill”’. Perhaps, rather than the command from God, it is Isaac’s vulnerability that provokes Abraham’s violence. Butler appears to echo Levinas’ formulation of the face that both

in Zornberg, Genesis, p. 97. God replies that Abraham would immediately obey if he asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, and tests him ‘immediately’. Derrida’s emphasis in particular on the opacity of God in this story is arguably more compelling for modern readers than Satan taunting God into the test. If God’s address is a form of violence, then even Satan’s role in the story does not limit God’s own responsibility in the matter.

45 Gen. 4:8.
46 Gen. 22:8, NIV.
47 Rashi, Commentaries on the Pentateuch, p. 52.
48 Quoted in Butler, Precarious Life, p. 134.
solicits and forbids violence. Drawing on the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, she suggests that aggression is founded in vulnerability; that vulnerability itself provokes a violent reaction. In a psychoanalytic sense, then, it is easy to see the Binding of Isaac as an inverted Oedipal drama of parental aggression both unfounding and negating itself. Unlike Oedipus however, Genesis 22 ultimately averts the catastrophic fulfilment of murderous desire. Similar to the emergence of the commandment of ‘thou shalt not kill’ itself, perhaps Abraham’s cessation of the murderous sacrifice represents a belated recognition of the demand of the face.

Yet the belated recognition of the face seems unlikely to deliver peace. For every time Abraham performs a sacrifice, would he not be reminded of his attempted sacrifice of his son? In his commentary on verse 13, Rashi suggests that Abraham experiences every sacrifice afterward as though it were Isaac’s, praying to God,

may it be [Your] will that this should be deemed as if it were being done to my son: as if my son were slaughtered, as if his blood were sprinkled, as if my son were flayed, as if he were burnt and reduced to ashes.

I think Rashi’s interpretation here is a sound one. It is hard to imagine Abraham sacrificing without being reminded of the Akedah, given the role of repetition in trauma. But perhaps Rashi’s reading needs to be supplemented with the Kierkegaardian insight about Abraham’s guilt–Abraham is guilty of Isaac’s murder, ethically. Moreover, Isaac will know that Abraham tried to murder him for his whole life, and that he raised the knife. Does Isaac feel hatred for his father? Kierkegaard suggests that by the time they returned to Sarah, ‘Isaac had lost his faith’, and that Abraham’s ‘eye was darkened’ under the weight of guilt for his actions. If Abraham repeats the sacrifice, prays as though it is Isaac every time, does he feel this guilt, again and again?

To sacrifice then, is undoubtedly itself a heavy burden, one predicated on having done the unforgivable. Yet, Derrida suggests that forgiveness is nothing if it is calculable. He says, ‘[i]f I forgive because it’s forgivable, because it’s easy to forgive, I’m not forgiving’. Derrida argues that true forgiveness consists of forgiving the unforgivable, and that ‘forgiving, if it is possible, must only come to be as impossible’. If we read from the perspective of Isaac, Abraham’s actions are unforgivable, opening up the way for another possible impossibility–Isaac’s

49 In her fascinating Abraham on Trial, anthropologist Carol Delaney questions the Freudian erasure of the question of parental aggression. She asks, ‘why did Freud focus only on the son’s desires and acts without considering those of the father? In the Oedipus story, why did he ignore Laius’s homicidal impulse?’ C. Delaney, Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of a Biblical Myth, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 13.


51 This legalistic aspect of the chapter is explicitly foregrounded in Delaney’s Abraham on Trial, where she does indeed rhetorically try Abraham for the attempted murder of his son.

52 Kierkegaard Fear and Trembling, p. 47.

53 Kierkegaard Fear and Trembling, p. 46


forgiveness of Abraham. But this drama is nevertheless incomplete. If, as some scholars suggest, Derrida’s messianic religion cannot ‘be confined within the Abrahamic, even though it bears an Abrahamic name’,56 I would like to suggest that in this binding, the apparent binding of only Isaac, innumerable others have always—already been confined and bound.

Why can’t women give?

Butler admits to being ‘drawn towards those kinds of readings that suspended the law, exposed its illegibility, its internal limits and contradictions, and even found Jewish authorization for those kinds of readings’.57 But what I want to make clear is that encoded within the Kierkegaardian suspension of the ethical is the very foundation of patriarchal law as such—it suspends one law (‘thou shalt not kill’) in order to formalise the founding of another (the rule of the Father). This law has as its operating principle a certain arrangement of bodies, spaces, practices and affects. As queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid argues, ‘belief systems are organised around people’s bodies, and people’s bodies in relationships, and in sexual relationships’.58 For Butler, our bodies are never entirely our own, are always partly for an other, the Other,59 and it is this particular form of universal vulnerability and intercorporeality that Genesis 22 directs towards only one relation—that of father and son (first God as Father to Abraham, and then Abraham to Isaac).

Now that I have posited an alternative reading of the Akedah to Kierkegaard’s, which examines the norms at work, let us proceed to examine the kinds of identifications and practices that have been precluded from the interpretation of the text. I turn to the traces of the passage’s interpretative history that live on in the present. In particular, the Christian legacy delivers an arguably de-racinated Abraham and Isaac, white, perhaps even not precisely Jewish. Such are undoubtedly effacements, not merely historically inaccurate but also fraught with racist and anti-Semitic sentiments. However, perhaps we can rework the image of Genesis 22 even more radically. Feminist scholars have posed important questions about the limited role of women in Genesis 22. Yvonne Sherwood asks, ‘why are women excluded from sacrifice?’60 Hagar, Ishmael’s mother, was exiled in the preceding chapter, where, at Sarah’s behest, Abraham sent her and Ishmael into the desert.61 It is striking that Sarah is absent from Genesis 22.62 Sarah’s childlessness is a central feature right from the very beginning of the Abrahamic narrative, where it is said, ‘Sarai was barren, she had no child’,63 so much so that literary critic Avivah Zornberg claims that for Sarah, ‘barren[ness] and joyful motherhood […] are not successive stages of a

60 Sherwood, ‘When Johannes de Silentio Sounds Like Johanna de Silentio’, p. 10.
61 Gen. 21:10.
63 Gen. 11:30.
life [...And] both remain necessary functions of her identity’. In contrast, Sarah is not even listening at the door when the sacrifice occurs in Genesis 18. Indeed, the uniqueness of her bond with Isaac has been erased—unlike Abraham, Isaac really is Sarah’s only son. The structure of the narrative displaces Sarah, ‘the further Abraham moves towards his destination, the greater the distance from Sarah [...] Sarah has been exiled in her own house!’ Sarah’s attachment to Isaac seems much stronger than Abraham’s, suggesting that, as theologian Phylis Trible has argued, ‘in view of the unique status of Sarah, and her exclusive relationship to Isaac, she, not Abraham ought to have been tested’.

The ‘conspicuous and inexplicable’ absence of Sarah makes sense in the light of a larger patriarchal pattern in which men become metonymic for the whole, and women’s erasure is unacknowledged and unremarked upon. To put it succinctly, women are sacrificing but do not sacrifice, silenced but denied a meaningful silence. It is tempting, then, to view Abraham’s silence as a kind of patriarchal pact between God and man that a woman cannot enter into. Kierkegaard suggests that Abraham is silent about his plan, that he cannot tell his wife Sarah for fear of being dissuaded. Kierkegaard says, ‘for Abraham, the ethical had no higher expression than family life’. Recall that the ethical, however, constitutes a form of ‘temptation’ for Kierkegaard, one which is clearly equated with the domestic, that is, with the feminine. It seems clear that the gift—Abraham’s gift—is conditioned on Sarah’s unknowing. Kierkegaard assumes Sarah to be incapable of the kind of ethical fidelity, and of the singular relation to the transcendent that Abraham has. As an absolute relation between the particular and the absolute, Kierkegaard suggests that the secret cannot be mediated through a third. In addition to the domestic, the excluded Sarah paradoxically comes to be associated with the social itself.

As well as tracing the silences and ellipses around which Genesis 22 is framed, perhaps we can also reconsider the notion of sacrifice through a queer theory lens. As any good Foucaultian knows, the category of the homosexual as a ‘species’ is a relatively recent cultural invention. Yet, it is worth taking the risk of anachronism through mapping contemporary cultural formations into the text, especially given the continued life of the philosophical discourse of the gift in the present. Kierkegaard in the ‘Attunement’ section imagines the passage from a number of perspectives. Now, let us go further, and imagine new possibilities. Given that Isaac is linked to his ‘reproductive futurism’, it is clear that he is being figured as implicitly heterosexual in function (if not necessarily identity). I would like to imagine Isaac as a homosexual man. What happens then? Perhaps we can now picture Isaac as the victim of violence, tied and then murdered like Matthew

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64 Zornberg makes this argument through her reading of the Targum, exegetical Aramaic translations of the Torah compiled in the last centuries B.C.E and several of the early C.E. in Zornberg, Genesis, p. 77.
65 Gossai, Power and Marginality, p. 143.
66 Gossai, Power and Marginality, p. 150.
67 Quoted in Gossai, Power and Marginality, p. 159.
68 Gossai, Power and Marginality, p. 145.
69 Kierkegaard Fear and Trembling, p. 136.
70 Kierkegaard Fear and Trembling, p. 89.
72 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, pp. 44-56.
73 Edelman, No Future, p. 4.
Shepherd, a young homosexual man killed in Wyoming in 1998. What happens if we imagine Isaac as a daughter? Or a butch lesbian of colour? Or a transgender man like Brandon Teena, another murder victim? A transgender woman like Angie Zapata? What kind of a sacrifice do we imagine taking place, if we re-imagine the kind of victim? Or do we cease to imagine that there is a sacrifice taking place? It is my contention that the gift only makes sense when there is something as exceedingly precious as a firstborn ‘legitimate’ son in this story about patrimony being lost, and that this is problematised when other Others are substituted in Isaac’s place. After all, in order to be a sacrifice must necessarily be about the loss of something significant—unless that being lost is valued it is not a sacrifice at all.

Indeed, perhaps instead of a loving father like Abraham (remember that for Kierkegaard, love is the pre-condition of the sacrifice) sacrificing his beloved child, we see the angry arm of Patriarchal law incarnated in the form of the murderous father, violently policing norms about gender, sexuality and race (and one could go on further with disability and so on). What I am suggesting, then, is that there is a clear set of preconditions that set out who is good enough to be a sacrifice, and who is merely punishable or disposable. Butler asks, ‘[w]ho counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And finally, [w]hat makes for grievable life?’ To be grieved, as Butler argues, is to be lost and to have been valuable. Isaac is loved, he is ‘your favoured one’, so his death would be clearly experienced as a loss. But for the other Others, it is arguable that ‘they cannot be mourned because they were already lost or, rather, never “were”’. Instead, the omission of others is something like the melancholic repudiation of their grievability: Ishmael and Hagar have already disappeared in Genesis 21, and Sarah is left behind.

But more fully, the very articulation of the story is formulated through a foreclosure of the kinds of Others who could be sacrificed and mourned. If the gift must be conditioned on its own impossibility, is it rather all too possible to imagine a father sacrificing a child who does not fall within the patrilineal, implicitly heterosexual bounds of the gift? It remains monstrous, to be sure, but more imaginable, I think, given the terms in which value is assigned to particular kinds of bodies, identities and practices, and not others. For Butler, grief furnishes a sense of a political community of a certain order and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.

Religious communities, too, are formed around grief, and very often specifically through symbolic investments in the narratives of the Bible. The foreclosure of the potential worth as sacrifice of the other Others, then, suggests the ways in which

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74 Teena was a transgender man murdered in 1993 in Nebraska in the United States. He was the subject of the Oscar-winning film, Boys Don’t Cry.
75 Butler Precarious Life, p. 20.
76 Gen. 22:02, JPS. The NIV makes Isaac’s preciousness even clearer: ‘take your son, your only son, whom you love’ (italics added).
77 Butler Precarious Life, p. 33.
78 Butler Precarious Life, p. 22.
those ‘relational ties’ continue to be directed along patriarchal, heteronormative, racist and cissexist lines.\textsuperscript{79} Butler leads us to conclude a very different kind of impossibility to the gift described by Kierkegaard and Derrida—one in which some Others cannot ever sacrifice or be sacrificed.

Conclusion

Throughout her career, Butler has drawn our attention to the repetitive citation aspect of culture, reminding us of the power of post-structuralist concepts of repetition and iterability.\textsuperscript{80} Recently, in an implicit rebuttal of theorists from Kierkegaard to Alain Badiou, Butler suggested that

maybe the “act” in its singularity and heroism is overrated: it loses sight of the iterable process in which a critical intervention is needed, and it can become the very means by which the “subject” is produced at the expense of a relational social ontology.\textsuperscript{81}

Abraham’s act repays itself in descendants as numerous as the stars. In that singular act, he (and Sarah, lest we forget) is guaranteed an abundance of children. In other words, Abraham’s attempted murder comes to stand in for the power of female reproductive ability, an agreement in silence between God and a man that displaces female creative ability. Yet, that particular act is conditioned on a heroic masculinity premised on a social economy of bodies, in which only the father sacrifices and some bodies (male, heterosexual, sons) are valuable enough to be sacrificed, while the other Others are not. But Butler’s analysis of Levinas registers no such distinction—everybody is capable of being the face, of making a demand outside of language. It is my contention that everyone is worthy of sacrifice, and that members of historically marginalised groups are worthy of being mourned when they are lost. So while the gift has undoubtedly sparked much heated philosophical discussion about the possibility of true sacrifice, it is also a site in which a repeated critical feminist and queer revision and re-occupation remains necessary.

\textsuperscript{79} ‘Cissexist’ is the term transsexual writer Julia Serano coins to describe the belief that transsexual people’s identities are inferior to their non-transsexual (‘cissexual’) counterparts. J. Serano, Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity, Berkeley, Seal, 2007.
