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Women and Gender in the Bible and the Biblical World

Jo Henderson-Merrygold*

Gendering Sarai: Reading Beyond Cisnormativity in Genesis 11:29–12:20 and 20:1–18

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Abstract: This article explores the way assumptions about gender prevalent in twenty-first century readers impact our understanding of Sarai. It interrogates the way a mere glimpse allows us to instantaneously assign a person gender, something trans theorist Julia Serano calls gendering. Through this article, we see how the third-party accounts of Sarai in Genesis 11:19–12:20 parallel the experience of that introductory glance today. By undertaking a close reading, different themes emerge that work to both confirm and challenge her fit within dominant gender norms. Indeed, Sarai cannot easily be subsumed into cisnormative gender expectations that privilege consistent coherence between the sex assigned at birth and gender identity and expression. Genesis 20:1–20 is then placed in discussion with the earlier portion of Sarai’s story. It provides the opportunity to revisit how observers within the text see and understand her. In turn new details emerge that seek to confirm Sarai’s fit within cisnormativity; but in doing so, they end up disrupting our perception that Sarai is a cisnormative woman. Ultimately, this reading establishes that Sarai does not neatly fit our preconceptions, which opens up the potential to consider her a transgender or a gender-diverse figure.

Keywords: transgender, gender, Genesis, Hebrew Bible, Sarai, reader-response, cisnormativity, queer, ideological hermeneutics

Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no child. Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran they settled there. (Genesis 11:29–31)¹

From the point of her first appearance (Gen. 11:29–31), Sarai sets a challenge for reader and fellow character alike to discern her gender and identity. Without uttering a word or displaying any agency, she arrives in a story in which she will become a prominent figure; yet in these introductory verses she lacks key elements of a recognisable and desirable introductory contextualisation. She is a *tabula rasa*, free from the details that indicate a wider sense of “being, relation, reproduction, and ideology” sufficient to establish lineage, class, and ethnic or racial heritage.² She bears only her name, status as Abram’s wife, and carries the portentous knowledge that she “was barren; she had no child” (v.30). No more is known of her at this introductory stage. Yet it is precisely because Sarai is missing such significant details of her background that she becomes such a tantalising character in this exploration of dominant gender norms.

¹ Throughout this article, biblical references follow the New Revised Standard Version. This is an intentional decision in order to emphasise the significance of reader-response for this example of ideological interpretation.

² Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 42.

* **Corresponding author: Jo Henderson-Merrygold**, Sheffield Institute for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies, The University of Sheffield, School of English, Sheffield, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, e-mail: j.henderson-merrygold@sheffield.ac.uk

Her silence and lack of initial context indicate ruptures in the anticipated reproductive continuity of the narrative and, as Jack Halberstam argues, create a space for queer and trans interpretation.³ He suggests that details which contextualise a character also provide reassurance that the character conforms to enduring expectations of gender and sexuality: reliable consistency comes when a character is in continuity with their (heteronormative) parents and, in due course, will bear their own offspring to continue the line.⁴ For Halberstam even the smallest cracks in an individual's characterisation bring space for provocative rejections of norms: silence indicates a rejection of the need to self-articulate and locate oneself as anticipated; lack of connection with family and lineage represents a breakaway from normative gendered and reproductive expectations. The dual themes – lack of context and lack of speech – set the scene for Sarai's arrival in the Genesis text.

Once the scene is set, the challenge is then to gender each character at the moment that they join the story. Gendering, according to trans theorist and activist Julia Serano, is the momentary and instantaneous decisions made to assign gender to someone when first encountering them.⁵ She argues that it is barely recognisable and seemingly benign, so long as those gendering and being gendered are cisgender, i.e. where one's gender is and always has been as it is now (thus are cisnormative). It is a feature of cisgender assumption and privilege as even the most fragmentary details gleaned through brief interactions validate the perception of an unchanging, visibly recognisable gender. Yet if one is trans or gender diverse (TGD), gendering brings danger and uncertainty as being misgendered or being perceived as ambiguously gendered reveals the presence – and limitations – of cisnormative presuppositions. Despite these problems, Serano reminds her readers that gendering is almost instinctive and thus forms an inescapable part of any introduction to someone new. In this reading, I use Serano's model of gendering, in combination with Halberstam's insights into identifying TGD experiences, to explore how Sarai and her gender are introduced. Through an engagement with the opening portion of her narrative, especially Genesis 11:29–12:20, I explore how gendering is facilitated within her introduction in the text. Textual clues, including marital status, context and lineage, and childbearing status, jostle with third person accounts of her identity – especially her beauty – in providing a basis from which to make judgements about Sarai's conformity to cisnormative gender expectations.

Without even needing to hear her speak or to encounter her as a character with agency or substantial narrative presence, there is sufficient information on which to build gendered assumptions. Despite the clear signalling of conformity to gender norms – especially as glimpsed through the accounts of Sarai's beauty in Genesis 12:10–20 – there remain tantalising gaps in this opening passage to reveal ruptures sufficient for a Halberstam-informed reading to call into question the validity of such a cisnormative assumption. As her story progresses, the significance of her introduction cannot be overlooked, especially as we continue through her life looking for further clues to confirm (or withhold) a cisnormative gender assignment. Despite the emerging picture of a character who cannot easily be constrained by cisnormative presuppositions, there is one further aspect of her tale that serves as a last-ditch attempt to distract from Sarai's gender diversity. It is found in the reconstruction of Sarai's origin story in Genesis 20:1–20, where divine intervention sees Sarai protected from the advances of a foreign leader – all while she is constructed as a woman through the word of God. She also finds her husband attempting to fill in the gaps of her origin story as Abram provides details of her heritage and lineage lacking earlier in the narrative. As Halberstam shows, gender nonconformity is rarely left unacknowledged and must be frequently mitigated. He argues that gender diversity is frequently subject to rationalisation. This occurs where apparently errant behaviour and moments of discontinuity are explained away in order to facilitate a character's

³ Halberstam, *In A Queer Time; Queer Art of Failure*.

⁴ Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 42–3.

⁵ Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 162–4.

return to the cisnormative world.⁶ In Sarai's case, I treat Genesis 20:1–20 as an attempt both to rationalise her story and to serve as an act of retrospective continuity – a retcon. This retcon functions to reconfigure something previously considered factual in Sarai's characterisation, in this case to remove the instability caused by the lack of context in Genesis 11:29–31. I will argue that while this seeks to provide clarity and close the ruptures in the text, it serves to make them more obvious and open to reinterpretation. In summary, I will argue that for readers responding to Sarai's story today, Genesis 11:29–12:20 offers tantalising opportunities for a cisnormative reading, but it ultimately fails. Even in the face of what here appears a brazen attempt to fill in those gaps, courtesy of additional details added in Genesis 20:1–18, it is not possible to adequately resolve the uncertainty established in Genesis 11:29–12:20.

1 Gendering Sarai

The reading I undertake here is intentionally whimsical and somewhat anachronistic in order to playfully challenge enduring preconceptions that lead to the cisgendering of biblical characters.⁷ I follow Halberstam who argues for the value of chasing “hunches, whims, [and] fancies” in order to reveal the limitations of our presuppositions, especially those pertaining to cisnormativity.⁸ Cisnormativity is the name given to gender norms that privilege consistency and coherence between the sex assigned at birth and gender identity and expression, i.e. being cisgender. Those who are not cisgender (hereafter cis) – trans(gender), nonbinary, intersex, gender nonconforming – do not receive the same recognition for the authenticity and validity of sex and gender and face cissexism, transphobia, and erasure from public view.⁹ Serano writes evocatively of how this is translated into everyday life through the process of gendering.¹⁰ She describes how we subconsciously yet almost instantaneously assign a gender to people when encountering them for the first time, relying on only scant details such as bodily features, body language, voice, and attire. Serano highlights the way that gendering is done without access to birth certificates, anatomical or chromosomal details, or any supposedly objective indicator of an individual's sex.¹¹ Nevertheless, she argues we trust that our assumptions hold and thus declare the person to be male or female without a second thought, assigning labels believed to be accurate in perpetuity. The potential that any given person may have a TGD past or future is rarely considered. When gendered language, such as names and pronouns, is added to the mix, gendering is consolidated and is widely treated as reliable. Yet to do this uncritically means perpetuating a cisnormative worldview that continues to marginalise TGD people and experiences. Serano describes this as a matter of both cis-privilege and cis-assumption.

⁶ Halberstam, *In A Queer Time*, 55.

⁷ For discussions of the enduring effects of assuming that biblical characters are only cisgender, see Sumerau et al., “Contemporary Religion,” 293–311. The anachronistic approach used in this article is informed by Boer, *Novel Histories*, 136–7.

⁸ Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 21.

⁹ For a helpful guide to trans, gender, and sexuality terminology, see “Julia [Serano]’s Trans, Gender, Sexuality, & Activism Glossary:” www.juliaserano.com/terminology.html.

¹⁰ Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 162–4.

¹¹ “While all transgender people experience transphobia, transsexuals additionally experience a related (albeit distinct) form of prejudice: cissexism, which is the belief that transsexuals’ identified genders are inferior to, or less authentic, than those of cissexuals (i.e., people who are not transsexuals and who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned). The most common expression of cissexism occurs when people attempt to deny the transsexual the basic privileges that are associated with the trans person’s self-identified gender [...]. The justification for this denial is generally founded on the assumption that the trans person’s gender is not authentic because it does not correlate with the sex they were assigned at birth. In making this assumption, cissexists attempt to create an artificial hierarchy. By insisting that the trans person’s gender is ‘fake,’ they attempt to validate their own gender as ‘real,’ or ‘natural.’ This sort of thinking is incredibly naive, as it denies a basic truth: we make assumptions every day about other people’s genders without ever seeing their birth certificates, their chromosomes, their genitals, their reproductive systems, their childhood socialization, or their legal sex. There is no such thing as a ‘real’ gender – there is only the gender we perceive others to be” (Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 162–4).

The first step to challenge this is to make the process more visible. She does this by emphasising how differently cis and TGD people experience gendering:

While cissexual assumption remains invisible to most cissexuals, those of us who are transsexual are excruciatingly aware of it. Prior to our transitions, we find that the cissexual majority simply assumes that we fully identify as members of our assigned sex, thus making it difficult for us to manage our gender difference and to be open about the way we see ourselves. And after our transitions, many of us find that the cissexual majority simply assumes that we have already been members of our identified sex, making it impossible for us to be open about our trans status without constantly having to come out to others. Thus, while most cissexuals are unaware that cissexual assumption even exists, those of us who are transsexual recognize it as an active process that erases trans people and their experiences.¹²

While Serano writes of interpersonal interactions in the early twenty-first century, her attention to gendering is useful for exploring how cisnormative presuppositions inform how gender in the Bible is understood.

It is increasingly important to recognise the contribution of cisnormativity to a reader's presuppositions when engaging with characters found in the Bible. Typified by cis-assumption and privilege, cisnormativity erases TGD experiences through the expectation that everyone will conform to fixed, binary gender norms. Women in the Bible (as well as today) will, on balance, demonstrate their femininity and conform to female social expectations; men will perform masculinity and play the man.¹³ Where deviation from those norms occurs, the individual in question will necessarily return to the gender norms soon thereafter; it must be rationalised, to return to Halberstam's language. To do otherwise is to face censure or to be treated as fake, unnatural, or otherwise unacceptable, in other words experiences cissexism. Serano's observations provide a thought-provoking basis for a reconsideration of responses to textual details that facilitate a gendering of biblical characters. Her description enables a recognition of ways that introductory glimpses of the character within a narrative are as important as those momentary glances and inferences in the twenty-first century everyday life. In reading the introductory portion of Sarai's story, I will show how these texts serve the reader's desire to gender Sarai as a cisnormative character and, in doing so, seek to downplay instances where she could be understood differently.

Given the introduction to Sarai is so lacking in the context so essential to slot her effectively into the readers' cisnormative assumptions, it is helpful to consider what tidbits can be found. This mimics the momentary glance Serano speaks of when she reflects on the immediacy of gendering one another. Even when Sarai is first introduced, it is without ceremony or substantial detail. It is curt and to the point: she is listed as a member of Terah's family through her status wife of Abram and described as childless (Gen. 11:27–31). She is immediately contrasted with Milcah, wife of Abram's brother Nahor, who is provided with the familial context Sarai lacks. Milcah is the daughter of Haran who also fathered Lot and Iscah (v.29). While it is Sarai who is the narratively significant character here, this lack of context is not even shared by the later matriarchs. Rebekah and her heritage – including her status as a descendant of Milcah – are introduced through a genealogy found in Genesis 22:20–23 before her suitability as an endogamous wife is made irrefutable in Genesis 24.¹⁴ Rachel's introduction similarly provides the desired context as she is described as the daughter of Laban son of Nahor even before the reader or her future husband have even caught a glance of her (Genesis 29:5–6). Milcah and the future matriarchs are each provided the name of their father to consolidate their status as daughter – and not just anyone's daughter, but a specific named person on each occasion. This grants each woman an introduction in the text that offers reassurance and authority that they are and always have been who they purport themselves to be. No such context is

¹² Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 165.

¹³ Clines, *Interested Parties*, 212–43.

¹⁴ Rebekah's genealogy names Milcah, reintroducing her for the first time since Genesis 11:29: "Now after these things it was told Abraham, 'Milcah also has borne children, to your brother Nahor: Uz the firstborn, Bus his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel' Bethuel became the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother" (Genesis 22:20–23). Rebekah's context is further consolidated through the repeated acknowledgement of her lineage (Genesis 24:15, 24, 47). Her status as daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah and Nahor is included on each occasion.

proffered for Sarai, and therefore the text offers no comparable reassurance of her status as a (cis) normative character at the point she enters the story.¹⁵ This lack of context becomes a moment of silence that provides a small rupture into which a Halberstam-informed approach can begin to find leverage. A provocative “what if?” provides a flickering glimpse of a character whose lack of context opens the possibility of identifying gender differently within their own story.

As Sarai is such a significant female character within the ancestral narratives, mitigating any nagging doubt is essential, but Sarai remains barely present within the text. In Genesis 12, she really begins to come into focus, even if holding her in that gaze remains challenging. Narratologically, Sarai is only present through inclusion of her name as one of Abram’s party as they embark on the journey that takes them to Canaan (Gen. 12:5). She is named alongside Lot, Abram’s nephew, as well as the unspecified possessions and unnamed “persons they had acquired in Haran” (v.5). She is bought into sharper focus once they arrive in Egypt (v.10), but it is through the words of the omniscient but unnamed narrator that Sarai comes into clearer view. From Genesis 12:10–20, Sarai piques interest while remaining present, just, to hold the viewer’s gaze long enough to gender her.

As Sarai arrives in Egypt (Gen. 12:11–20), the construction of Sarai’s gender becomes clearer through the trans-informed gaze. Her name and the pronouns are already familiar, but now the reader is invited to share in Abram’s appraisal of his wife. Abram is presented as a reliable commentator as he has been provided with the context and lineage that is withheld from Sarai (Gen. 11:26–32).¹⁶ Importantly, he is also favoured by God, as demonstrated through personalised divine messages (Gen. 12:1–3, 7) and his construction of an altar to the Lord (v.7–8). Abram’s status as the patriarch is also emerging through reference to his possessions and the size of his (largely enslaved) party (v.5). Thus, Abram speaks confidently and authoritatively of Sarai:

I know well that you are a *woman* beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his *wife*’; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say that you are my *sister*, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account. (vv.11–13, emphasis added)

Here it is not only what he says, but how he says it, that becomes important in creating a clear enough image of Sarai to contribute to gendering her. A cisnormative reading relies heavily on the way language – including translational choices – signals gender effectively. There is often a comforting reassurance when the character is gendered in a way that conforms to expectation. It must be sufficient enough to consolidate presuppositions but not excessive, so that the authenticity of that gender assignation is bought into question.¹⁷ Therefore, reading the word “woman” alongside the designation that Sarai is beautiful becomes somewhat clanging.¹⁸ Abram’s words to and about Sarai are clearly, repeatedly gendered and the description of beauty further feminises her, so why the need to make her womanhood so explicit? “Beautiful” gives merest glimpse of Sarai as embodied, but it is all the detail provided about her at this stage. Therefore, when combined with Abram’s use of the terms “woman,” “wife,” and “sister,” there is a rather overwhelming insistence on the femaleness and femininity of Sarai. Yet it is not only the gaze of Abram and the narrator who present their appraisal of Sarai; the text also shares an account of the gaze of unnamed Egyptians who report to Pharaoh of Sarai as Abram predicts.

As they enter Egypt, the narrator says “the Egyptians saw that *the woman* was very beautiful. When the officials of Pharaoh saw *her*, they praised *her* to Pharaoh. And *the woman* was taken into Pharaoh’s

¹⁵ For further queer exploration of Sarai’s story, see Rosenberg, *Ancestral Queerness*. Rosenberg argues that while there is no indication that Sarai or Abram “ever had sex with someone of the same gender or that they identified with a gender that did not match their biology,” they present a valuable case study for queer sociality (25–27).

¹⁶ Abram’s genealogy is traced through his father, Terah, back to Shem and from Shem to Noah (Gen. 10:32; 11:10–32).

¹⁷ For examples of using a transgender gaze to reveal excess gender performance in biblical characters, see Guest, “Modeling the Transgender Gaze;” Ross, “Transgender Gaze at Genesis 38.”

¹⁸ Fokkelien Van Dijk-Hemmes also find this problematic in her feminist reading of the text. She finds discomfort in the male-centred view of Sarai’s beauty and the absence of Sarai’s own perspective as she is the subject of sustained male gaze (Van Dijk-Hemmes, “Sarai’s Exile,” 228).

house. And for *her* sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels” (Gen. 12:14–16, emphasis added). For now, Sarai has lost her name, making the gendered language used to describe her all the more visible and powerful. She is no longer *a* beautiful woman but now appears as *the* (only) woman. Clearly there is only one woman of note! As she is the only woman visible, the Egyptians are (also) trying to find ways to consolidate their gendering of Sarai. They cling to the beauty as Abram has previously described, but here the multiple unnamed voices confirm Abram’s appraisal of Sarai. The result is that this beautiful femininity ensures that she is taken into Pharaoh’s household. Only in verse 17, when Abram’s deception unravels, is Sarai given her name back. As Pharaoh and Abram jostle for Sarai, she disappears from view only to be referred to in the third person through the use of pronouns (she/her) and relational gendered terms (wife/sister) (vv.18–19). Even on their departure from Egypt, Sarah remains beyond the gaze of the reader, hidden once again behind the nameless designation “wife” (v.20).

2 Fixing a trans gaze on Sarai?

In these fleeting glimpses of Sarai, apparently pertinent details emerge to facilitate the gendering process, but their value is yet to be established. From a trans-informed perspective, it becomes possible to focus a trans gaze on Sarai and her portrayal in the narrative. Halberstam positioned a transgender gaze as a tool for analysing the “visual representations of gender ambiguity” in film.¹⁹ In translating Halberstam’s approach for biblical interpretation, I focus on his observation that TGD characters struggle to hold the gaze of the viewer over a sustained period of time.²⁰ Sarai fades in and out of focus, slipping beyond the gaze of the reader and the narrator alike for a sustained period which, according to Halberstam, is common in the presentation of TGD characters for a largely cisgender (or cisnormative) audience. Where gender is unstable or chimerical, it exists beyond the comprehension of the reader and it must fade into the background so as not to cause disquiet – and with it goes the character whose gender is under scrutiny. For Halberstam, it is dangerous for TGD characters to remain visible, so they “disappear in order to remain viable.”²¹ This then means “the transgender gaze becomes difficult to track because it depends on complex relations in time and space between seeing and not seeing, appearing and disappearing, knowing and not knowing.”²² These complexities become apparent for Sarai; even when she is in view she becomes lost behind a highly gendered, but depersonalised, language (Gen. 12:10–20).

In order to assess whether Sarai’s story parallels accounts of gender diversity, there is a need to engage carefully with the gaze of those who see her most clearly *in* the text. Of particular significance is the impact of cisnormative gender expectations on the characters surrounding Sarai. To what extent is an engagement with their views of Sarai also affected by cisnormativity? Abram’s account of his wife, as the privileged figure within the narrative, carries most weight (Gen. 12:11–13). Yet it is when that account is held in parallel with the observations of the Egyptian officials (vv. 14–15) that the significance of this contribution to a cisnormative reading becomes clearest. By recognising that the Egyptian officials are independent – or even potentially hostile – viewers, Sarai’s beauty is not only subjectively praised by Abram but can be understood as universally recognisable. The Egyptian officials and the Pharaoh symbolise a significant hegemonic political power in the region, so their perspectives are particularly powerful in endowing gender on Sarai. Here beauty is aligned consistently with womanhood and femininity. The combination of these observations and the frequency of the gendered language applied to Sarai ensures that she is presented as an inescapably female beauty. That beauty is also far from neutral,

¹⁹ Halberstam, *In A Queer Time*, 76.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 76–96.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

²² *Ibid.*, 78.

leading Shirley Anne Tate, who works at the intersection of Black, feminist, decolonial and diaspora studies, to describe beauty as “the fetishized outcome of the work of fantasy.”²³ Thus, Sarai’s beauty has something of Goldilocks’ porridge to it – it is neither too excess to be believed nor sufficiently lacking to be unremarkable: once again it needs to be just right.

Looking at Sarai’s beauty through this cispicious, trans-informed lens brings into sharp focus a question about what it means to be a just-right level of beauty.²⁴ How can Sarai’s beauty – something that is acknowledged to be culturally constructed and changing – be recognised by both Abraham and the Egyptians alike? The first point is to recognise that the plural voices serve to affirm the integrity and authenticity of Sarai’s beauty. This is important as so many TGD people, especially trans women and femme people, face persistent accusations of fakeness. Serano considers this as a core component of transmisogyny, where trans women are treated as duplicitous and pitiable.²⁵ Where an interest in beauty or bodily aesthetics is praised in a cisnormative woman, it is too often seen as an inauthentic affectation or mimicry in others.²⁶ The advantage of the third-party accounts in Sarai’s story is that it removes the potential for us to see her beauty as an ersatz affectation. Rather the eye-witness accounts instil a sense of something that appears authentic and thus it confers Sarai with a cisnormative feminine beauty.

As Tate points out, though, there is more to beauty than just apparent authenticity and recognisability. It is a fantasy, but a fantasy that is imbued with “gendered, racialized, and contested symbolic resources.”²⁷ The plural voices required to confirm the authenticity of Sarai’s beauty are testament to this. The perception of a beauty that translates from Abram to the Egyptians calls to mind her recognisability within dominant universal beauty standards, something that translates from the ancient world to today. The recognisability of Sarai’s beauty has moved through the Egyptian hegemonies that once dominated the region of Canaan/Israel–Judah through to the current privileging of white Eurocentric womanhood.²⁸ This interpretation of Sarai is not new but here it also becomes complicated by (and complicit in) cisnormative gender presuppositions. Beauty signals femininity, no doubt, but does so in a way that also connotes a racialised view of Sarai. She typifies hegemonic cisnormative femininity today, something all the more evident through the use of the definite article when referring to Sarai as *the* woman. She is, by implication, the most womanly woman there is! By accepting the assertion of both the Egyptians and Abram that Sarai is beautiful, then treating this as an affirmation of Sarai’s womanhood, the cisnormative feminine gender norms reveal their colonial and white supremacist roots. Hegemonic beauty standards are those of white femininity, an outworking of colonialism, that also treats other bodies, other people, as different and inferior. Black bodies are presented as “hypersexual, a characterization that positioned black women as the moral opposites of pure white women” on the one hand and as degenerated on the other.²⁹ Gender expectations are inextricable from racialised models of beauty, the same models that also convey morality, power, and intelligence.³⁰ The corollary is that ugliness is also racialised; Sarah Nuttall highlights the way ugliness is the racist “metaphor *par excellence*” that aligns both the African

²³ Tate, *Black Beauty*, 17.

²⁴ Cispicion is a portmanteau term coined to describe the need to treat cisnormativity with suspicion. It was first attributed to Henderson-Merrygold (née Merrygold) in Stiebert, *First-Degree Incest*, 122 n.81.

²⁵ Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 35–52.

²⁶ “It’s telling that TV, film, and news producers tend not to be satisfied with merely showing trans women wearing feminine clothes and makeup. Rather, it is their intention to capture trans women *in the act* of putting on lipstick, dresses, and high heels, thereby giving the audience the impression that the trans woman’s femaleness is an artificial mask or costume” (Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 41).

²⁷ Craig, “Race, Beauty, and Guilty Pleasure,” 160.

²⁸ Tate recognises that “approximation to white standards is still a prerequisite for beauty, which in turn is a necessary aspect of social capital” despite the emergence of anti-racist and black feminist beauty standards (Tate, *Black Beauty*, 13). Craig describes “dominant beauty standards that idealized fair skin, small noses and lips, and long flowing hair defined black women’s dark skin colour, facial features, and tightly curled, short hair as ugly” (Craig, “Race, Beauty, and Guilty Pleasure,” 163).

²⁹ Craig, “Race, Beauty, and Guilty Pleasure,” 163; Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 72.

³⁰ Nuttall, “Introduction,” 8–9; Spillers, “Mama’s Baby.”

continent and Black people with moral decay.³¹ Asian bodies have been portrayed either as monstrous or exotic and are still held in distinction from Eurocentric, beauty norms.³² Asian beauty is understood through a lens of orientalism that sees a hypersexual woman but perceives her as unreliable and untrustworthy, masking deception and “a grotesque interior.”³³ Thus, beauty signifies race and sensuality as well as gender. For Sarai to emerge as beautiful for both her husband and the Egyptian onlookers, she must represent a widely recognisable form of beauty; in this case, she must typify hegemonic beauty standards and all that entails with regard to racialised and cisnormalised privilege.

The account of Sarai’s sojourn in Egypt provides invaluable information to allow the reader to gender her. The language and description of her beauty contribute to an apparently inscrutable image of Sarai as a cisnormative woman. Even though she remains a narrative object, yet to speak and act for herself, there is a key detail from the introductory remarks in Genesis 11:29–31 that remains unresolved. Sarai’s childlessness, if it becomes the focus, has the power to destabilise the effects of the feminine gendering made possible through Genesis 12:10–20.

3 A pregnant pause

The one clear thing of note about Sarai, as an individual, in Genesis 11:29–31, is that she is childless. The childlessness is something unique to her, and not shared with her husband, and it becomes a core part of her characterisation: “Sarai was barren.”³⁴ It is an inescapable designation but with it comes further connotations for gendering her. As Candida Moss and Joel Baden argue, “womanhood continues to be most associated with motherhood, and with the assumption that motherhood is the highest state of womanhood.”³⁵ For TGD women, this is all the more problematic as “a common assumption for dismissing trans women is tied to reproductive assumptions – because they cannot give birth, trans women are not ‘real’ women.”³⁶ Given that cisnormative womanhood is synonymous with motherhood, the emphasis on Sarai’s childlessness in the introductory portion of her story cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the gendered language and emphasis on beauty serve as the necessary juxtaposition to facilitate a cisnormative reading of Sarai.

Returning to focus on the childless Sarai who finds herself in Egypt, the question of a potential pregnancy or lack thereof remains hanging despite the contribution of the beauty motif. Her beauty has ensured that she is *the* woman taken into Pharaoh’s harem, but with that welcome recognition comes new risks. Those risks are both to the patriarchal requirements placed on Sarai and to the cisnormative expectations that parallel them. They coalesce around Abram’s need for descendants.

As part of the Lord’s appearance to Abram prior to the exile to Egypt, Abram is promised offspring who will be heirs to Canaan (Gen. 12:7). As feminist biblical scholar Cheryl Exum notes, Sarah is invisible during the receipt of this promise; she has faded from the gaze entirely.³⁷ Sarai has not conceived and perhaps cannot conceive the promised children at this stage. So, as the entourage arrive in Egypt, there are significant potential risks and opportunities for pregnancy. Pimping his wife out on arrival, therefore, seems a counterintuitive move for Abram when trying to bring a child of one’s own into the world. Exum acknowledges that while Abram fears for his life, “the possibility that she might have sexual relations with a man other than the patriarch [...] can be regarded as a threat to the purity of the line.”³⁸ It is a major

³¹ Nuttall, “Introduction,” 9.

³² Craig, “Race, Beauty, and Guilty Pleasure,” 163.

³³ Shimizu, *Hypersexuality of Race*, 82.

³⁴ Schneider, *Sarah; Weems, Just A Sister Away*, “A Maid, A Mistress, and No Mercy.”

³⁵ Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 7.

³⁶ Valentine, “Examining Scripture.”

³⁷ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 77.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

threat to what Exum sees as the primary function of the matriarch: mother to the heir to the ancestral dynasty. Here in Genesis 12 specifically, Exum notes that there is no explicit confirmation that Sarah did not have sex with Pharaoh.³⁹ Having described the use of this motif as “curious” and “peculiar,” Exum concedes that the accounts “are so unusual and unconventional, and traditional interpretations of them are so unsatisfying.”⁴⁰

In her own non-traditional interpretation, Exum makes explicit that Abram must have considered there to be no substantial risk for Sarai to play the role of concubine.⁴¹ She offers one particularly pertinent observation: “If the patriarch does not suppose that the matriarch is in danger, neither is there any evidence that the *matriarch* thinks she is in danger.”⁴² While Exum argues this is primarily the result of androcentric texts that keep the matriarchs beyond the consideration of the story, I offer an alternative reading. By rejecting the cisnormative presupposition that the potential for (biological) motherhood conveys womanhood (and *vice versa*), new possibilities emerge. In other words, perhaps Abram and Sarai are well acquainted – and indeed comfortable – with the knowledge that Sarai cannot have children – or not without a miracle! This would provide a justification for the corporate lack of concern demonstrated by Sarai, Abram, and the narrator in making explicit that Sarai did not have sex during her stay in the harem.

There is, perhaps, one motivation for Abram and, to a lesser extent, Sarai to commit to this course of action which recognises that Genesis 12 contributes so significantly to the gendering of Sarai. Abram’s actions provide an opportunity to resolve Sarai’s apparent lack of context and her childlessness, each of which undermines the validity of a cisnormative assumption, all in one go. Perhaps he is trying to add a layer of decency over the potentially indecent character by providing a narrative where she appears quintessentially feminine despite her childlessness.⁴³ Even with a limited view of Sarai to this point, there are already questions about the extent to which she fits neatly within cisnormative expectations for her sex and gender. By making Sarai the object of such sustained and diverse gaze – a gaze that has the power to ascribe womanhood – Abram centres and decentres his wife and her gender. It is clear that beauty is one major hook on to which to attach a cisnormative reading, but there remain alternative possibilities of understanding Sarai’s gender even beyond the competing themes of beauty and childlessness.

Using Halberstam’s interpretive tools, Sarai’s lack of historical or familial context offers no reassuring confirmation that she is reliably cisgender. If the information is withheld by a third party, perhaps by the narrator, questions emerge about what is being hidden and why. What features of Sarai’s context are sufficiently worrisome that they cannot be shared? Alternatively, if Sarai takes ownership of the gaps in the story, her narrative silence can be understood as an act of defiance. In the end, it matters little whether her omission is an act of patriarchal silencing: Sarai symbolises a rejection of the need to speak, self-locate, and confirm the expectations placed on her identity.⁴⁴ As she fades in and out of focus, her story has parallels with the representation of TGD characters who appear incomprehensible. At this stage, it is clear that Sarai increasingly does not fully or neatly fit into the cisnormative mould; rather she sits at a slight angle to those norms due to insufficient understanding of who she is. Even while Abram’s actions try to shout over Sarai’s silence, it becomes possible to imagine that highlighting Sarai’s childlessness also offers space for TGD readings to step in and fill the gap.

³⁹ Exum contrasts the way the narrative is more explicit in clarifying that the matriarch remains untouched by Abimelech in Genesis 20 and Genesis 26, where the motif is repeated (Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 86).

⁴⁰ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 86.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 117–8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴³ Here I include cisnormative expectations within Marcella Althaus-Reid’s conceptualisation of decency, see Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology; Queer God*.

⁴⁴ Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 42–3.

Sarai's childlessness, in combination with her lack of context, represents a rejection of the cisnormative ideals associated with success, health, and perfection that are wedded to reproduction.⁴⁵ It provides just enough of a gap into which to glimpse a different view of Sarai. Seeing Sarai as a woman, but one who does not fully fit within a cisnormative reading, is hugely powerful. One such example is Sally Gross's readings where she emphasises the parallels between Sarai's story and intersex experience.⁴⁶ For Gross, Sarai is someone who experiences diversity of sexual development beyond the narrow limits of normative maleness or femaleness, meaning that she would today be recognised as an intersex person. Gross highlights the way that the rabbinic tradition makes space for those who do not easily fit into the categories of male and female. She then draws on Rabbi Nahman's identification of Sarai as an *'aylonith*, "a woman without a womb."⁴⁷ While Gross acknowledges that the Talmudic Rabbis offer glosses that are "perhaps a trifle far-fetched and quaint," she celebrates them for the equanimity with which they explored "the possibility that leading and revered scriptural characters were intersexed."⁴⁸ The problem emerges today when intersex lives, along with other TGD experiences, are overlooked by cisnormative models of gender. Indeed, Virginia Mollenkott and Michael Carden highlight Gross's interpretation for its value in reading for greater gender diversity in the Bible which, in turn, confronts the dominance of cisnormative presuppositions.⁴⁹ These interpretations do not preclude the miracle of Genesis 21:1 but offer a different understanding of the circumstances for God's intervention to overcome. Yet that remains some way into Sarai's future for now. Gross's intersex interpretation of Sarai adds to the details I identify through the use of Serano and Halberstam's insights. Sarai increasingly cannot be constrained by cisnormative expectations, irrespective of how much those around her seek to direct how she is understood. She will not easily be gatekept by overly simplified litmus tests of cisnormative femininity that relate primarily to procreative capacity.⁵⁰ Nor will she easily fit into what an androcentric, cisnormative gaze tells us – sometimes quite determinately – is a femininity demanded for womankind.

4 Retconning Sarai's gender

The problem that emerges in reading Sarai and acknowledging her discontinuity with cisnormative expectations is that there is still the persistent desire to try to identify more hooks on which to secure the impression she can fit into those norms. There is a temptation to try to find enough of a consistent picture of Sarai to facilitate a cisnormalised reading of her gender. However, the established, and potentially problematic, features in her characterisation remain in discontinuity despite concerted efforts to mitigate them early in her story. Sarai still does not quite fit the hallowed expectations of cisnormative gender. Given the curious feature of a second sister–wife story, this time in Genesis 20, it is worth considering this as an attempt to undermine the earlier discontinuities. In other words, the repeated use of this motif can be considered to function as a "retcon:" "retroactive continuity," where changes are made to "already-established facts and canonical material."⁵¹ Mark Wolf describes it as an opportunity to "reinterpret past events or make use of holes or audience assumptions to recontextualize events."⁵² If Genesis 20 functions as a retcon, its contribution is to actively try to change the earlier context in order to rationalise and stabilise Sarai's gender. It is a nother story in which Sarai is far from an active participant, so the challenge remains to try and fix a (trans) gaze on her once again.

⁴⁵ Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 120.

⁴⁶ Gross, "Intersexuality and Scripture," 65–74.

⁴⁷ Gross, "Intersexuality and Scripture," 72. This interpretation draws heavily on rabbinic commentary on Isaiah 51:1–2, which Rabbi Nahman uses as an intertext to reach the conclusion that Sarai was without a womb.

⁴⁸ Gross, "Intersexuality and Scripture," 73.

⁴⁹ Mollenkott, *Omnigender*; Carden, "Genesis/Bereshit."

⁵⁰ Valentine, "Examining Scripture."

⁵¹ Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 212–3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 213.

The juxtaposition between the overt attention to Sarai's beauty and the covert theme of her childlessness is a feature unique to the Egypt story (Gen. 12:10–20). When the sister-wife storyline reappears in Genesis 20, Sarai's beauty is left unremarked. Now renamed as Sarah and Abraham (Gen. 17:1–16), the spouses find themselves exiled to Gerar, and their fate lies in the hands of King Abimelech, rather than an unnamed Pharaoh. While decades have passed since the earlier deception, Sarah is still welcomed into Abimelech's court with an expectation that concubinage is in her immediate future. On this occasion, God intervenes via a dream to ensure that Abimelech does not have sex with – and potentially impregnate – Sarah (Gen. 20:3–7). Her beauty is implied through reference to Abimelech's implied (albeit unacted) desire for Sarah. The brief acknowledgement that God closed the wombs of Abimelech's "wife and female slaves" (Gen. 20:17–18) further ensures that there are no other pregnancies to remark on or to threaten the sanctity of Abraham's lineage.⁵³ This serves to foreground fecundity more overtly in the narrative, even though it is a lack of conception that warrants comment. Two things have changed since Genesis 12 though. The first is primarily of note for the reader when considering how they gender Sarai: Genesis 20 does not feature in the introduction to Sarai's story. In the interim, she has become an active participant in her own narrative, so it does not serve the purposes of contributing to the initial viewing of Sarai that facilitates her gendering. The second is that Genesis 20 is the first time Sarah features in the story after she has become aware of God's promise that she will bear a child (Gen. 18:1–14).⁵⁴ Sarah has already laughingly recognised that this will not be possible without divine intervention (vv.11, 14). While that does follow in due course (Gen. 21:1), there is a nascent recognition that pregnancy might be possible for the first time. Despite these differences, Sarah is barely more present in this second incident than the first. As she is far from an active presence, once again it is worth considering the different function of these largely similar stories in establishing how Sarai's gender is understood.

Sarah is yet again absent and discussed in the third person by God and Abimelech. She is not party to the discussion prior to the interaction between Abraham and Abimelech where the former purports Sarah is his sister to the latter, although Sarah validates this when asked (Gen. 20:2, 5). As in Egypt, this is largely done without reference to Sarah's name, which contributes to the sense that there is only one woman, her womanhood is inscrutable, and she alone of women matters at this stage:

From there Abraham journeyed toward the region of the Negeb, and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While residing in Gerar as an alien, Abraham said of his *wife* Sarah, "*She is my sister.*" And King Abimelech of Gerar sent and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, "You are about to die because of *the woman* you have taken; for *she* is a *married woman.*" Now Abimelech had not approached *her*; so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent people? Did he not himself say to me, '*She is my sister?*' And *she herself* said, 'He is my brother.' I did this in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands." Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart; furthermore it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch *her*. Now then, return the man's *wife*; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore *her*, know that you shall surely die, you and all that are yours." (Genesis 20:1–7, emphasis added)

Sarah's womanhood is actively constructed as God does not refer to Sarah by name at any point but directly refers to her as "the woman" (v.3). A divine locutionary act designates Sarah inescapably as woman; God has made her so! The question left hanging is whether that also contributes to the perception of Sarah as someone who conforms to, or at least is clearly recognisable, within cisgender norms or not. If it is not so, does that mean that it becomes possible to see divine affirmation of non-cisnormative expressions of womanhood – I certainly hope so!

The sense that this is part of an attempt to retcon Sarah in order to facilitate a cisnormalised reading is gaining momentum. The divine interjection is not the only significant contribution of the sojourn into Gerar for tweaking the reader's understanding of Sarah's gender. Context is added where it had been left

⁵³ For further discussion of the interplay between the histories of gender, race, and transness, see Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*.

⁵⁴ Sarah (renamed in Gen. 17:15) remains absent for the remainder of Genesis 18, while God and her husband (now, Abraham) debate the future of Sodom. Both Abraham and Sarah are absent throughout Genesis 19.

open earlier in Sarah's story. When confronted by Abimelech for the deception, Abraham justifies himself by speaking of Sarah's history in a way that differs significantly from any earlier accounts of his wife. He says, "Besides, she is indeed by sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife" (Gen. 20:12). This directly contrasts with the notable lack of detail offered in Genesis 11:29–31. If these details mattered so greatly, why were they not present at Sarah's introduction? More importantly, why is adding that context so important now? The answer to both questions relates directly to the need to rationalise and reclaim her status as a cisnormative woman due to her impending motherhood. The lack of context or lineage that so effectively opens the possibility of queer and trans readings, as championed by Halberstam, is foreclosed here to prevent them at the point where lineage matters most. The importance of inscrutable paternity becomes even clearer as the stay in Gerar comes to the end: only as Sarah, Abraham, and their newly inflated entourage leave, does God reopen the wombs of the house of Abimelech, having earlier closed them "because of Sarah, Abraham's wife" (Gen. 20:17–18). As they prepare to leave, Abimelech seeks Sarah explicitly to make amends for mistreating her in an act that once again emphasises her status as a subordinate but nevertheless desirable woman (v.16). Her status is restored through the gifts to Sarah's husband; rather than making any reparation to her, focusing on the man in her life further emphasises her femaleness.⁵⁵

At the conclusion of the chapter, Sarah's missing context has been interjected in a story that seeks to recall the earlier explicit accounts of her beauty and femininity. In case those details are too subtle, God directly confirms her gender and sex through a locutionary act that directly bequeaths womanhood on Sarah. Meanwhile, it is the divine intervention rather than spousal disregard or lack of risk that prevents an unplanned pregnancy in Gerar, contra Egypt (Gen. 12:10–20). Thus, the time, place, and planning must be cohering for the much-anticipated pregnancy to finally enter the story. Perhaps this will, finally, set aside any of those nagging doubts about the extent to which Sarah can be made to fit cisnormative expectations. Then again, maybe not. Instead, the attempt to make Sarah fit cisnormative expectations has been marked as visible and constructed. Recognising that Genesis 20:1–18 has effectively functioned as a cisnormalising retcon has destabilised the overall coherence of narrative rather than strengthening it. This is something frequently associated with the process of retconning as well as a feature of erasing TGD experiences.⁵⁶ Yet once again Halberstam's focus on the power of discontinuity enables the recognition of richness and detail in Sarah's nonconformity. As the (re)construction of the trans-informed gaze on Sarah becomes increasingly clear, the desire to force her into familiar cisnormative gender expectations becomes all the more difficult to achieve. In the end, no detail from the retconning of Genesis 20 undermines or invalidates the picture of a complex and hard-to-gender woman. She, like her gender, remains something of a will-o'-the-wisp.

5 Conclusion

Sarah and her quirky, chimerical, ever-changing gender have played their part, leaving the reader to make sense of the story of her life. The opportunity to use Genesis 12 as the basis for gendering Sarah offers the potential glimpse of a character who just might remain credible and coherent within cisnormative presuppositions about gender and sex. They present a credible alternative point of focus to the scant details of Genesis 11:29–31, but as Sarah's life unfurls in – and especially beyond – the narrator's viewpoint a picture emerges of someone who does not conform to those powerful cisnormative gender expectations. Halberstam's recognition of the gift of subversion possible through a character without context comes to the fore in Sarah's story. The opening lack of historical and familial context highlights the rupture – the

⁵⁵ To Sarah he said, "Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your exoneration before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated" (Genesis 20:16).

⁵⁶ Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 212–6; Halberstam, *In A Queer Time*, 54–5.

space – available for alternative readings. In so doing, they reveal the anachronisms already present in the story. Through reading against the text, accompanied by trans theories of gender such as those of Halberstam and Serano, the processes through which a character's gender is constructed become clear. As the construction itself becomes visible, it becomes possible to view components in distinction from each other, rather than always in continuity. Despite attempts to fix a gaze on Sarai, she remains beyond the focus of the narrative and where she is not an active participant, her own perspective and self-expression are notably absent. They represent the silent defiance of a woman who will not slide willingly into either androcentric or cisnormative expectations and thus cannot hold our gaze. Despite her silence, delightful fleeting glimpses of this paradoxical character appear. These glimpses further emphasise the parallels between the encounter with Sarai in these introductory portions of her story and Serano's descriptions of gendering today. There is, however, more to Sarai's gender than this initial glance proffers, just as our own genders are more complex than gendering frequently implies. Throughout this analysis, she has remained visible only through the gaze of the narrator and fellow characters alike. Her own perspective remains unaddressed and warrants further exploration. What remains clear, however, is that she cannot be easily constrained within the simplified tropes of beautiful wife, potential mother, or even matriarch created around her. Even her relationship to the category or identity of woman is up for further discussion in the light of this cispicious interpretation. This reading facilitates a way of engaging with a character's gender that foregrounds instability, discontinuity, and diversity in order to place it in discussion with today's changing understandings of gender and sex. Reading Sarah with a cispicious scepticism towards gender expectations, in the end, presents a rich and diversely character open to further queer and trans interpretation.

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