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Layers of Abjection: The Unnamed *Pilegesh* of Judges 19 and Us

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Abstract

The unnamed pilegesh of Judges 19 has been understood and labeled as “abject.” However, to only see her as abject as it pertains to the text is to miss the layered aspects of her abjection. She is not only abject literally and literarily but also abject as she is a symbol of abjection for the social body of Ancient Judah, a figure by which they understand and make sense of their traumas. The dismembered pilegesh thus demonstrates how corporeal violence to her body is used to think within the ancient world, how her body continues to demonstrate the subjugation of precarious bodies, and the way her body demonstrates theological claims and ideas—on multiple layers. Finally, in a manner of self-reflexivity, this article considers my posture as continuing her abjection. While this will not and cannot redress her abjection, exposing these layers is an attempt at re-membering.

Keywords: Judges; Abjection; Exile; Mobility; Trauma; Diaspora; Violence; Metaphor; Reflexivity

“And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.”²

Introduction

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² Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.



There are many examples of abjection in the Bible, especially considering abjection creates states of exclusion, even non-being.³ Revolting characters bloat in the text and polemics of “inclusive exclusion” help define and bolster the identities of this ancient community through the presence of the abject(s).⁴

Abjection is a term used to describe and theorize within the psychoanalytic, political, and social disciplines. This concept in itself both unites and transcends disciplines, making abjection easy to appropriate for the field of biblical studies. In their volume on abjection, Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond remark: “abjection is utterly ubiquitous.”⁵ Indeed, abjection and the abject have many lives. The abject is cast out, seen as disgusting, an object delineating a boundary line of what we should not be. The abject is neither object nor subject; simultaneously, separation from the abject is part of what allows the subject to become definitive. The abject is something to avoid, yet one will encounter the abject regularly, externally and internally, an inherent paradox. The abject and the necessary action of expulsion facing said abject, an act of abjection, will also entail fascination regardless of aversion. Because the term

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⁴ Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 20. Tyler summarizes and understands Georges Bataille’s work, “Abjection and Miserable Forms,” in *More & Less 2*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, (Los Angeles: Semiotext, 1993) as a paradox that “in order for a...practice to be declared obscene, experienced as disgusting and regulated accordingly, it must be seen to be practiced within the body politic... processes of inclusion and exclusion produce ‘waste populations:’ an excess that threatens from within, but which the system cannot fully expel as it requires this surplus both to constitute the boundaries of the state and to legitimize the prevailing order of power.” “Revolting Subjects,” 20-21. More will be said in a full discussion below.

⁵ Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond, “Introduction: Not It, or, The Abject Objection,” in *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure & Violence*, eds. Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 2.

resonates with so many, particularly in the context of marginalized subjects, it is regularly used in post-colonial, queer, gender, transgender, Black, and migration theories, and beyond. Most recently in biblical studies, Natalie Mylonas demonstrated the embodied abjection of personified woman Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16 as a polemic for what the people both are and must not be.⁶

This article argues that the unnamed *pilegesh*⁷ of Judges 19 is abject *par excellence*. While she has been labeled as such before,⁸ her abjection has only been seen as such on a literary level. But if the narrative is doing more than describing a singular human life, the purpose of the text thus oozing beyond the boundaries of her own body, then *her* abjection may be erased and simultaneously amplified in favor of *our* abjection. The body of the unnamed *pilegesh* in Judges 19, therefore, embodies a thick description of abjection—her body is used to think with, her body shows the continued subjugation of precarious bodies, and her

⁶ Natalie Mylonas, *Jerusalem as Contested Space in Ezekiel: Exilic Encounters with Emotions, Space, and Identity Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023). There are many similarities to be made involving the *pilegesh* in Judges 19 and Jerusalem as woman in Ezekiel 16, and some allusions will be done throughout this article, but that cannot be done in full here. See Serge Frolov, “The Poverty of Parallels: Reading Judges 19 with Ezekiel 16 via the Song of Songs,” in *Reading Gender in Judges: An Intertextual Approach*, eds. Shelley Birdsong, J. Cornelis de Vos, Hyun Chul Paul Kim (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023) 247-262.

⁷ *Pilegesh* is most often translated as a concubine. Some prefer secondary wife due to the racialized and, therefore, negative connotations associated with concubinage; but the term wife still denotes modern connotations that are perhaps too generous regardless of the adjective before it. I will not be translating the term, and leaving it as *pilegesh* throughout. *Pilegesh* in the text could be booty from conquest, essentially enslaved, but also have varying levels of status and power in royal households. It is clear this is not the latter instance in our text. The relationship between husband and wife switches terms to one of maidservant and master (19:19). Most often, regardless of status and power, it involves sexual enslavement. Esther Brownsmith notes that every time *pilegesh* appears in the Bible, “it invariably has one of two contexts. Either it distinguishes secondary wives from primary wives, usually for the purpose of children’s inheritance, or it emphasizes the sexual availability of the *pilegesh*.” *Gendered Violence in Biblical Narrative: The Devouring Metaphor* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 48.

⁸ Esther Brownsmith, “‘Call Me By Your Name’: Critical Fabulation and the Woman of Judges 19,” *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies* 4, no. 2 (2022): 20. Andrew Hock-Soon Ng, “Revisiting Judges 19: A Gothic Perspective,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32, no. 2 (2007): 199-215.



body demonstrates, dictates, and perpetuates potentially paradoxical theological claims and ideas. Leaking out beyond the pages and potential original purposes, the abjection also infects our self, and the reinscribing of her damned state may be perpetuated in the scholarly work that beholds her. While there are layers of literature and diaspora, interpreters are also engulfed as we similarly act to suppress her existence. Beginning with a more in-depth discussion on how to understand abjection, as will be applied in this article, a summarized version of Judges 19 will also be provided. Moving layer-by-layer, from the text to symbolic, to selves and self, the unnamed, dismembered *pilegash*'s abjection will be re-membered in all her impossibility.⁹

Defining Abjection

The notion of abjection was introduced in 1920s France by philosopher Georges Bataille in *Documents*, but took full form in “Abjection and Miserable Forms” in 1934, as he witnessed Hitler’s rise to power.¹⁰ For Bataille, abjection is oppression imposed upon specific kinds of bodies, now the abject—and also creates the “sovereign,” even inciting a sense of security in distinction.¹¹ However, most who work with abjection criticism found their way through Julia Kristeva’s work in her essay

⁹ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008); *Lose Your Mother*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007). The word “re-membered” is from Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts,” which is of itself an act of redress to the fungibility of the Black enslaved bodies she wrote on in *Lose Your Mother*, a task she calls “impossible.” More will be added on this at the end of the article.

¹⁰ See Sylvère Lotringer “The Politics of Abjection,” in *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure & Violence*, eds. Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 33-39, for a more detailed overview of Georges Bataille’s work.

¹¹ As summarized by Hennefeld and Sammond, “Introduction,” 20. “For any oppressive ruling class to understand itself as justly sovereign, it must find its abject Other among the masses of the oppressed, and thereby demarcate the filth and decay from which it is inherently different (yet to which it is necessarily related), through means that are seemingly benign but manifestly cruel...it becomes a graphic inscription of the relations of power on the social landscape.”

entitled *The Powers of Horror*. Kristeva sought to know the origins of abjection, shifting into the psychoanalytical. Starting with the infantile, Kristeva made sense of the abject first via the mundane, quotidian experiences of disgust that bodies must both produce and expel, those being the abject experiences of feces, vomit, fluids, menstruation, pregnancy, etc. Purging and cleansing oneself, an act of abjection, of the “ick” from the orifices, separates selves from these threatening secretions, allowing for catharsis and restoration.¹² These borders and boundaries are seen as foundational and formational, remaining in bodies that continue to negotiate social identities and need the abject and acts of abjection to be a sovereign ego. The abject “comes to symbolize all the reviled forms of difference by which meaning and identity are delineated in language and culture.”¹³

Kristeva went further, however, in exploring what she purported was the “primary abject,” that being the maternal, the mother. In becoming a self and subject, one must expel from the mother. Therefore, “all abjections are re-enactments of this primary matricide.”¹⁴ The mother is the one made abject, cast off, and, in her work, does not have a voice and is a “sight/site of psychosocial disgust.” Imogen Tyler’s work on abjection rightly critiques this point of Kristeva’s work as it “not only reiterates the taboo on maternal subjectivity but also legitimates the abjection of maternal subjects.”¹⁵ While many have seen Kristeva’s work as laudable, the risk is that this becomes “another site in which a narrative of acceptable violence is endlessly rehearsed until we find ourselves not only colluding with,

¹² Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, 27-8; Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1-5.

¹³ Henefeld and Sammond, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 38; C.f. Tyler, “Against Abjection,” 81.

¹⁵ Note the matricidal aspect in regard to Judges 19. If Scholz is correct that a *pilegish*’s primary role is to have children and our text does not mention any, is her abjection at the hands of her “master” in part because of her failure to reproduce?



but more fundamentally believing in, our own abjection.”¹⁶ Many theorists have offered correction, such as Gayatri Spivak, Anne McClintock, and Judith Butler,¹⁷ primarily as Kristeva’s personal and political life have only provided further evidence that her theory of abjection was not curated to resist and refuse that which harms, but to normalize these behaviors instead.¹⁸ This insight is needed as a correction to recognize abjection and its theory as something that does not have to be universal but can help explain, most often, hegemonic

¹⁶ Imogen Tyler, “Against Abjection,” *Feminist Theory* 10, no. 1 (2009), 87. Tyler adds, “for whilst Kristeva’s account of abjection is compelling (at an explanatory level) what is completely absent from her account is any discussion of what it might mean to be that maternal abject, to be the one who repeatedly finds themselves the object of the other’s violent objectifying disgust... the distinction between the maternal as abstract concept and the maternal as lived and embodied by insisting that we take theory at its word.” “Against Abjection,” 95.

¹⁷ Gayatri Spivak, “Extreme Eurocentrism,” *Lusitania* 1 no.4: 55-60. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Tyler notes that “Spivak’s resistance is incisive; she doesn’t reject abjection as an explanatory concept, but rather insists on understanding it as a European theory which reproduces the imperial axis of European subjectivity.” “Against Abjection,” 34. Spivak writes, “Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you?” 62. See continued comments for more.

¹⁸ From Julie James, “Refusing Abjection: Transphobia and Trans Youth Survivance,” in *Feminist Theory* 22, no. 1 (2021). “Kristeva is not giving voice to the abject or abjected people, practices and objects, as the abject does not speak. That is, through abjection, those deemed abject are silenced; they are muted. Instead, we are hearing the colonizing subject’s response to a perceived threat to their subjectivity and their subsequent attempts to deal with this threat. This ultimately gives voice to a process that involves fear, loss of humanity and repeated violence as abjection involves a denial of existence through various forms of ‘casting out’ through retreat from horror, through purification and through sublimation...Kristeva is offering a reflection of deeply problematic, dehumanizing, violent and repeated social processes... Julia Kristeva has been found to evoke negative stereotypes of racialized populations in her work and personal statements, to assert political stances in favor of assimilation to French hegemonic culture and to hide this Eurocentrism under claims that her theorizing is universally applicable. These themes are repeated in Kristeva’s theory of abjection where, instead of offering a theory about the emergence of subjectivity and social processes that are universally applicable, she renders visible and gives voice to the violent emergence of the colonizing subject as well as how this violence is repeated to defend and maintain this subjectivity. The harm in not understanding this contextualization is the potential replication of this violence.” “Refusing Abjection,” 113. See also Hanan Ibrahim, “Foreigners to Kristeva: Refashioning Orientalism and the Limits of Love,” in *SAGE Open* 8, no. 2 (2018).

insecurities and behaviors.¹⁹ These theories should and must be historically grounded, especially when used in other disciplines. Tyler notes, in more contextualized reckonings of this theory, that “understanding abjection as a regulatory norm allows us to examine the ways in which abjection is invoked or employed in the service of other norms and ideals, be they norms of gender, social class, citizenship, national belonging.”²⁰

What is also important is how abjection can become internalized by those who have been abjectified. Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* explores the crushing ways colonialism makes people into things and, in turn, become things unto themselves. And yet, Fanon and others have found a sort of power in this abjection because the world that abjectifies them is not one they should desire to inhabit as subject.²¹ However, the difficulty of the tension found in the abject’s muscles is that holding the violence the sovereign inflicts can release both internally and externally.²² Aspects of mimicry and ambivalence within these liminal positions are fluid and disruptive. The push and

¹⁹ James (“Refusing Abjection,” 114) writes: “...through the process of abjection, a person seeks to separate or sever their relationship or known connection to something or someone through casting these beings or entities as abject. It is perhaps unsurprising to think that a colonizing subjectivity would emerge and be maintained in this way—through severing interconnections and repeatedly casting individuals, social practices and entities as filthy, erotic or sublime—as ultimately nonhuman. This may offer insights into the mechanisms of the violence of colonialism, past and present, given that the colonizing subject emerges and is maintained through a violent abjection of their origins – of their interconnections, of their material existence, of their positive connection to the maternal and perhaps of their own humanity.” Anne McClintock’s work in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), also notes that this concept is imperialist, but it may help to understand imperialism from the inside. However, as to note for discussions in this article, we must also “articulate the difference between the compulsory social abjection of minoritized others and right-wing opportunistic appropriations of rhetorics of marginalization.” Hennefeld and Sammond, “Introduction,” 4.

²⁰ Tyler, *Revoluting Subjects*, 36.

²¹ “Now the problem is to lay hold of this violence which is changing direction.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 57.

²² For an account on abjection and fear of the foreign rhetoric citing the violent *banlieues* of France, see Alain Badiou, *Polemics* (New York: Verso Books, 2006): 114.



pull of rejection and desire simultaneously reside in the abject, the subject, and those carrying out acts of abjection. Because of these asymmetrical power dynamics, abjection often creates a vicious cycle of violence.

For Kristeva, the use of abjection as a concept made it possible to analyze individual, social, and textual bodies, as she does in *Powers of Horror*. Although this brief introduction has laid bare many cautions of her work, the text of Judges 19 will wholly agree with the imperative of abjection as an interpretive framework. Ultimately, abjection is boundary work—alongside the recognition that boundaries are not as fixed or rigid as even acts of abjection attempt to solidify, which, of course, perpetuates the anxiety and fear that undergirds exclusion.²³ Recognizing that the term is one understood best as the gaze of an oppressive power should allow for interrogation of the position, but not necessarily an acceptance.²⁴ Questioning who gets to dictate what defines order, and thus, who gets to be subject, must be part of this analysis. The violence that comes with maintaining a kind of normativity is too often, but should not be, normalized. Mapping out *how* and *why* bodies are distinguished as Other and made to be abject can be important in challenging and preventing the continuation of such. As will be demonstrated with the *pilegesh*'s body in Judges 19, this mapping of perspectives will show (1) how abjection occurs in the *text* itself literally against her, (2) how her body is made symbolic to communicate a national crisis in diaspora by *authorship*, and (3) how scholars like *myself* may continue the cycle of abjection in continued

²³ Robert Phillips, "Abjection," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2 (2014): 19-21.

²⁴ Others have disagreed with this point. David Halperin believes that welcoming this abjection of non-normative or acceptable behaviors may be a way to reclaim one's own subjectivity and gain control. *What Do Gay Men Want?* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007). See also Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2010). Once again, as mentioned above regarding Fanon's work, the question becomes *why* should we want that world? This is an extremely valid question.

use of her—and why. Before entering into each of these layers of abjection, the story in Judges 19, in which her abjection is made plain and simultaneously made invisible, will be summarized.

Abjection and Judges 19

A Chapter Summary

Judges 19 opens with a *pilegesh*²⁵ who *zonahs* and leaves her husband, a Levite in Ephraim, for her father's house in Bethlehem (19:1-2).²⁶ The Levite goes to speak to her heart,²⁷ to bring her back from her father's

²⁵ See footnote 6.

²⁶ *Zonah* is normally translated in modern English contexts as “playing the whore,” or “unfaithful,” usually applied to prostitution, or in cultic cases, idolatry. According to the law in Deuteronomy 22, this infidelity should be punished. Is she waiting to be stoned at the door of her father's house? What are readers to think, then, when the father-in-law is not seen in the text to have punished her? Also of mention here that the terminology of *zonah* does not simply entail unfaithfulness in that she may have had sexual relations with another person. Cheryl Exum's work mentions that if she was to leave her spouse in a patriarchal society, that is seen as unfaithful: “a woman who asserts her sexual autonomy by leaving her husband—and whether or not she remains with him is a sexual issue—is guilty of sexual misconduct.” *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 179. LXX translations complicate matters in that she leaves because she is angry with the Levite, not because she is “unfaithful.” Redaction criticism demonstrates that the term could have had some meaning in regard to the LXX more blatantly, but the use of the term here, in general, “encourages readers to objectify the woman from the start,” making her more erotic and thus, our willingness to sacrifice the imperfect woman. Brownsmith, *Gendered Violence*, 58-9. Reviewers asked, “was he really her husband?” He was, for a while in title her husband—and one could argue that when his title changes to “master” in 19:26, and she is called a maidservant as aforementioned in 19:19, he is acting as such no longer, but given the societal hierarchies, they may be one in the same. *Pilegesh* would also infer sexual enslavement; some have even debated if the *pilegesh* is a foreign female captive (Deuteronomy 21:10-14). In this instance, “wife” is a benevolent term that can be used to mask and hide the abuses inherent in this status.

²⁷ The Levite waits four months to go to speak to his *pilegesh*'s heart, which could be due to the *zonah*-ing, in that he waited to see if she would be visibly pregnant. Whenever this occurs in a text, Susanne Scholz, mentions that the “situation is wrong, difficult, or danger is in the air,” In “What ‘Really’ Happened to Dinah, A Feminist Analysis of Genesis 34,” *lectio difficilior* 2 (2001). It is not lost on me the parallels in Genesis to these narratives as well as 1 and 2 Samuel.



house in Ephraim (19:3).²⁸ After five days of a power struggle involving hospitality between the father and the Levite, the Levite seems to win out, taking his *pilegesh* with him (19:4-10). After a side comment about not staying in a town where there are no Israelites, although night is coming quickly and Jebus is available (19:11-12), they arrive in Gibeah of Benjamin, where they wait too long for hospitality until a migrant living in Gibeah offers his home (19:13-21). Wicked men of Gibeah ask *to know* the Levite (19:22), which is responded to by an offering of not only the host's virginal daughter but also the Levite's *pilegesh* (19:23-24).²⁹ One of the two men inside the house seizes the *pilegesh* and sends her out to the wicked men, who abuse her throughout the night, and at daybreak, her hands are seen resting on the threshold of the door (19:25-26). The Levite, with imperative force, tells the *pilegesh* to get up, and when she does not, he hoists her onto his donkey, brings her to his home, and dismembers her into twelve pieces, which are subsequently sent to the twelve tribes of Israel (19:27-30). The message he is said to send with and through her body is that "such a thing" has not happened since coming out of Egypt (19:30). The Levite, before he disappears entirely from the narrative (20:4-7), is not to blame with his version of the story. The Levite's version of the story moves "all Israel" into civil war (Judg. 20), mass rape (Judg. 21), and everyone back where

²⁸ The only other time this particular phrase occurs is in Deuteronomy 22, as noted by Brownsmith, "where it refers to a man who receives monetary compensation after a man slanders or rapes his daughter." This gives us more of a hint as to her treatment, but also makes it clear that the father is the wronged party. *Gendered Violence*, 50.

²⁹ One goes back and forth as to whether or not this was appropriate, given that the host should not presume he has any right over his guest's property, see Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme in "Invitation to Murder: Hospitality and Violence in the Hebrew Bible," *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology* 73:1; and "Sex, Violence, and State Formation in Judges 19-21," *The Bible and Hellenism: Greek Influence on Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, eds, Thomas L. Thompson and Philippe Wajdenbaum (Durham: Acumen, 2014). However, Brownsmith pointed out that in Judges 19:19, the Levite calls her "your slave girl" to the host, in essence, potentially transferring ownership. *Gendered Violence*, 52.

they are said to belong (21:24).³⁰ The narrative frame reminds readers that there was no king, and “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (21:25).³¹

(1) *Text Layer*

First and foremost, how and why abjection occurs in the text and to the *pilegish* as it is literally depicted is vital for a foundation demonstrating potential additional layers of abjection. That this text depicts corporeal violence is to state the obvious. Not only are there threats of violence both implicit and explicit, but the threats towards multiple bodies devolve into actual violence towards the singular body of the *pilegish*. The multiple threats the Levite receives concerning him and his possessions create a great mirroring and overreaction that even extends into the following chapters, again, towards female bodies noted to be virgins, future wives, or daughters of fathers and brothers (21:7, 22). The text highlights that to be *pilegish* is to be abject by nature and, because of such, not only disposable but also desirable as property that helps define or even elevate the status of their enslaver.³²

³⁰ Of course, where people “belong” was something enforced upon the bodies of the women of Jabesh-Gilead and Shiloh; so the verse itself is sanitizing. The notion of things seemingly “going back to normal” is anesthetizing.

³¹ “Should one infer from this that Judges 19–21 does not in fact represent what would have been considered normative behavior?” 63. T.M. Lemos, *Violence and Personhood in Ancient Israel and Comparative Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³² This also reminds of abjection in both historical and modern-day conversations of the “unrapeable,” as Helen Paynter writes: “This is not to say that these women are untouchable, but that in certain portions of the popular imagination, sexual assault of these women does not constitute ‘rape,’ and therefore, the women are ‘fair game.’” *Telling Terror in Judges 19: Rape and Reparation for the Levite’s Wife* (London: Routledge, 2020), 63. Sex workers, enslaved Black women and even thereafter, Black women, migrant women in many Western countries, have often been demarcated as such, especially in being stereotyped as hypersexual. The *pilegish*’s first act of “deviancy” may contribute to this stereotyping as well. *Gendered Violence*, 58.



Judges 19 begins with the *pilegesh* as a subject, her action of *zonah*, and her movement from Ephraim to Bethlehem.³³ Although this action is met with what could be understood as a loving gesture to woo his wife back to him, the Levite makes it abundantly clear in every other narrative glimpse that she has been abject from the start—or, at the bare minimum, her subject action, a refusal or resistance of her abject status, was a transgression that necessitated such abjection by the Levite to reinstate norms of power and agency.

Although there are some similarities to this text, these similarities happen in metaphoric violence against metaphoric women, such as in Ezekiel 16, which uses the same language of *zonah* alongside clear female agency. T.M. Lemos notes that contrary to those who argue this behavior was not normative, in part, because the stories are *stories*, “these actions might relate to physical violence carried out by Israelite husbands against their wives in more quotidian circumstances, as such behavior could be an indicator of whether or not personhood was accorded to wives.”³⁴ The normative is that the *pilegesh* would remain faithful, regardless of treatment by “her master” (19:26). Mistreatment can certainly be read into the text in regards to asking why the *pilegesh* left the Levite, and perhaps why her father feels the need to keep the Levite drunk and happy for a long period of time with seeming resistance to their departure. Unfortunately, what occurs in verses 1-

³³ Elisa Uusimäki, “An Intersectional Perspective on Female Mobility in the Hebrew Bible,” *Vetus Testamentum* 72 (2022): 4-5. “The story opens up with a bold move, as the woman’s wish to leave her master’s house leads to a courageous act enabled by her family network; she has a childhood home to which she can return. Yet her father fails her, and she must follow her master back ‘home.’ Although the outcome is appalling, the author implies that the woman could move between her childhood home and the house of her master, albeit temporarily and depending on the opinions of the men who dictate her destiny. In fact, the text begs the question of whether the woman’s own initiative to move outside her immediate home contributes to the horrific outcome; the same question of why evil things happen to women who move alone can be addressed in regard to Dinah, who sets out to meet other girls and is raped (Gen 34:1-2),” 10. This is, of course, a blaming-the-victim logic in the text that is part and parcel of such a rape culture.

³⁴ Lemos, *Violence and Personhood*, 83-4.

4 seems to imply the Levite's powerlessness, most specifically, being "seized" by the father-in-law in verse 4, is thus mirrored by the Levite himself towards the *pilegesh* in verse 29.³⁵ Lemos continues, "...masculinity and domination are tied together, as are domination and violence, and violence and personhood. It is no wonder, then, that the personhood of women in ancient Israel was so unstable."³⁶ She is only a person as defined by her male characters in the text.³⁷ Although it may be argued that the Levite has not mistreated her until the bitter end, her low status is reinforced as they leave her father's house; Isabelle Hamley notes that she is regarded "below even animals, as the Levite takes his donkeys first and the *pilegesh* second in Judg. 19:10-12."³⁸ She is already being punished for her misdeeds of assuming personhood, subordination restored.³⁹

When the Levite is threatened again in verse 22 with an action that would place him in a submissive position, the *pilegesh* is sent as a substitute, and the men seem to be satisfied with shaming the Levite through his "property." After multiple perpetrators rape her until the morning (v. 25) and does not respond to the Levite's imperatives (v. 28), readers are left to fill the gap as to whether the men of Gibeah murdered her. While this is an important debate the LXX quickly cleans up, it is essential to note that from the Levite's perspective, *his* possession has just been possessed by others. With little to no regard for the *pilegesh* as human, her body is used to make multiple statements

³⁵ Brownsmith, *Gendered Violence*, 63-64.

³⁶ Lemos, *Violence and Personhood*, 95.

³⁷ Brownsmith, *Gendered Violence*, 46-47.

³⁸ Hamley, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: An Irigaryan Reading and Victimization in Judges 19-21* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 115.

³⁹ This is exactly how misogyny works, the policing branch of the patriarchy. Kate Manne's *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Interestingly, Manne argues against humanist models of understanding the question of "are women human?" But Manne does recognize that women, although seen as human in her view by even those who enact violence against them, are only allowed to "be" in specific ways that are not equal to how men are able to "be." While they are human, they are not free.



for himself as a counterreaction to male insecurity. If she was unable to be controlled in her life, the Levite ensured she would stay controlled and exclusively his through her death.⁴⁰

Death and the dead body are seen as the ultimate or “utmost” of abjection.⁴¹ The Levite is most concerned with his mastery and less so with purity; but dismembering her can be seen as a form of “purging” in that it “gives expression to a continual need to secure a narcissistic hygienic fantasy of a clean, whole and proper self through the performative enactment of self/other and self/object distinctions.”⁴² Her body is used as a means to send a message, one she does not get to dictate. As she controls her mobility at the beginning of the passage, the Levite controls her mobility at every point thereafter. In his final performance of abjection, she is offered to everyone and no one simultaneously (v. 29). Like a child after someone has used his plaything, he no longer wants her anyhow—she is dirty and needs to be cast off. Her body dispersed reaffirms the Levite’s dominance over the spaces she is sent to, reclaiming all of which he considered to have been threatened. The message that he sends with her body makes clear that he is not concerned with her abuse or death or the inter-tribal war;⁴³ rather, he is most concerned with the threat to his dominance. He tells “all Israel” that the wicked men of Gibeah “meant to kill me” and resolves—potentially falsely—the question of who actually killed the *pilegish* as to the “abomination” that will justify the herem they

⁴⁰ Diandra Chretien Erickson, “Judges,” *Postcolonial Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. Hemchand Gossai (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 137. “This statement of dominance from the men of Gibeah ignites a counterreaction from the Levite that inverts the distribution of power between him and the concubine that was initiated at the beginning of the narrative [by the *pilegish*]; the Levite is now the dominator and the concubine is subjugated.”

⁴¹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 4.

⁴² Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, 27-8.

⁴³ Erickson writes that “the Israelites illustrate a strong level of repulsion over the *pilegish*’s raped and murdered body that ignites a civil war.” “Judges,” 138. However, is it the raped and murdered body that brings repulsion, or the threat to the masculine? More continued on this “message.”

have already gathered to enact (Judg 21:5-6).⁴⁴ The Levite's catharsis is complete, and everything regarding the proper placement of power will return to normal.

From the beginning, the very status of *pilegesh* is one, at least, of object—which is almost immediately contested as she acts as subject. The two male figures in her life, the Levite and her father, have their own power struggle as guest and host, further threatening the stability of the Levite's seeming dominance in both title and even ownership of a *pilegesh*. In yet another hospitality situation, the Levite feels the need to assure the old man that he has more than enough provisions (v. 19); the *pilegesh's* body is raped as a way to assault the Levite. As if she was not fungible enough, the violence enacted towards her subjugated body by chopping her to the bone removes her personhood. And yet, does she have a personhood to lose in this structure? She is punished for acting as if she does. Her body marks the boundaries of the Levite's power, which have been drawn afresh on her flesh and mobilized. The message is clear: do not subvert the system or the status quo.

This explanation of Judges 19 is alone sufficient to reckon with in conceptualizing abjection. Yet, there are still vital pieces of historical analysis that add grit under the surface of the text, leaving more to feel. The next layer attends to the authors in their setting as their own experiences leave residue on meaning that may shift and shape the abject body of the *pilegesh* into different, thick forms of matter or mattering. Attending to this layer is a way to view the text from those who may define themselves as abject instead of remaining on this layer, which privileges the perspective of the sovereign.

⁴⁴ For more on the faulty trial that takes place in Judges 20, see Sarah Schwartz, "Law and Order in Judges 19-21," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 35 (2021): 145.



(2) *Author Layer*

Dating for the book of Judges and this specific chapter are contested as some advocate for types of authorship in either the Deuteronomistic or the Priestly schools.⁴⁵ However, both arguably would have to recognize the overlaps of their experiences, which could include the literal and/or transgenerational transmission of war and exile. Perhaps multiple migrations were personally undertaken, and living under the thumb of imperialist rule means that regardless of ideological difference between the two schools, there is significant upheaval. Erickson notes that the book of Judges generally depicts “perpetual crises of identity” as “embedded within the representations of this turbulent and unstable period.”⁴⁶ That there was a need to figure out who “Israel” was and is given their new circumstances of foreign rule in their purported homeland is an understatement. Erickson highlights that “the unstable and ambiguous characterizations of various figures in the book are directly influenced by the scribes’ experiences of colonization.”⁴⁷ While much of the book has to do with the threat to their identity from foreign influences and the need to stabilize their own as a “history,” which in the cycle often means to abject the Other via violent means, their experiences of internal strife in these latter chapters echo Fanon’s muscular tension. For a group of people experiencing limitations on their freedom, feeling their own abjection, the release of the abuse they experience by those with power over them towards those

⁴⁵ Many who advocate for the Dtr period do so due to its inclusion in the “Deuteronomistic History,” those being Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. The most thorough argument for dating this passage is in favor of a Persian, Priestly period authorship, see Cynthia Edenberg, *Dismembering the Whole: Composition and Purpose of Judges 19-21* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016).

⁴⁶ Erickson, “Judges,” 121.

⁴⁷ Erickson, 123.

with either similar (horizontal) or less power than they is a coping mechanism—ironically and unfortunately an unfulfilling catharsis.⁴⁸

The authors and even receivers of these texts could identify with the abject character(s), both as a symbol and metaphor for their experience of war (multiple perpetrator rape) and exile (dismemberment and diaspora). As the text begins with ambiguity surrounding the *pilegesh zonah*-ing, moving from place to place before death at the hands of their “spouse,” her body may be acting out or performing a communal trauma of war and diaspora that they would still be feeling the consequences of in reception. That the exilic experience was understood as encapsulated in the abjection experienced by the *pilegesh* in Judges 19 is echoed in the intertext of Amos 7:17, as almost every verb depicted in this prophecy is found lived:

Therefore, this is what Adonai says: ‘Your wife will be a *zonah* (Judg. 19:2) in the city, and your sons and daughter will fall (Judg. 19:26) and the land will be divided (Judg 19:29),⁴⁹ and you will die in an unclean land (Judg. 19:29-30; 20:6), and Israel will most definitely go into exile away from its land.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Erickson, 124. “Due to colonial mimicry and the simultaneous attraction and repulsion that create ambivalence, the oppressed group resides in a dissonant space where they simultaneously perpetuate and reject imperialism.”

⁴⁹ The verb in Judg. 19:29 is *natach*, whereas in Amos 7:17 it is *chalaq*. In my own work, I also compare this text with Hosea.

⁵⁰ Of note here is what is “supposed” to happen when an abomination is committed: “The proper way to deal with abominations, such as the ones listed in Leviticus 18 and 20, is to remove those who commit them,” 184. Brian Rainey, *Religion, Ethnicity, and Xenophobia in the Bible: A Theoretical, Exegetical, and Theological Survey* (New York: Routledge, 2019). See further commentary on this below.



Metaphors and symbols of the woman's body as the social body are frequent in the Hebrew Bible.⁵¹ Given their experiences of abjection, emotions surrounding gender constructions in hegemonic power structures may be more weighty than the trope of city as female; once again, Lemos, in reading Ezekiel and Daniel through the lens of postcolonial theories of gender, reckons with how "...the Israelite exiles' lowered social status and loss of masculine privilege" occurred in the experience of exile, and that "this loss is so pronounced in the mind of the prophet that...the Israelites have in fact become a woman."⁵² She continues: "To be conquered, then, was to be vulnerable and weak, and to be weak was to become a 'woman.'"⁵³ The absolute abjection of the woman signals to them, similarly as Lemos sees in Ezekiel, "...his victimhood in the most misogynistic and violent of terms, but it is at base a self-hatred he is expressing. He is like a battered wife who writes an account from the perspective of her husband, telling us, the reader, how much she deserves to be beaten."⁵⁴ Self-blame is a powerful coping mechanism amid significant loss, restoring a semblance of control in the lack of it.⁵⁵ However, where Ezekiel's self-blame and identification with the *zonah* character in chapters 16 and 23 leave no room for ambiguity, Judges 19 is full of it. What kind of *zonah* did she enact? Does it make a difference?⁵⁶ Do the abject *pilegish* actually believe they are to blame or deserving of this

⁵¹ Language taken from Alice Keefe's work, *A Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

⁵² T.M. Lemos, "They Have Become Women': Judean Diaspora and Postcolonial Theories of Gender and Migration," *Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion: Essays in Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Saul Olyan (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 102.

⁵³ Lemos, "The Emasculation of Exile: Hypermasculinity and Feminization in the Book of Ezekiel," *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, eds. Brad Kelle, Frank Ritzel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 389.

⁵⁴ Lemos, "They Have Become Women," 98.

⁵⁵ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 53-54.

⁵⁶ On this note, Hamley asks readers "would she be less of a victim if she had been promiscuous?" *Unspeakable*, 139.

fate? In horrifyingly performing this narrative act, representing themselves both by metaphor and symbolization in the *pilegesh's* body, have they created a parody of the familiar narrative to break down these norms, or at the very least, expose them for the horror they are? This narrative could be taking their abjection into their own hands, writing their own story. Paradoxically, as both Judges 19 and the following chapters attempt to secure their norms and identity through acts of violent abjection against women, the *pilegesh* in being unmade and remade is still yet the boundary and border for defining the subject. In her disembodiment, she is Israel embodied.⁵⁷

Kristeva, in her work on abjection, writes of the “deject” as an exile: “The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), *situates* (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing.”⁵⁸ The *pilegesh* acts outside of the norms to begin with by acting with agency when her status should negate the ability to do so. She places herself in her father’s house, separates herself from the Levite, and strays

⁵⁷ For a modern example, Tyler talks about a migrant woman in the UK, Sonia: “Sonia’s story illustrates the paradox of abjection made manifest on the scale of both the individual body and the body politic. Sonia has been constituted as ‘illegal’, somebody with no right to reside or remain in Britain. She cannot escape Britain, she tried and failed, but she is also deprived of access to the resources which human beings require to make a livable life within the state. Sonia is excluded from British citizenship, its rights and protections, but, paradoxically, remains under the direct and suffocating control of the state; her everyday life is saturated with state power. Indeed, her attempts both to leave and to remain have been mobilized by state actors, immigration judges and the news media, as a deterrent to others. She has been made ‘an example’, first when she attempted to leave Britain, and secondly when she attempted to politicize her struggle to stay by enlisting the support of activists and humanitarian campaigners. With no rights of residency and no rights of citizenship, she now exists in an unlivable mode of statelessness with her stateless children. When we apply this account of abjection to the nation-state, we can see how, as a ‘national abject’, the abject ‘other’ of citizenship, Sonia has come, despite her best efforts and many years of struggle, to embody the inner constitutive boundary of Britain. If we are, as Kristeva suggested, our own abjects, then Sonia is also, paradoxically, as British as it is possible to be. Sonia embodies British citizenship.” *Revolted Subjects*, 68-69.

⁵⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 8.



through *zonah*.⁵⁹ Kristeva remarks that the deject is not interested in *who* they are but *where* they are: “For the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never one, nor homogeneous, nor totalizable, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic.”⁶⁰ Given that the *pilegash* is divided into many places and pieces, one could argue that the authors of this text, if identifying with her person, see themselves as non-person in their exilic experience.

Could her body, as depicted, be seen as a site of contestation, of a different epistemology? If she *zonah*-ed because she found something better, regardless of whether or not the Levite was abusive, she remains tethered to her “master” even in her attempt to leave: “The more he strays, the more he is saved.”⁶¹ What could this mean in relation to YHWH? While we cannot and should not speak on behalf of her, maybe the emphasis on her enslavement from the beginning of the passage betrays what she was thinking in *zonah*-ing. Perhaps the theological claim is in defense of *zonah*, although the outcome remained unchangeable.

Tyler gives two explicit examples of how the abject in the United Kingdom act out their abjection as a damning protest: Abas Amini in 2003 and the women at Yarl Wood Immigration Centre in 2008. Amini, facing potential deportation after the Home Office ruled against his case, sewed his eyes, ears, and lips shut. This grotesque violation of his own body was to depict the everyday violence he lived due to xenophobia. Tyler remarks, “This protest was an expression of being made abject and a refusal of its mummifying effects. At the height of asylum invasion hysteria, Amini insisted that his face was a true face

⁵⁹ Although the LXX and MT differ in verse 3, in that the MT says “she brought him” to her father’s house.

⁶⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 8.

⁶¹ Kristeva, 8.

of Britain.”⁶² Many remarked that in making oneself unspeaking, he had ironically made his voice heard. Similarly, the mothers of Yarl Wood, in decrying not only separation from their children in these centers but also their subsequent deportations, took their clothes off and sat naked to depict how they felt they were being treated and seen as “animals.” “Through their impersonation of bare life the Yarl’s Wood protesters signal their refusal of their (and their children’s) designation as disposable human waste.”⁶³ If one connects these two protests of those abject in making themselves visibly abject to that of Judges 19, the normalized invisibility of the *pilegish* so bluntly fragmented and dispersed is quite a symbolic protest.

And yet, if one is reminded of the struggle that the scribal male elite may feel in their abjection, *what about the actual Others in their midst?* In comparison, the abject in the examples above laid claim to their own bodies, not another’s. As the scribal male elite feels threatened by their abjection, their metaphor may very well still be the reality for the subordinate amongst them, a continued, multiplicative abjection so they may feel “man enough.”⁶⁴ While the symbolic metaphor of the *pilegish* may be empowering to some, it may also contribute to the

⁶² Tyler, *Revolting Subjects*, 101.

⁶³ Tyler, 117. “Bare Life” is a concept taken from Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁶⁴ Trickle-down abjection? Lemos also discusses this complexity in “They Have Become Women,” and while Fanon is instrumental, he is also not without his rightful critics. Specifically, from Nira Yuval-Davis’ *Gender & Nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 55. When feminization and disempowerment are equated, as Fanon does, then liberation is equated “with machoism—and it is in this conjecture that paradoxically the ‘liberated’ woman [in movements of decolonization] can become disempowered.” This legitimizes “the secondary position of women in these national collectivities.” This too in Hennefeld and Sammond’s discussion on abjection today, “many people normally associated with the dominant culture are increasingly claiming an abject status in order to adopt, ironize, and undermine the markers of marginalization by which damaging social and power hierarchies have traditionally been administered and enforced.” “Introduction,” 2. Important to note that the source of violence is still located in the colonizing powers that be. Mieke Bal sees the Levite as a judge: “We must judge such judgement and justice and expose its being anchored in power.” *Death and Dissymmetry*, 245.



continued scapegoating and even erasure of Other abject bodies. Are real *pilegesh* included in the communal metaphor? Does understanding the *pilegesh* as a metaphor add to the reality of her literary status as collateral damage, even furthering her transformation into non-being? As the book of Judges propagandistically ends by advocating for kingship as a correction to these behaviors of repulsive and fetishistic violence, the question must be raised as to whether the hope is to simply (re)gain power rather than transform those relations, even as the parody plays out. While some remark on how Judges 20-21 depicts the mass rape as “reconciliatory” and “unifying,” even establishing a “new order,”⁶⁵ the metaphor may have relegated the social body of Israel as spread into diaspora existence and never to be brought back “whole” a massive failure. Her and their abjection continues—this “new order” does not make for liberation. Andrew Hock-Soon Ng says of this passage, “the biblical story should be read against the status quo of androcentric hierarchies, as a tale that develops resistance in the readers to such societal habits and customs.”⁶⁶ If power is not transformed, it is oppressively perpetuated. Who gets to be sovereign, subject?

Although peeling back layers of perspective has only complicated the text rather than simplifying, the *pilegesh*'s abjection has also amplified. On a literal level, it seemed to be clear that her abjection was inevitable, if not necessary, from the perspective of the powerful. On this diasporic level, her abjection is a protest of mistreatment from those who perceive themselves as abject, albeit still missing those with less power among the male elite. Cheryl Exum famously coined what happens to the *pilegesh* in being denied subjectivity from the narrator

⁶⁵ Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 194.

⁶⁶ Hock-Soon Ng, “Revisiting Judges 19: A Gothic Perspective,” 199-215. Erickson also writes: “what is spoken by the Canaanite enemy in Judges 5 [Sisera’s mother] is acted out by the Israelites in Judges 21.” “Judges,” 139. This is colonial mimicry.

as being “raped by the pen.”⁶⁷ Helen Paynter builds upon this meaning to depict how not only may (or may not) our narrator be at fault,

“But there is another pen – or rather, a thousand more pens – by which [the *pilegesh*] can be raped and has been raped. These are the pens of the traditional commentators who have, among them, committed every one of the sins that Exum has outlined. If rape is a denial of subjectivity, then [the *pilegesh*] has indeed been raped. She has been ignored, marginalised, and victim-shamed. Her character has been smeared. She has been viewed as the cause of trouble; her suffering has been celebrated as the will of God.”⁶⁸

This article will not allow more of these abjections to be placed upon the *pilegesh*, more so than it already has. However, the statements by both Exum and Paynter do invoke a question less often asked by scholars: how do we, even unwittingly, perpetuate her abjection in further scholarship?

(3) *Self Layer*

Self-reflexivity is an integral part of scholarship regardless of one’s field of research. This posture allows researchers to avoid the pitfalls of assuming one is objective in their work, asking if something may be missed or unacknowledged because of how one’s own experiences, values, and belief systems may affect even the questions one uses to

⁶⁷ Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 170.

⁶⁸ Helen Paynter, *Telling Terror in Judges 19: Rape and Reparation for the Levite’s Wife* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 72. Paynter named the *pilegesh* “Beli-Fachad,” as a way to honor her subjectivity. I will discuss below why I do not name her, but I do appreciate the naming practices.



interrogate the text.⁶⁹ Perhaps the lack of this recognition for many is because a stance of humility due to their positionality was never a thought to begin with, or may be threatening to themselves. However, considering positionalities our bodies inhabit in juxtaposition to those we “study,” even if these subjects/objects/abjects are long dead and most likely fictional,⁷⁰ is vital to a fuller picture, even as the path is “full of thorns.”⁷¹ These thorns—what I argue are not necessarily differences but particularly, the ways in which we are implicated—and the impossibility of avoiding them are what we must finally attend to as our scholarship threatens to use and consume texts and those therein without another thought.

As the previous section discussed the thin line between identifying oneself as the abject and further perpetuating her abjection, the balancing act repeats itself here. Rhiannon Graybill’s work *Texts After Terror* warns that the use of women’s bodies to think with may be still happening in well-meaning feminist scholarship; many use their bodies to “grieve with,” still *using* or “instrumentalizing women, stories, and suffering,” in a way lending to a westernized, fixed, happy ending.”⁷² In interpreting these stories’ silences, feminist interpreters

⁶⁹ Jasmine Gani and Rabea Khan, “Positionality Statements as a Function of Coloniality: Interrogating Reflexive Methodologies,” *International Studies Quarterly* 68 (2024). These statements should be done thoughtfully as this can, ironically and paradoxically, still privilege the white researcher. Considering complicity would be more helpful, and this is what I hope to attend to here.

⁷⁰ I remember my first SBL as a PhD student, where I attended any and all papers on Judges 19 for my work and research. During the question portion in the aftermath of one of these papers, a man made a comment that none of what was just said about the *pilegesh* mattered, because she was not even real. Now five years later, I hope this article is a response to that abjectifying comment. Sara Ahmed’s *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way* (New York: Seal Press, 2023), 67: “he had said to her that she was only upset because she was reading the film wrong by ‘taking it literally.’ He said rape was ‘just a metaphor.’ *Hurt is dismissed as literalism.*”

⁷¹ Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*, 130.

⁷² Rhiannon Graybill, *Texts After Terror: Rape, Sexual Violence & The Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 146-148.

usually create and curate “in memoriam,” *on behalf* of these victims and survivors, and they are found to be quite scripted.⁷³ In my dissertation, I attempted to use the ambiguity and irony found in the story to flip it on its head, making the “sin” of Gibeah one that my Western, white saviorism could more easily stomach and digest: one of “Othering.”⁷⁴ Thus, Her body became meaningful for my ideological purposes, mimicking the act of the Levite by ascribing a message to her that I will never know if she wanted to send. While seeing the sin of Gibeah as a story of Othering is a valid way to read the text—to be self-reflexive is to ask how my profound discomfort with the story, an entirely rational feeling, was one I may have rushed to cover over. Did I dress up her abjection with my objection and, in so doing, cover over some of the horrors of the story instead of sitting with the “unhappiness” of it?⁷⁵ Can we acknowledge our leaky bodies, the abject parts of us that we rush to clean up or away, our incontinence?⁷⁶

Butler’s work on queer bodies being made abject plays with what it means to “matter.” “To make something matter describes an attempt to bring something urgent or pressing to attention. However...making something matter can also imply a more violent forcing of matter into

⁷³ Graybill, 147.

⁷⁴ Alexiana Fry, “The Sin of Gibeah?: Reading Judges 19 and Hosea 9-10 in the Context of Migration and Trauma,” PhD diss. (University of Stellenbosch, 2021).

⁷⁵ Graybill advocates for Unhappy reading, especially in the case of Judges 19, which allows us to be mad/sad about the text but also “describes what is infelicitous, resistant, or frustrating to our interpretive desires,” 149. There is not and should not be a way to make this story “good.” And yet, simply to allow this text to *not* have an after because she is dead misses what this text has done very much so in its “after.”

⁷⁶ I add here that many who would read this as “unhappy” and leave the text be also can be perpetuating harm in that the violence is deemed normative and therefore unproblematic, something to the effect of not placing judgment/cultural relativism or even their own ideologies of *jus in bello*, etc. that make excuses for violent behaviors and acts. I would argue that the work done by feminist interpreters who say that this is unacceptable do less harm than those who justify these texts for a myriad of reasons, often based on their own unquestioned positionality.



an identifiable form or name.”⁷⁷ Many have noted that the lack of a name for the *pilegesh* deserves redress, and interpreters have given her a plethora of names.⁷⁸ And yet, as Esther Brownsmith has diligently shown, these names have been chosen to reflect the interpreter’s view of the text.⁷⁹ She also names her Tizkoret, meaning a reminder or a memorial.⁸⁰ Her piece then shifts, through the work of Black scholarship in the United States, that there may be a power that she is taking from the *pilegesh* in her act of naming—Brownsmith moves quickly into self-reflexivity:

“By naming Tizkoret and thus ‘rescuing’ her from the ranks of the abject, am I denying her this ‘access to anonymous existence’? Am I forcing her into the ranks of linear temporality, imprisoning her as a character in a brutal history, rather than a ghost who drifts, soft-soled and slippery, around the grim details of Judges?”⁸¹

Echoing Butler’s remark that making something matter can force people, characters, into boxes they may not want to be in, Brownsmith also considers that the act of naming can follow along a “script,” a way of dealing with the interpreter/reader’s discomfort. This can be understood as an act of abjection, with the interpreter as sovereign ego whose worldview must be tended to through the control of the abject’s

⁷⁷ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 189. Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso Books, 2006), 141: “When we consider the ordinary ways that we think about humanization and dehumanization, we find the assumption that those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all.”

⁷⁸ Brownsmith, “Call Me By Your Name,” 6: “Perhaps it was Beth, or Bath-Sheber, or Beli-Fachad, or Suzgika, or Timna, or Tamar, or Mara.” Her article is fantastic, and walks through the naming and abjection of the *Pilegesh* in brilliant detail.

⁷⁹ Brownsmith, 7.

⁸⁰ Brownsmith, 16.

⁸¹ Brownsmith, 21.

body. Brownsmith ends this piece with a narration of her as if Judges were being performed by a theatre troupe, with Tizkoret as one of those characters:

“She acted out her narrative a thousand times in pitying readers’ minds, reliving the rape and dismemberment, reinforcing their views about justice and a leaderless land. She watched as scholars debated her character: was she an unfaithful whore or a righteously angry spouse? She took on different names like different costumes, playing her part in the story that each author directed; in between the plays’ acts, she sat and gossiped with her sisters, free to breathe and rest her feet. But some of her favourite moments were when the survivors of rape and abuse read her story, and looked into her eyes, and said, ‘*You are me.*’ In those moments, she had a name—and though it was not her own, it was true, and powerful in its abjection.”⁸²

Part of my reasons for not naming is to allow for her anonymity to be a way in which the story may invite critical reflection as to who *we* may be in the story, and while different from Brownsmith’s portrayal above, the reality of her many afterlives as an “everyperson” to be reflected unhappily. Yet, the challenge is to acknowledge these identifications with her without erasing *her*, to acknowledge differences even in the similarities. Hartman struggles again with this: “the challenge was that in grasping for the girl in the portrait, there was not one girl but many lives, not a particular Black person but a generation, a chorus, a repeatable image of the wayward...her echoing asks, in each face exchanged, *where the particular girl went.*”⁸³

⁸² Brownsmith, 21-22. For the many of us who have read the story and have similarly said, “you are me,” to the *pilegesh*, I grieve our precarity.

⁸³ Eyo Ewara, “Attempting Redress: Fungibility, Ethics, and Redressive Practice in the Work of Saidiya Hartman,” *Theory & Event* 25, no.2 (April 2022): 375.



Many of us are drawn to these texts, not only because of the desire/disgust paradigm of the abject but also because we cannot and should not leave them. On the one hand, this is because the academy depends on a “publish or perish” model that, unfortunately, necessitates the use and abuse of these characters’ bodies for our careers. For those engaging with this fungibility, self-reflexivity is, once again, essential. Although the *pilegesh* does not speak, the very archive is incomplete and damnable, leaving us, as Graybill reminds us, unhappy. Where this particular girl went, who this particular *pilegesh* is beyond what we have in our text, is absent. On the other hand, these affects also simultaneously draw many of us in to somehow re-member the dis-membered. As the *pilegesh*’s story conjures the extreme, many of us have attempted to respond in a way different from the Levite, to do justice where we see injustice.⁸⁴ Is there another way? Can she ever be brought back together again, as her dismemberment is repeated, in abject bodies that are not only hers?

While writing about the unnamed woman in Timnah, Mahri Leonard-Fleckman articulates the tension of “centering this woman while letting her alone, writing the past while leaving it undone,” a practice she calls “irresolution.”⁸⁵ The unhappiness and frustration of being unable to fix what has happened should not be a space where inaction occurs but precisely the contrary. For Saidiya Hartman, whose attempt to read the gaps in the archive on enslavement in nineteenth-century America is a “task of writing the impossible,”⁸⁶ the very grasp at survival is to redress the harm: “Redress is not about what can be salvaged ‘nevertheless.’ It is about how the forging of alternative possibilities remains both necessary as ameliorative for the subjected,

⁸⁴ This is also echoed in Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, “Irresolution as Historical Practice and the Case of the Unnamed Woman in Timnah,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 142, no. 3 (2023): 409-429.

⁸⁵ Leonard-Fleckman, 416.

⁸⁶ Hartman, “Venus,” 14.

and indispensable to their subjection.”⁸⁷ Her attempts to redress in response to the fungibility of the Black body as it was and still is involve three elements according to theorist Eyo Ewara: “re-membering, articulation, and self-making or ‘counter-investment.’”⁸⁸ To re-member is to allow pain to be articulated instead of *used*, that the fungibility of the abject is questioned. The counter-investment acknowledges that this abject body is not just one of pain but “open to the possibility of pleasure, connection, and joy.”⁸⁹ How the lives of those deemed abject attempt to survive and push against their abjection *are* acts of redress, even as they may fail or place them immediately back into abjection.⁹⁰ Among these layers of abjection and the impossible, irresolute action of redress,⁹¹ I conclude by acknowledging the final actions of the *pilegish* as a claiming herself of her personhood and dignity: the confronting posture with her hands at the threshold and the potential of the refusal to answer her master (Judg. 19:26-28).

Never Concluding

“And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. As morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man’s house where her master was, until it was light. In the morning her master got up, opened the doors of the house, and

⁸⁷ Ewara, “Attempting Redress,” 384. Insert abject for subject for my meaning.

⁸⁸ Ewara, 370.

⁸⁹ Ewara, 376.

⁹⁰ The women at Yarl Wood do get deported. Also a note from Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 54: “The particular status of the slave as object and as subject requires a careful consideration of the notion of agency if one wants to do more than ‘endow’ the slave with agency as some sort of gift dispensed by historians and critics to the dispossessed.”

⁹¹ Leonard-Fleckman, “Irresolution,” 429: “the only way to remain responsible and honest in our work is to remain frustrated and undone, always reaching for the unknowable, straddling past and present, representations and their deconstructions.”



when he went out to go on his way, there was the woman, his concubine, lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold (Judg. 19:25-27, NRSVUE)."

Kristeva writes, "significance is indeed inherent in the human body."⁹² Her hands on the threshold, the space in-between public and private, have been taken as a few things for commentators. Hamley writes, "the economical detail of the woman's hands on the threshold speaks of her desperate attempt to return to safety in a world where nowhere is safe for women."⁹³ Lillian Klein sees the hands similarly as ones of "mute helplessness."⁹⁴ Bal writes that her hands are accusatory and damning.⁹⁵ Julie Faith Parker says these hands in this space are a "final act of self-determination."⁹⁶ Brownsmith reminds readers that regardless of what they are doing, they are also a "synecdoche for her self. They reduce a living woman to a single body part..."⁹⁷ Although this is extremely important to interrogate, I want to focus on the place of the abject/deject: to be abject is to "disturb identity, system order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."⁹⁸ In this, I am also conjuring up the image of "The Willful Child" in Grimm's Fairy Tales, where even as the child is dead and buried, their hand continues to reach up out of the earth

⁹² Kristeva, *Powers*, 10. Whether or not she would regard the *pilegesh* as human is a question.

⁹³ Hamley, *Unspeakable*, 175. Earlier in her monograph she notes, 122: "She had trespassed into the public domain by leaving the marital home, and later, she comes out of her father's house to meet the Levite outside but meets disaster and death precisely within the public space onto which she had trespassed. She is not allowed back into the safety of the private world as she lies on the threshold."

⁹⁴ Lillian Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), 171.

⁹⁵ Mieke Bal, "Dealing/with/Women: Daughters in the Book of Judges," *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 330.

⁹⁶ Julie Faith Parker, "Re-membering the Dismembered: Piecing Together Meaning from Stories of Women and Body Parts in Ancient Near Eastern Literature," *Biblical Interpretation* 23, no.2 (2015): 177.

⁹⁷ Brownsmith, *Gendered Violence*, 63.

⁹⁸ Kristeva, *Powers*, 4.

until, finally, the mother strikes the hand with the rod until it draws back underground.⁹⁹ From the perspective of the text, the hands can certainly be understood as something claiming a will outside of the normative, and thus, need to be further subject to violence as pedagogy, put back in one's place. From the author's perspective, the hands could be seen to demonstrate the agonistic of being abjectified. From the perspective of my self, as well as other scholars, in twisting Sara Ahmed's interpretation of the grim tale, the connection of ourselves to the details of the hands is "sustaining a connection." The hands are a record of *both* severance *and* perseverance, not only between ourselves but in exposing "the violence because she is concerned with the survival of the people."¹⁰⁰

While both inside and outside the house have proven consistently unsafe for her, perhaps only in this liminal space, the in-between, is where she can finally rest. Many abjectified bodies have spoken of border space in similar ways.¹⁰¹ In one regard, this act of falling at the door is also a reaction to the violations she has experienced: the failure to be protected by her father, being thrown out by either one of the men in the house, and experiencing multiple perpetrator rape for hours. She may be falling due to exhaustion from the abuse, collapsing before reaching "anywhere." It is this space of nowhere, the space of abjection, where her hands reside. Bal writes that her hands on the threshold "are ignored by the husband to whom they are addressed."¹⁰² But her act is not ignored. Her hands placed in neither public nor

⁹⁹ Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Household Tales* (London, George Bell, 1884), 125.

¹⁰⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Living A Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 79. The hands are thus becoming "deconstructive limbs or intersectional points," 88.

¹⁰¹ Specifically, Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987). Also Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 88: "Arms can embody how we fail to inhabit a category. Arms can be how we insist on inhabiting a category we are assumed to fail. Arms can throw a category into crisis. No wonder we must look to the arm..."

¹⁰² Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 156.



private could be taken as a symbol of her desire to survive in this aftermath of pain,¹⁰³ to be something other than abject, to exist elsewhere.¹⁰⁴ Why should she want *this* world? Her hands may be the ultimate motion of abject objection,¹⁰⁵ the exposure of the violence that surrounds *her* being. He speaks to her, maybe seeing her in this action as alive in these symbolic borderlands: “‘Get up,’ he said to her, ‘we are going.’ But there was no answer (Judg. 19:28).” Instead of focusing solely on her hands, I consider her silence as potentially agentic.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps this is a refusal to answer his request, a refusal of *him*, no longer considered a master in this new borderspace. Most certainly, this is my wishful thinking, fighting off my persistent unhappiness for the possibility of something different. But the lack of answer, what could be her resistance, still turns into his response of further abjection unto her death. Even this paragraph of conjecture is fragile.

What we have left are pieces, fragments of his- and herstory, literally and figuratively dismembered. I know the well-known quotation by Peggy Day, in that “we need to ask feminist questions, but we must be

¹⁰³ The binary of public and private is often accepted as natural but they are constructed and false. Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*, 80.

¹⁰⁴ Tyler, *Revolting*, 11-12: “‘becoming imperceptible’ is the most effective tool that marginal populations can employ to oppose prevailing forms of geopolitical power. Certainly, invisibility is an important strategy of evasion... it is also the expressed desire of many who find themselves in unbearable states of capture within the borders of the state, such as those ‘failed’ asylum seekers and Gypsies and Travellers whose visibility and categorization has, as we shall see, led to their immobilization within systems of bureaucracy and penal control.”

¹⁰⁵ Hennefeld and Sammond, “Introduction,” 27: “The abject objection demands more of us than quietude, acquiescence, and incorporation. It is a challenge, asking us who the hell we think we are.”

¹⁰⁶ Floya Anthias, *Translocational Belongings: Intersectional Dilemmas and Social Inequalities* (London: Routledge, 2021), 14: “whilst such a view is compelling and important, it’s also central to reinsert the role of the agentic and agonistic in human life, as that which resists, contests, and is engaged in the struggle around the ‘givenness’ of the social order, the doxa that often underpin such forms of violence.”

prepared” to receive not-so-feminist answers.¹⁰⁷ Still, as I cling to her abjected body a few thousand years later, we are well overdue for a more just future. If “history is always changing, and so can we,”¹⁰⁸ our bodies must refuse easy relief that continues to allow status quo; yet, we have come full circle to the persistence in impossibility that I cannot, and I would argue, *should not* help but insist on something different.

¹⁰⁷ Peggy Day, editor, *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 3.

¹⁰⁸ Leonard-Fleckman, “Irresolution,” 429.

