“A son is born to Naomi!”:

Constructing Genealogy and Queering Ancestry in *The Book of Ruth*

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Introduction

In her 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," the Jewish lesbian poet Adrienne Rich writes that "*Lesbian existence* suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence" (*Blood, Bread and Poetry*, 51). Following her definition of *lesbian existence,* Rich proposes a theory of the *lesbian continuum,* a constant oscillation, moving between the historical, literary, and living. Crucial to Rich's theorizing is the necessity of a backwards construction of lesbian history. As she writes, "lesbian existence has been lived (unlike, say, Jewish or Catholic existence) without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning" (52). Rich's literature creates a movement away from just the lived to the written, from history experienced to history recognized and archived. Her writing exemplifies the embodied location of the lesbian as one that transcends stagnant models of time.

In the early days of Rich's literary career, she translated the work of poet Kadya Molodowsky from Yiddish into English. Rich and Molodowsky existed, for the most part, on different planes, both generationally and linguistically. But, for a moment, those differentiated locations in place and time collapsed. In *Queer Expectations: A Genealogy of Jewish Women's Poetry,* Zohar Weiman-Kelman writes of the interconnection of the two poets. Weiman-Kelman unveils an image of Rich and Molodowsky seated next to each other at the publication of Rich's translation of Molodowsky's poetry. The image rests on the page, depicting what Weiman-Kelman calls "the intergenerational dream encounter" present in both poets' work (Weiman-Kelman, 21). Weiman-Kelman goes on to pose a question in relation to this image capturing a fleeting moment of poetic continuity; "how might we imagine a historical model that builds at once on historicity and contemporaneity, on blood and text, a narrative that refuses to be

trapped in or relegated outside of tradition but rather generates new modes of continuity through the very breaks with and in history" (Weiman-Kelman, 22). It is from this vantage point, of the lesbian continuum and the coexistence of blood and text, that I read *The Book of Ruth*[1].

The *Book of Ruth* is read annually in the Jewish month of Sivan, conjuring a thousands of years long textual tradition of interpretation. A brief summary and some context may be helpful prior to my theorizing of this text. The text of *Ruth* is found in *Kethuvim* (*Writings*) and is one of the five *Megillot* (scrolls). Because it is not in the *Five Books of Moses*, *Ruth* falls outside of the weekly Torah reading cycle and is instead read on the holiday of Shavuot, The Festival of Weeks. The reading of this specific text on this holiday has a significance to the construction and passing of time that I will explore in more detail later on. As is the case with most texts in the Tanakh, the exact date that *Ruth* was written is impossible to identify; however, "Many scholars propose a date between 950 and 700 BCE, that is, between the time of David and the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Others suggest a date during the period of the Babylonian exile or in the early period of the return (586-500 BCE). (*Jewish Study Bible*, 1579).[2] Within either of these proposed time frames, there is an unsteady, yet necessary, relationship to time. The Jewish year is centered around the passing of time as it relates to the agricultural cycle of the Levant. Holidays come and go along with the seasons, and the four new year celebrations are intertwined with the harvests. The harvests are obviously annual, but cannot be expected on the exact same day every year and often vary based on changing environmental factors that are not entirely reliable.

The exposition of this story is linked to that of the partially unpredictable nature of the harvest: "In the days when the chieftains ruled, there was a famine in the land; and a man of

[1] From here on, the actual text will be referred to in italics as either *The Book of Ruth* or *Ruth.* The character which this text is centered around will not be italicized and will be written simply as Ruth.
[2] *The Jewish Study Bible,* "Introduction to *The Book of Ruth"*

Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons, went to reside in the country of Moab" (Ruth 1:1). In many ways, if it weren't for the disruption in the cycle of the harvest, the central characters, Ruth and Naomi, might never have met. It is through this happenstance warp of expected cycles of time that Ruth and Naomi's relationship forms. The narrative that follows the initial problem of flawed agricultural production expands to topics far beyond just agricultural production, but remains in close relation with the harvest cycle. To escape the famine, Naomi and her sons move to Moab, the country from which Ruth hails.

To summarize what follows, Naomi, her husband Elimelech, and her two sons, Mahlon and Chillion, travel to the country of Moab remaining there for ten years, both sons marrying Moabite women. Mahlon marries a woman from Moab named Ruth. Elimelech dies, and Naomi's two sons follow him in death. When pressed to leave her mother-in-law Naomi's side, Ruth refuses and the two women stay together. Here lies the possibility that perhaps Ruth and Naomi were lesbians. Maybe after their husbands died they realized not that Naomi loved Elimelech and Ruth loved Mahlon, but they in fact loved each other. When Ruth said "'Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.'"(Ruth 1:16-18) she was exclaiming her romantic love and devotion for Naomi. One could absolutely read this as a story of a lesbian romance, midrashically determining it through direct examples in the text. Later on, Naomi, concerned for the prosperity and livelihood of Ruth, as well as herself, instructs Ruth to find a new husband. Naomi tells Ruth to go to the fields of a man named Boaz, a distant relative of Elimelech, and glean. After Ruth's participation in the barley harvest, she goes to Boaz one night and proposes a

levirate[3] marriage of sorts. Boaz obliges, and Ruth subsequently has a son, Obed, who will become the grandfather of King David. In the final chapter of *Ruth* it is written that "A son is born to Naomi!" (Ruth 4:17). Later on, I will devote more attention to this crucial line which complicates the nature of genealogy and how, through subtle choices of language and interaction, a queer narrative emerges from this text.

Queering Torah

It is only recently in the timeline of biblical scholarship that expansive[4] interpretations of the *Book of Ruth* have emerged. These expansive interpretations are ones that utilize queer theory to read *Ruth*. As is the case with many of the queer readings of biblical stories, it is challenging to come to a simple literary conclusion. Because of the nature of biblical narrative, context, and time frame in which this was written, there is little to no direct writing of queer relationships. In *Narrative Desire and The Book of Ruth,* Stephanie Day Powell writes, "Searching for evidence of same-sex relations and relationships in the Hebrew Bible has proved particularly difficult. While the debates regarding homosexuality and the Bible are familiar enough…suffice it to say the information that the Bible does provide is largely polemical in nature" (4). [5] In more recent years, biblical scholarship has started to invite the possibility that perhaps the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is more than just that of in-laws and instead an example of lesbian existence within the Hebrew Bible. Scholars like Powell suggest that through queer theory and methods of reading we can find Ruth and Naomi's relationship to be a queer one, in which instead of being in love with their respective husbands they are in love with each other. However,

[3] "The custom among the Jews and some other nations, by which the brother or next of kin to a deceased man was bound under certain circumstances to marry the widow" (OED). It is not entirely a levirate because Boaz is not a direct relative of Naomi or Elimelech.
[4] Read: queer.
[5] Stephanie Day Powell, *Narrative Desire and the Book of Ruth*

in my view of *Ruth,* an explicit story of lesbian desire is not what produces a compelling queer reading of the text. I propose instead that, through the utilization of contemporary queer reading practices, the queerness of this ancient story can emerge. It is not through an explicit story of lesbian desire existing within the Book of Ruth that a convincing queer interpretation can emerge, but rather through a contemporary reading of the text that invokes the queerness of its narrative structure.

Returning to Weiman-Kelman, who writes about the poetry of Yocheved Bat-Miriam, a modernist poet writing in Hebrew, we can begin to find methods of parsing out queer narratives in otherwise inexplicitly queer texts. Bat-Miriam's poetry depicts encounters between women that, when read through a contemporary lens as Weiman-Kelman does, are understood to be queer encounters. This is to say that Bat-Miriam was not writing poetry with outright queer content, but through expansive readings it is understood as being queer. Weiman-Kelman reads this poetry as queer, with the caveat that their "reading of Bat-Miriam is not anchored in her sexual practice. Similarly [the] use of Bat-Miriam to discuss a resistance to heteronormative futurity and reproduction does not rely on her biography" (xv). This is precisely how I understand *Ruth* to be a queer narrative. *Ruth* becomes a queer narrative through one's looking back towards it through a queer lens. Doing this requires a reader to parse the text thoughtfully and expansively enough to find seeds of queerness throughout. It requires a reader versed in current understandings of what constitutes queerness to be able to see an alternative reading that could not have been seen in past understandings of a text. Introducing a term coined by Christopher Nealon as well as written about by Powell, Weiman-Kelman explains that, "To retroactively read this desire as queer or lesbian when Bat-Miriam herself did not claim such an identity exposes my role as a queer reader, the one Nealon calls a 'hermeneutic friend,' who can

identify (and identify *with*) desires that were not or could not be, intelligible to authors in the past" (Weiman-Kelman, xv). The "hermeneutic friend" allows a certain access to a text outside of original and heteronormative interpretations. The concept of the hermeneutic friend invites the readers to interact with the text in a unique way. In reading a text through this method, the line of differentiation between the reader and the text itself becomes blurry. What is often frowned upon, projecting one's own lived experience onto a text, becomes necessary in order to uncover these desires that were unintelligible to authors (and readers for that matter) of the past. This allows the reader to become the text and the text to become the reader.

The concept of the hermeneutic friend is especially pertinent when reading texts in the Jewish tradition. The Jewish textual tradition causes a unique embodiment of text. As each chapter of every text is read at its respective point in the year cycle, those reading it are asked to engage in an ever evolving act of interpretation, of hermeneutics that remember a history as constantly relevant to its readers. When these texts are read, they change based on who is reading them, where, and when. Thus, everyone interacting with the Jewish textual tradition acts as a hermeneutic friend. However, what Nealon, Powell, and Weiman-Kelman are referring to is a distinctly queer reading, the "hermeneutic friend" being one who can find queer desire where it has not yet been spoken, whether or not it is written explicitly. The hermeneutic friend then creates a narrative and textual genealogy through interacting with the text in this manner.

Queer Genealogies

Ruth begins and ends with genealogy. It begins with the recording of the relations of Elimelech: "The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and his two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah" (Ruth 1:2). It ends with the

descendants of Ruth (and Naomi), "Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David" (Ruth 4:22). In between these bookends of reproductive descendancy, however heteronormative assumptions of genealogy are upended.

As is the case in nearly every text in the Tanakh, *Megillat Ruth* elucidates a genealogical structure. Between the lines of a genealogical recording, an epic family tree of sorts, one finds the actual story within biblical text. There are numerous functions of genealogy within the Tanakh. For one, genealogy serves as a through line of Abrahamic descendancy in the Hebrew Bible. This recurrent framework of genealogy is also interpreted as that of Messianic ancestry, finding within the lists upon lists on lineage a seed of hopefulness for Messianic deliverance.[6]

The placement of *Ruth* in the Tanakh is also relevant in considering the overall genealogical structure that forms in this ordering of the texts. *Ruth* falls after The Five Books of Moses and Prophets in the section of Writings, where the Psalms, the authorship of which is attributed to King David's reign, are also located. *Ruth* offers itself as a precursor of Davidic genealogy, though it falls after the initial writing of the existence of David in *Samuel 1*. *Ruth* ends in the writing down of Ruth's lineage, which leads directly to King David, who lived merely four generations after Ruth.

The documentation of genealogy often represents what is the heteronormative paradigm of biblical writing, a continuous cycle of assumed heterosexuality. However, the manner in which Ruth's genealogy transcends linear, heteronormative time, suggests that heteronormative genealogy need not be the paradigm.

The paradigm of genealogy creates a sort of meta lineage between the actual characters of biblical text and the readers of the text. Although as I mentioned earlier, the subjective reading of

[6] Even in the conversation of the lines Mashiach ben Yosef v. Mashiach ben David, the trajectory of their lineage is crucial in the ushering in of a Messianic era.

a text has much to do with the positionality, in time, location, and identity of the reader. Radical rabbis Ariana Katz and Jessica Rosenberg wrote in their recent book *For Times Such As These: A Radical's Guide to the Jewish Year* about the story of Ruth. They write of the moment in the year cycle that *Ruth* is read, and how different traditions have interpreted it:

> Rabbinic tradition understands Ruth to be the first convert to Judaism. Dyke tradition understands Ruth and Naomi to be lovers, that Ruth's vow was not (only) to the Jewish people but a love vow to Naomi. As such these words are often spoken between brides under a chuppah… Ruth seduces and perterns with Boaz, a land owning relation of Naomi. They marry, and Ruth gives birth to a child, 'born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons' (4:15). Naomi becomes the child's foster mother, and her neighbors name him Obed. This queerspawn was the grandfather of King David, who is the ancestor of the one who will be the Mashiach. (Katz and Rosenberg, 243)[7].

It is through interpretations such as these, that the expected nature of biblical genealogy is subverted. In the messianic lineage predating the birth of King David is Obed, this so-called "queerspawn." This non-normative lineage also requires me to acknowledge how *Ruth* addresses the physicality of genealogy, that is the bearing of children or the inability to do so.

After Ruth and her sister-in-law Orpah's husbands die, they protest the instruction to leave Naomi's side. They plead to stay with her, "But Naomi replied, "Turn back, my daughters! Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons in my body who might be husbands for you? Turn back, my daughters, for I am too old to be married…Oh no, my daughters! My lot is far more bitter than yours, for the hand of the LORD has struck out

[7] *For Times Such As These: A Radical's Guide to the Jewish Year*

against me" (*Ruth* 1:11-13). In these circumstances, age as well as the ability to give birth is presented as a problem in the continuity of genealogy. However, the continuity of genealogy later proves to be somewhat unrelated to a biological bond of descendants.

The significance of birth, and the land in which one is born, is particularly important in Ruth's case. Ruth's Moabite lineage is a detail central to the text, which presents a problem in the narrative. Being a Moabite who joins the Israelite community, Ruth is positioned as the first convert to Judaism. When she marries Naomi's son Ruth leaves her birthplace and, for the most part, her identity as Moabite. However, this conversion is not necessarily that simple, as there are many different connotations that complicate the position of Moabite identification in an Israelite context. One of which is the connotation of Moab being a place of gender deviance.

Moab as a location having differing gendered norms from Israelite society is a detail that comes up in most, if not all, Transjordanian relationships in the Tanakh. Jewish studies scholar Peter J. Sabo addresses this, in the greater context of biblical stories, in his text *Moabite women, Transjordanian women, and incest and exogamy: The gendered dimensions of boundaries in the Hebrew Bible.* He purports that the presentation of Moab as a gender deviant society is rooted in a larger issue of identification:

> Moabite women are double trouble in the Hebrew Bible: they are both foreigner and female. Foreigners pose a problem of identity, even as they are the means by which identity is created. That is, the concept of 'foreigner' requires invented categories of Self and Other. As the texts of the Hebrew Bible work out what an 'Israelite' is, they seek to distinguish this identity from Israel's neighbors. This is especially the case with close neighbors in the

> Transjordan, the Moabites foremost among them. Moab thus establishes geographical boundaries—with the important division along the lines of the Jordan River—as well as ethnic ones. (Sabo, 93)

Sabo goes on to present the construction of Israelite identity as going hand in hand with the construction of gendered identity. He explains Moab "as a site of exogamous anxiety" (94), which contributes a complication to the polemical qualities of Ruth's conversion. Sabo continuously brings up the problem of incest in this literature, penning the phrase "incestuous undertones" as being a quality of *The Book of Ruth* (105). He theorizes that these incestuos undertones are not necessarily unique to *Ruth,* however they are especially prevalent in this particular text. I tend to diverge from his reading in this regard and propose that what readers today would consider to be an unsettling incestuous relationship being so prevalent in biblical text does not hold the same weight to the characters involved as it does to us now. Sabo builds upon the other theologians that he mentions and suggests that the relationship of Naomi and Boaz as distant relatives[8] achieves a redemption of sorts for the problems of genealogical gaps in texts and stories that precede *Ruth.* The outline of genealogy in *Ruth* provides the Davidic genealogy that is absent in the texts that come before this in the Tanakh.

I find Sabo's more compelling argument to be that of the constructions of gendered identities in the Transjordanian regions. Sabo writes:

> The ambiguity and deconstructive traces surrounding kinship and geography in the book are further highlighted when one considers issues of gender. The relationship between Moab and Israel is altered when the focus is not between a man and a woman/women but between two women; in other words, opposition turns into alliance by merely changing the gender of one of the players. Similarly,

[8] See previous note about levirate marriages.

> Mieke Bal notes that Boaz is a hero because he 'dares to assume the point of view of the woman', and thus he accepts being positioned in the female role. (109)

What Sabo is getting at here is the unsteady quality of identification in the Near East region. As biblical characters, especially the characters in *The Book of Ruth,* attempt to reckon with tribal identity, Ruth's conversion appears as a complication not only in terms of Israelite identification but also of gender identity.

Ruth's identity as a Moabite appears to disrupt the strictly Israelite society and destabilize the assumptions of gender dynamics within that society. To see these relationships and dynamics as such, though, requires the reading of the text through a postmodern lens. One is able to see that these dynamics become visible only in greater temporal context, bringing the genealogy of *Ruth* outside of just the text and into conversation with its readers and interpreters. This brings us back to the *hermeneutic friend.* This disruption of Israelite gender dynamics is recognized by one who reads from a vantage point that exposes how the politics of gender differentiate between the two societies.

Queer Temporality

To look back at a text through queer hermeneutics also allows for an evasion of linear time, bringing the idea of queer temporality to the forefront of our discussion. Queer temporality, as a term, becomes more clear when put in context with the works and theorizing of Jack Halberstam. For the purposes of my reading of *Ruth,* I am defining queer temporality as a disruption and divergence in and from normative assumptions of time, space, and relationality. In the case of the story of Ruth and Naomi, this includes, but is not

limited to, the nature of their familial and legal bond, the time frame in which the story takes place, and the genealogy that follows their story. As I will devote more attention to later on, the nature of Ruth and Naomi's relationship fits into queer relationship structures, and as many modern biblical scholars have proposed, could even be defined as a lesbian relationship. However, the more compelling queer reading to me is that which utilizes queer theory to notice the queer narrative construction taking place, instead of speculating on the interaction and identity of two biblical characters.

Reading the *Book of Ruth* as queer applies the idea of queer temporality on multiple planes. In one regard, examining *Ruth* in a queer manner destroys linear and heteronormative temporality in that it reads the text as relevant to a current queer reader, and releases *Ruth* from rigid interpretations of the past. This returns to my proposition that the reader becomes implicated in the genealogy that Ruth's lineage begins. The text comes to inhabit its queerness through resonance with its reader and through said reader's own interaction with it. In another regard, the actual content of *Ruth* can be understood as an instance of queer temporality, Ruth and Naomi's relationship exemplifying a queerly fashioned ancestry as well as holding the possibility to be read as a lesbian relationship.

In Halberstam's book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives,* he suggests these definitions:

> 'queer' refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time. 'Queer time' is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. 'Queer space' refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer

people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics. (20)

Halberstam's concepts of queer time and space are in many ways defined by what they are not and as such must be a rejection of the normative. But, necessitated in the rejection of the normative is the construction or production of the nonnormative. Halberstam's definitions create terms for "considerations of life, location, and transformation" (17).Through this, he encompasses the ability to radically queer the mundane. Thus, within the very definitions he writes is the necessity of creation and transformation. While he is explicitly defining these terms in a postmodern context, as a postmodern reader, I map Halberstam's definitions onto the narrative within the *Book of Ruth.*

The first, and perhaps most well known example in *Ruth* that fits well into Halberstam's definitions is when Ruth and Orpah (both of whom are Moabites) follow Naomi (a Judean) after their husband's have died (Ruth 1:10). Although I have already mentioned this particular example, it is very much worth revisiting with Halberstam's framework in mind. This moment is the beginning of Ruth and Naomi's family structure "leaving temporal frames" of reproduction.

An especially intriguing queering of relationships comes when the character of Boaz is introduced. Boaz is introduced first as a "redeeming kinsman." He is, as was a point of concern for Sabo,[9] a distant relative of Elimelech. This introduction comes in the second book of *Ruth,* just after Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem "at the beginning of the barley harvest" (Ruth 1:22). This moment is also one of few examples in the text that is grounded in the year cycle as a marker of time, the last before Boaz and Ruth's relationship begins. Ruth then goes into the fields to glean the harvest, and finds Boaz who treats her kindly and allows her to glean in his

[9] Sabo, *Moabite women, Transjordanian women, and incest and exogamy: The gendered dimensions of boundaries in the Hebrew Bible*

fields. Ruth asks Boaz, “Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?” (Ruth 2:10), invoking the foreigner/local dichotomy once again. Boaz in turn responds by saying “I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before. May the LORD reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge!” (Ruth 2:11-12). Here, Boaz’s first positive impression of Ruth is not because of his own interaction with her, but rather because of what he has heard about her in relation to others, specifically the kindness she has shown to Naomi.

Ruth returns to Naomi and tells her of the kindness put upon her by Boaz. Naomi informs Ruth that she knows of Boaz as a relative of theirs and instructs her by saying “It is best, daughter, that you go out with his girls, and not be annoyed in some other field” (Ruth 2:22). Here, the beginnings of Ruth and Boaz’s relationship are instigated by Naomi. Naomi’s instruction continues into book three in which she says,

> “Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy. Now there is our kinsman Boaz, whose girls you were close to. He will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor tonight. So bathe, anoint yourself, dress up, and go down to the threshing floor. But do not disclose yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he lies down, and go over and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what you are to do.” (Ruth 3:1-4)

To this Ruth responds, “I will do everything you tell me.” (Ruth 3:5). I understand Ruth’s trust in Naomi's suggestions as a combination of her true devotion and wish to do what is best for her along with a naive acceptance of Naomi’s guidance.

From this, we can see that Ruth and Boaz’s relationship does not emerge out of a vacuum of desire, but instead a series of influences leading these characters to the conclusion of desire, even if only for practical and economical reasons. This is not surprising given the nature of biblical marriage, as well as what psychoanalytic literary theory tells us about desire as a concept. René Girard writes extensively on this matter in his 1961 book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel.* Coming from the first chapter of this Girard text is his idea of *“triangular” desire,* a model of thinking about the directionality of desire that will be very helpful in my queer interpretation of *Ruth.*

Girard uses the case of Don Quixote and Amadis as his primary example of a mediated triangular desire. Don Quixote and Amadis have a relationship of migration and devotion similar to Ruth and Naomi, wherein Don Quixote follows the whims and desires of Amadis as Ruth does Naomi: “Don Quixote has surrendered to Amadis the individual’s fundamental prerogative: he no longer chooses the objects of his own desire–Amadis must choose for him” (Girard, 1). Ruth surrenders in this way early on in the text as she says to Naomi “Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.” (Ruth 1:16-17). However, this mediation continues after she first meets Boaz and Naomi instructs her on how to proceed, only to have Ruth respond “I will do everything you tell me.” (Ruth 3:5). Ruth’s actions throughout the entire narrative hinge on Naomi’s desires.

As Girard explains, “The disciple pursues objects which are determined for him, or at least seem to be determined for him by the model of all chivalry. We shall call this model the *mediator* of desire. Chivalric existence is Don Quixote’s *imitation* of Amadis in the same sense that the Christian’s existence is the imitation of Christ.” (Girard, 2). Chivalric existence, and what constitutes something as such, appears frequently throughout Ruth, and who the chivalric actor is is a queering of relationality in and of itself. This particular example of the Christian imitating Christ that Girard proposes is intriguing compared to Ruth’s statement “your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). Ruth embodies the devotion to Naomi’s God because of her devotion to (or perhaps desire for) Naomi herself. Ruth’s devotion to this God is, as Girard would put it, an imitation of Naomi’s devotion to God and of Ruth’s devotion to Naomi.

Girard proposes that to better understand the mutability of mediated desire, a metaphorical triangular diagram proves helpful. To begin, I suggest that a straight line exists between Ruth and Naomi representing a subject desiring an object (who is the subject and who is the object will depend on the situational context), “The straight line is present in the desire of Don Quixote, but is not essential. The mediator is there, above that line, radiating toward both the subject and the object, the spatial metaphor which expresses this relationship is obviously the triangle” (Girard, 2). Boaz exists here as the mediator who radiates above Ruth and Naomi, effectively getting in the way of an unmediated desire (however impossible that may actually be).

Ruth, as I have stressed, is a story of devotion. As Powell put it, “Theologically, the book of Ruth stresses the need for acts of *hesed* to sustain the community and protect its most vulnerable members” (Powell, 19). The emphasis on *hesed* is present in nearly all writing on *Ruth* as a central quality of the narrative. The *Jewish Study Bible’s* commentary on *Ruth* suggests

that the narrative structure "[implies] that God rewards such acts of *hesed"* (JPS, 1573).[10] Many definitions of *hesed* bear notable similarities to definitions of chivalry. The *Brown-Driver-Briggs Dictionary* defines *hesed* as " goodness, kindness," "*lovingkindness,*" or alternatively, "*kindness* of men towards men, in doing favours and benefits."[11] This last definition seems to me to be very similar to the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of chivalry, that being "The brave, honourable, and courteous character attributed to the ideal knight; disinterested bravery, honour, and courtesy; chivalrousness"[12] (which would include kindness exchanged between men).

Just as *Ruth* can be read as a story of devotion, it can also be read as a story of chivalry. Girard writes that, "Chivalric passion defines a desire *according to Another,* opposed to this desire *according to Oneself* that most of us pride ourselves on enjoying. Don Quixote and Sancho borrow their desires from the Other in a movement which is so fundamental and primitive that they completely confuse it with the will to be Oneself" (Girard, 4). This has deep resonance in *Ruth.* Ruth's commitment to Naomi is so instinctual that she could never come to realize the desire is coming from outside of herself, mediated by outside factors. What proves to be an intriguing shift in gendered dynamics of chivalric passion, as something fulfilled by men unto other men or unto women, is Ruth's chivalric passion for Naomi. Boaz's kindness towards Ruth, and in doing so towards Naomi, falls into the chivalric model that Girard refers to. But, even before Ruth meets Boaz, she is the one engaging in chivalry. This is yet another disruption

[10] The implication of God as the driving factor behind all actions creates its own triangulation and mediation of desire in many ways, "God is mentioned numerous times by the three main characters, but the actions of the story are never explicitly said to have been caused by God. Rather, God remains in the shadows, implying that God rewards such acts of *hesed.* And that divine activity lies behind the reversal of the deprivations that have afflicted Naomi and the nation as a whole" (JPS, 1573). In this instance, God is acting as the mediator of desire, radiating above (pun partially intended) all characters actions as a rewarding shadow figure, covertly instigating what Girard would describe as "desire according to the Another." Even outside human interaction in the *Ruth* narrative is the presence of God, constantly mediating all desires in all spheres.
[11] BDB Dictionary
[12] OED

in biblical gender expectations. Prior to meeting Boaz, Ruth acts chivalrously unto Naomi, a woman who legally is not related to her anymore. Ruth, who was once the chivalrous actor, becomes the chivalrous receiver after meeting Boaz. This then effectively achieves what Girard suggests, "The triangle is no *Gestalt.* The real structures are intersubjective. They cannot be localized anywhere; the triangle has no reality whatever; it is a systematic metaphor, systematically pursued." (Girard, 2). This suggests that, according to Halberstam's qualifications of what creates a queer narrative, the triangle itself is a queer structure with the ability to subvert assumptions of positionality.

A particularly interesting example of this triangulation that Girard describes is in the presumed sexual relationship between Ruth and Boaz. This encounter between the two offers a pathway towards a queer futurity outside of the text given the numerous textual ambiguities of the moment that this interaction appears in. In reference to a queer retelling of *Ruth* by Athalya Brenner, Powell writes on this: "There is the displacement of Boaz by YHWH at the point of marital consummation: "So Boaz married Ruth; she became his wife, and he cohabitated with her. The Lord let her conceive and she bore a son" (literally, "[Boaz] came into her and the Lord gave her conception") (4:13)" (Powell, 69). As Powell has explained, God is literally inserted into an interaction between two characters that they believe to be straightforward desire, unmediated by any outside factors. Powell goes on to suggest that, "While YHWH often plays a role in permitting pregnancy in other birth narratives in the Hebrew Bible, this is the only instance in which [God] is said to be involved directly in impregnation." (69). In this particular text, as the narrative progresses what was once a misfortune situation, that being the death of Naomi's sons and husband, reverses. Because of Ruth, and God, Naomi's circumstances turn to fortunate, the birth of Obed being the ultimate conclusion of that reversal. Powell also suggests

that, "YHWH's participation certainly bears theological significance, drawing our attention to Ruth's divinely sanctioned role in the future of Israel. However, what is of more immediate note is the fact that Boaz is supplanted. He provides the sperm, but his procreative role is abruptly upended. (Powell, 69). In this instance, God replaces Boaz in the triangulation of Ruth's desire. Perhaps Boaz exists here as a sort of means to an end in the genealogical trajectory of Ruth. God's mediation of Ruth and Boaz's marital consummation is theologically important in the Davidic ancestry that begins in *Ruth*, as Powell suggested. The dynamic is further triangulated, and thus further queered, as Naomi assumes the role as Obed's "foster mother" (Ruth 4:16). This, as well as numerous other examples fit into Halberstam's definition of 'queer' as a nonnormative organization of community and kinship.

Weiman-Kelman also proposes some ideas of the role of the masculine subject in narrative, specifically in the Emma Lazarus poem they focus on in their book, "The man is hardly described as a desirable participant, and the idea of some kind of inadvertent erotic interaction with him…seems foreclosed by overshadowing brightness of their bodies." (Weiman-Kelman, 68). Consider here what the role of Boaz in the narrative may be. The nature of Ruth and Boaz's intimate relationship is unclear, "Consequently, the man is rendered superfluous to the intimacy among the women both poetically and thematically" (Weiman-Kelman, 69). My understanding of Girard's mediated desire as it applies to *Ruth* is quite similar to how Weiman-Kelman sees the man in the Lazarus poem to be secondary to the purposes of the narrative, and to be there only for practical reasons.

Halberstam's theories of queer time and space interact quite nicely with Girard's theories of mediated desire. Both theorists encapsulate the unstable nature of normative expectations of desire and the construction of relationships. Girard's theories require the very psychoanalytic

understanding that desire comes from outside of the self, and desire exists according to 'the other.' My queer approach to this theory expands upon it to suggest that while desire exists according to the other, the structuring of relationships/kinships and the actual outcome of that desire exists both according to and in opposition to 'the other.' This creates a generative model of community that Girard did not quite acknowledge. Halbertsam's queer time and space create a sort of link between these ideas, especially having to do with the ways in which time functions in narrative to create queer stories.

The intergenerationality and unclear time frame of the *Book of Ruth* abandon, in Halberstam's words, "the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance." [13] Although it is not unusual for a biblical story to lack an entirely comprehensible structure of linear time, it is particularly noteworthy that this quality of linear time is absent in *Ruth*. As an early marker of time in the narrative, it is written that after Naomi's husband died, their two sons "married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth, and they lived there about ten years" (Ruth 1:4). After this, the ability to accurately trace the timeline of the narrative vanishes. We can understand it as moving through the time between the barley and wheat harvests, or the time between Passover and Shavuot (Shavuot is the holiday that *Ruth* is read on), making the time frame of the story span a roughly seven week period. Additionally, according to the *Jewish Study Bible,* "King David, the culmination of the genealogy in Ruth 4.18-22, was traditionally thought to have been born and to have died on Shavuot…Shavuot has been identified since early postbiblical [sic] times as the time of the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai." (JPS, 1574). Within this seven week period, the manner how time passes is unclear, suiting Halberstam's idea of 'queer time'. The connection between the giving of the Torah and Sinai and *The Book of Ruth* is interesting given the sort of

[13] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*

"meta" textual lineage I am suggesting through my queer reading of this text. The nature of the textuality of the Torah is the intergenerational engagement with the text, both within the actual stories written in it and in the practices of reading it.[14] The physical qualities of reading Torah, by holding it, chanting it, repeating it year after year, and the many ways that one embodies the narratives within bears similarities to how I understand reading biblical stories as queer. To do so, as I hope to have explained here, necessitates an interaction between reader and text that links the two across time in a queer fashion.

This narrative also surrenders a normative structure of familial allegiance and loyalty. In regards to Halberstam's definition of 'queer space,' the story of Ruth and Naomi is a story of moveable location as much as it is anything else. The bond between Ruth and Naomi is not stagnant, refined to one physical place. Their bond travels just as they travel through Bethlehem and Moab. In addition to the structurally queer aspects of the texts that I have written on, there are also narrative details that resemble what a modern reader would recognize as queer in the way of content and in the qualities of Ruth and Naomi's relationship.

דָּבָקָה

What makes this recognizable is the presence of what can be assumed to be a queer or lesbian desire between Ruth and Naomi. One compelling example of lesbian desire in the Book of Ruth is the language used when Ruth refuses to leave Naomi's side, "They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her" (Ruth 1:14). Commentators seem to be unable to agree on this line's significance. The *Jewish Study Bible* suggests that "Ruth's attachment to Naomi is reminiscent of Gen. 2.24, which refers to the

[14] As is constantly written in Jewish text, *l'dor v'dor,* from generation to generation.

'clinging' of husband to wife." Noting the use of the same word, meaning 'clung' (דָּבְקָה), the commentator goes on to say "The connotation here is probably not sexual, but rather signifies Ruth's unswerving devotion to Naomi."[15] The *Jewish Study Bible* reading of this encounter between Ruth and Naomi, acknowledges the possibility for one to interpret it as sexual, but then immediately rejects it as an appropriate reading of the repetition of the word 'clung' across Genesis and Ruth.

However, other scholars would say that the very acknowledgment of this similarity does itself do something to suggest sexuality in this encounter. In reference to more general conceptions of sexuality, and homosexuality, in biblical literature and commentary, Powell proposes:

> such biblical prohibitions do provide acknowledgement that same-sex activity occurred. While the references pertain to male relations, Guest[16] makes note of some potential allusions to female homoeroticism in the literature of surrounding cultures. Furthermore, recently biblical commentators have put forth a range of deconstruction readings that indicate an anxiety on the part of biblical writers regarding the heteronormative assumptions underlying the Israelite worldview. (Powell, 5)

Powell is here acknowledging that homoeroticism was not absent in the thought of biblical writers, and therefore is not absent in the thought of modern biblical commentators. This past acknowledgement provides a link for readers in the future to ask these questions again, but come to different conclusions. In this tradition, specifically in regards to Ruth clinging to Naomi, Powell further suggests:

[15] *The Jewish Study Bible,* pg. 1575
[16] Deryn Guest

> Ruth and Naomi, alongside David and Jonathan, appear to be the most viable queer subjects in the Hebrew Bible. Turning the heterosexual contract of Genesis on its head, Ruth clings (Heb. *dābaq*) to Naomi (1:14) just as Adam is said to cling (*dābaq*) to Eve (Gen. 2:24)[17]

Powell writes that, although it is easily disputed, the congruence of the use of the word 'clung' in *Genesis* and *Ruth* having a homoerotic connotation is within the realm of interpretive possibility.[18]

Adam and Eve are a sensible starting point given the language utilized in both *Ruth* and *Genesis* to look at family structures found in the Tanakh. In the creation story, it is written that "the Lord God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This one at last Is bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Women, For from man was she taken.' Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh." (Gen. 2:22-24). This phrasing and messaging resonates in *Ruth* in the context that the word 'clung' is used as well. The symbolism of becoming one[19] is present in both *Genesis* and *Ruth* as a marker of a commitment between two individuals. We once again return here to the moment in which Ruth refuses to leave Naomi, clinging to her just as Adam clung to Eve[20].

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Weiman-Kelman says a very similar thing about the poetry of Bat-Miriam, "While the longing (*'ergah*) described is not explicitly sexual, the fact that the speaker insists on its impossibility underscores a reading of this desire as forbidden lesbian desire. The fact that historically such desires could only be alluded to is fundamental to the backward adoption of foundling texts" (*Queer Expectations,* xiv)

[19] I suspect that, if given this example, Girard would say that this too is an illusion of desire. Lacan's *"The Mirror Stage"* would also classify this as a myth, even if important in the development of relationships and self identity.

[20] While resisting the gender essentialism that is all too prevalent in the analysis of queer relationship dynamics, this positioning of Ruth in the place of Adam does strike me. Ruth is the one clinging to Naomi, as Adam clung to Eve, putting her loosely in a male identifying role. It is interesting to look at this alongside Ruth's position as the one acting chivalrously unto Naomi.

Even if I don't believe it to be the most fruitful or productive mode of reading *Ruth* as queer, this path of comparison to other biblical marital relationships raises the intriguing possibility that Ruth and Naomi's relationship can be read as a romantic and/or homoerotic relationship between two women. Nonetheless, I instead propose that the story of Ruth and Naomi, while very possibly an example of biblical lesbianism, is a story of a queerly constructed ancestry. As Weiman-Kelman and Powell have both theorized, reading a text as queer when it is not an explicitly queer story, per se, requires a certain amount of reading between the lines. To both authors, this is not necessarily an over reading, or a search for something that is not actually in the text, rather a form of conversation with the text that brings out of it what once could not have been expressed. In my reading of *Ruth*, I have utilized Halberstam's definitions of queer temporality, and his other qualities of queering time and space,[21] to notice the queerly constructed narrative that lies within this biblical book.

In order to better understand the queer nature of *Ruth*, we must return to the events following the birth of Obed, Ruth's son. Strangely, after Ruth's marriage to Boaz, her name is not mentioned again. In Ruth's absence, she exists only as a sort of ghost, radiating[22] in the narrative while literally being removed. Weiman-Kelman writes extensively about the motif of 'the lesbian ghost,' which is essentially what Ruth becomes. In the chapter "Heys Haunting: Poetics of Lesbian History,", Weiman-Kelman outlines the nature of haunting in relation to lesbian literature. In this literature, as Halberstam's writing understands as well, linear time is foregone, "Poetry can open a new dialogue between past, present, and future, and challenge the workings of normative history, We must, however, "recognize the extent to which such genealogies are not viral, but rather, ghostly, impossible, interrupted'" (Weiman-Kelman, 65). By using Emma

[21] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*
[22] In the most *Girardian* of ways.

Lazarus' poem "Magnetism," Weiman-Kelman explains how in literature, lesbians often appear in some sort of ghostly form, whether that be literal or figurative. Weiman-Kelman then unites the concepts *apparitional lesbians* and *queer spectrality* by using the theories of Carla Freccero and Terry Castle. "The *apparitional lesbian* is Terry Castle's term for the way the lesbian is cast in the role of ghost, at the same time that she is overlooked or 'ghosted' out of existence in canonical literature" (Weiman-Kelman, 35). In the end of *The Book of Ruth,* Ruth is effectively 'ghosted' by having her speaking role relinquished. The memory of her character and the existence of her biological child are at the foreground of the narrative by the end of the fourth book, but Ruth is nowhere to be found.

Weiman-Kelman goes on to say that this *apparitional lesbian* frequently appears as haunting the narrative it is a part of, which is along the lines of queer spectrality, "Haunting is a way that lesbians get to survive through history–they are never fully there but it also means they might still be, at least partially here. Indeed the lesbian herself may be lost, but lesbian desire still haunts the pages of Yiddish poetry" (Weiman-Kelman, 66). Again, the end of *Ruth* is the perfect example of this. Ruth's queer presence is no longer there in reality, only felt haunting the pages of the text. For Weiman-Kelman, this type of lesbian haunting interacts intricately with the fashioning of a queer ancestry through literature.

In reference to the Emma Lazarus poem that this chapter focuses on, Weiman-Kelman proposes that the reader has an important role in the construction of queer narrative temporality, "Through the poetic narration the readers become unwittingly complacent voyeurs as well, leafing through the book of poems as the women depicted in the poem leaf through the picture book" (Weiman-Kelman, 70-71)[23]. This very specific example harkens back to the modes of

[23] Weiman-Kelman goes on to reference the poetry of Kadya Malodovsky, who wrote a collection of poetry about historical figure Doña Garcia, the Spanish Inquisition, as well as Lazarus' fascination with Converso Jews. It is "interesting to think about Lazaurus' continued interest in Converso Jews (forced to convert

transmission and practice of reading Jewish text, and specifically reading *Ruth.* As we go through the year cycle, we constantly reopen this narrative to interpretation and reinterpretation. Ruth not only haunts her own narrative, she haunts all those who read it. Thus, she never truly disappeared.

Alternatively, the *Jewish Study Bible* offers that "Though Ruth has disappeared from the story, she is acknowledged and given her due by the women who speak to Naomi after the birth of Boaz and Ruth's son." [24] In a different vein, Powell posits, "Ruth's silence, if not erasure, means that we as readers are not privy to her perspective on events…In one way, the tilting of the book Ruth may stand as the books most subversive – indeed queerest – symbol, reminding us that so-called grand narratives will always waver under the weight of the kinds of gaps and fissures we have traced here" (Powell, 77).

Ruth, the very namesake of this book, who is now absent from the language, is not absent from the story. Ruth's ancestry achieves a queer futurity in Naomi's adoption of Obed. The remainder of the text contains indications that this ancestry had, in fact, been queerly constructed:

> So Boaz married Ruth; she became his wife, and he cohabited with her. The LORD let her conceive, and she bore a son. And the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today! May his name be perpetuated in Israel! He will renew your life and sustain your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons.' Naomi took the child and held it to her bosom. She became its

and hide their identity) as a parallel or even intersecting with the closet of sexuality" (Weiman-Kelman, 80). This may be a big stretch but it is be interesting to consider in the context of Ruth being the first convert.

[24] *Jewish Study Bible* (1580)

foster mother, and the women neighbors gave him a name, saying, 'A son is born to Naomi!' They named him Obed. (Ruth 4:13-17)

Here, an ambiguous kinship network is formed. It is not clear what Obed's parentage actually looks like. As Ruth has already disappeared from the narrative in terms of language, her role is not straightforward. It is not announced that a son was born to Boaz or Ruth, but instead that a son is born to Naomi.

Powell explains that "Kinship ties…are a system of symbols in which sex, biology, and blood relations are secondary to communal practices, values and beliefs" (71). The kinship ties within the story of *Ruth* are particularly applicable to the framing of this story as one of a queerly constructed ancestry. As Naomi adopts Obed, he becomes a descendant not of Ruth and Boaz but of Ruth and Naomi, queering the parentage of this child, "A son is born to Naomi!"[25]

Beyond the queering of ancestry within the text, the act of reading the *Book of Ruth* in this manner fashions itself a queer ancestry. By reading the *Book of Ruth* as a queer narrative the reader is implicated in the queer ancestry that began within the story. As Ruth is linked to Naomi who is linked to Boaz who is linked to Obed who is linked to David (and so on and so forth), the 'hermeneutic friend'[26] who reads *Ruth* becomes another link in the chain of Ruth's ancestry. In queering the *Book of Ruth*, the story takes on a new life, or perhaps a life that just could not be spoken.

[25] Ruth 4:17

[26] One "who can identify (and identify *with)* desires that were not or could not be, intelligible to authors in the past." (Weiman-Kelman, xv)

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