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## THE SIGN OF ORPAH: READING RUTH THROUGH NATIVE EYES

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### *Prologue: Reading in the Contact Zone*

This was no party  
 how the house was shaking.  
 They were trying  
 to nibble my bones, gnaw  
 my tribal tongue.  
 They took turns  
 pretending they had the power  
 to disembowel my soul  
 and force me to give them  
 my face to wear  
 for Halloween.  
 They like to play  
 that I want to change,  
 that I don't mind ending myself  
 in their holy book.  
 They think they can just twist till the blood has drained  
 and I am as white  
 and delightful  
 as can be.

(Wendy Rose, 'The Mormons Next Door')<sup>1</sup>

The act of reading the Bible has been fraught with difficulty and contradiction for indigenous peoples. On the one hand, the translation of God's Book into Native vernacular comes with a high price: the forcing of oral tongues into static alphabets and its

context of a colonizing Christianity. All too often, biblical reading has produced traumatic disruptions within Native societies and facilitated what we now call *culturecide*. On the other hand, this depressingly long history of victimization should not obscure the ways in which Native peoples have actively resisted *deracinating* processes by reading the Bible on their own terms.<sup>2</sup> As Rigoberta Menchú (Quiché Mayan) notes in her moving *testimonio*, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*:

We accept these Biblical forefathers as if they were our own ancestors, while still keeping within our own culture and our own customs... For instance the Bible tells us that there were kings who beat Christ. We drew a parallel with our king, Tecún Umán, who was defeated and persecuted by the Spaniards, and we take that as our own reality.<sup>3</sup>

Whether Menchú and the Quiché Mayan people scan a printed page or learn the stories by heart, they claim the Bible's 'reality' as their own and thus exceed the bounds of imperial exegesis. A vivid example of this dynamic emerges from the way Menchú and other women of her community learned to negotiate the biblical narratives of liberation.

As Menchú remarks, the Quiché began their reading process by searching the scripture for stories representing 'each one of us'. While the men of Chimel village adopted Moses and the Exodus as their paradigm text of liberation, the women preferred the tale of Judith, who 'fought very hard for her people and made many attacks against the king they had then, until she finally had his head'.<sup>4</sup> Here, the distinct hermeneutic tradition of Mayan women begins to emerge—one that does not indocinate the reader with the colonizer's values but, rather, helps them understand and respond to their own historical situation (in this case, the brutal war being waged against them by the Guatemalan regime of García Lucas). Menchú rejects the belief that the Bible, or the tale of Judith and Holofernes, themselves effect change: 'It's more that each one of us learns to understand his reality and wants to

2. 'Deracination' comes from the Latin word meaning 'to uproot or to alienate'.

3. Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (ed. E. Burgos-Debray, trans. A. Wright; London: Verso, 1984), p. 80.

4. Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, p. 131.

1. In Wendy Rose, *Going to War with All my Relations: New and Selected Poems* (Flagstaff, AZ: Enrtrada Books, 1993).

devote himself to others. More than anything else, it was a form of learning for us.<sup>5</sup> Through this statement, she articulates a process of reading practiced by many of the world's Native peoples—a process that actively selects and invents, rather than passively accepts, from the literate materials exported to them by the dominant Euro-Spanish culture. For Menchú, this transculturation of meaning emerges from the act of biblical reading in the contact zone.

In her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt defines a contact zone as the space of colonial encounters where people who are divided both geographically and historically come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of severe inequality and intractable conflict.<sup>6</sup> She coins this term, instead of borrowing the more Eurocentric 'colonial frontier', because she wants 'to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination'.<sup>7</sup> For Pratt, a 'contact' perspective treats the bonds among colonizers and colonized (for example, Quiché and *Ladinos*) as implying co-presence, mutual influence and interlocking understandings that emerge from deep asymmetries of power. In this essay I will read the biblical book of Ruth through just such a contact perspective forged by the interaction of biblical narrative, the realities of Anglo-European imperialism and the traditions of Cherokee women. This rereading is marked not only by the colonial history of Indian-white relations but also by the persistence of American Indian traditions; not only by Anglo-European genocide but also by Native 'survival';<sup>8</sup> not only by subjugation but also by resistance.

Scholars have traditionally regarded the book of Ruth as one of the Hebrew Bible's literary jewels: 'a brief moment of serenity in

5. Menchú, *I Rigoberta Menchú*, p. 135.
6. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.
7. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 7.
8. The term 'survival' is used by Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa) to describe the complicated gestures of Native survival in the contact zone of contemporary American culture.

the stormy world'.<sup>9</sup> According to Herman Gunkel, for example, Ruth represents one of those 'glorious *poetical narratives*' that exhibits 'a widow's love lasting beyond death and the grave'.<sup>10</sup> Feminist biblical critics have persuasively challenged this view by exposing its masculinist and heterosexist bias. For these interpreters, Ruth's love embodies the love of a woman-identified woman who is forced into the patriarchal institution of levirate marriage in order to survive. It is here—with this struggle over the meaning of women in the text—that I wish to begin my own articulation of the difficult and often dangerous terrain charted by the contact zone. Like Menchú, I hope that my reading of Ruth will function as a form of learning that will enable Native people both to understand more thoroughly how biblical interpretation has impacted us, and to assert our own perspectives more strongly. It seems fitting, then, that this journey begin with a crisis: the journey of Naomi and her husband Elimelech into Moab, the scandalous country of Lot's daughters.

#### *The Daughters of Lot*

Thus both daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day (Gen. 19:36-37, NRSV).

While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel (Num. 25:1-3, NRSV).

There was a famine in the house of bread—the literal meaning of the name 'Bethlehem'—and only the threat of starvation motivated Elimelech, a god-fearing Israelite, to forsake his home for the country harboring the sexually promiscuous and scandalous Moabites. Even worse, once he and his family arrive there, their two sons defy the Hebrew proscription against foreign marriage

9. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), p. 11.
10. H. Gunkel, *What Remains of the Old Testament, and Other Essays* (trans. A.K. Dallas; New York: Macmillan, 1928), p. 21.

by taking the Moabite women Orpah and Ruth as wives. Indeed, for centuries the Israelites had reviled this people as degenerate and, particularly, regarded Moabite women as the agents of impurity and evil. Even the name 'Moab' exhibits this contempt, since it allegedly originates in the incestuous liaison between Lot and his daughters. According to the biblical narrative in Genesis 19, Lot's daughters devise a plan to get him drunk on succeeding nights so that they can seduce him. Both women become pregnant through this relationship and both have sons. Lot's eldest daughter openly declares her son's origins when she calls him Moab, or 'from my father'. We glimpse the result of their actions in Deuteronomy which declares that, even to the tenth generation, 'no Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord' (Deut. 23.3).

As Randall Bailey notes in his fascinating essay on sex and sexuality in Hebrew canon narratives,

the effect of both the narrative in Genesis 19 and the laws in Deuteronomy 23...is to label within the consciousness of the reader the view of these nations as nothing more than 'incestuous bastards'. Through the use of repetition in the narrative in Genesis 19...the narrator grinds home the notion of *manzēfīm* [bastards].<sup>11</sup>

Further, according to Bailey, this dehumanization through graphic sexual innuendo enables one to read other parts of the Deuteronomic history—David's mass slaughter of the Moabites in 2 Sam. 8.2 or the ritual humiliation of the Ammonites in 2 Sam. 12.26-31—as warranted and even meritorious.<sup>12</sup>

The belief in Moabite women as a hypersexualized threat to Israelite men prophetically augurs the Christian attitude toward the indigenous women of the Americas. Indeed, as early as 1511, an anonymous Dutch pamphleteer vouched that 'these folk byven [yke bestes without any reasonableness... And the wymen be

11. Randall Bailey, 'They're Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives', in Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from This Place I. Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 121-38 (131).

12. Bailey, 'They're Nothing', p. 132.

very hoote and dysposed to lecherdnes.<sup>13</sup> Significantly (and, I would add, symptomatically), no less a personage than Thomas Jefferson, the second President of the United States and a framer of its Constitution, forges an important link between the Israelite attitude toward the Moabites and the Christian attitude toward American Indians in his own discourse on the book of Ruth. After finishing his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787)<sup>14</sup>—one of the most important influences upon Euramerican attitudes toward Native peoples—Jefferson submitted the manuscript for comments to Charles Thomson, then Secretary of Congress. Thomson's remarks were included in the published version because, as Jefferson enthused, 'the following observations...have too much merit not to be communicated'. In his response to the section that describes the nation's 'Aborigines', Thomson observes that an alleged lack of 'ardor' in Indian men most probably originated in the forwardness of their women:

Instances similar to that of Ruth and Boaz are not uncommon among them. For though the women are modest and diffident, and so bashful that they seldom lift up their eyes, and scarce ever look a man full in the face, yet being brought up on great subjection, custom and manners reconcile them to modes of acting, which, judged of by Europeans, would be deemed inconsistent with the rules of female decorum and propriety.<sup>15</sup>

Jefferson endorses Thomson's remarks by locating the relevant biblical passage: 'When Boaz had eaten and drank, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of corn: and Ruth came softly, and uncovered his feet, and laid her down. Ruth iii:7.<sup>16</sup> Although cloaked in the rhetoric of Enlightenment gentility, the statements by Thomson and Jefferson nevertheless

13. As cited in Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 10.

14. T. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (ed. William Peden; New York: W.W. Norton, 1982).

15. Jefferson, *Notes*, p. 201.

16. Jefferson, *Notes*, p. 297. Since in Hebrew 'feet' is often used as a euphemism for a man's genitals, Ruth is clearly initiating some sort of sexual encounter with Boaz.

disseminate a cautionary tale that is quite similar to the one concerning the Moabites: both American Indian and Moabite women exist as agents not only of evil and impurity but also of men's sexual frigidity. Given such negative representations, we need to investigate why the biblical author of Ruth chooses to foreground precisely this ideological nexus by consistently identifying the protagonist as 'Ruth of Moab'.

Ruth 2.6 provides an insightful glimpse into this process. After Elimelech and his two sons die, Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem. Naomi subsequently, and recklessly according to some critics, sends her daughter-in-law into the fields of Boaz, a relative of her late husband, who notices the young widow and asks his servant to whom she belongs. 'The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, "she is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab":' The redundant doubling of ethnic markers in this passage—the Moabite from the country of Moab—emphasizes the text's construction of Ruth not only as a *gērāh*, or resident alien, but also as an alien who comes from a despised and barbaric country. However, the significance of this particular repetition has been construed in widely variant ways.

For example, the rabbis who wrote *Ruth R.* believe that it reinforces Ruth's role as a paradigmatic convert to Judaism who 'turned her back upon wicked Moab and its worthless idols to become a God-fearing Jewess—loyal daughter-in-law, modest bride, renowned ancestress of Israel's great King David'.<sup>17</sup> The *Legereh Shmuel* expands this view and suggests that the quality of Ruth's faith even surpasses that of Abraham since, unlike Ruth, he only left home after God commanded him to do so.<sup>18</sup> For more contemporary critics the message of Ruth's identity is not one of conversion, but rather of 'interethnic bonding' that parallels the gender bond established when Naomi's daughter-in-law 'clings' to her husband's mother instead of returning home.<sup>19</sup> William

17. Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, *Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), p. 72.

18. Darr, *Far More Precious*, p. 72.

19. The verb 'to cling' is particularly revealing here, since its customary usage involves the relationships of husbands to wives and of humans to Yahweh. Both womanist and feminist critics have used this linguistic turn to argue for Ruth's status as a woman-identified woman. Or, a woman who

Phipps articulates this position when he argues that the repetition of 'Ruth the Moabite' connotes 'vital religion and ethics in a time of bigotry and mayhem',<sup>20</sup> and acts as an antidote to the xenophobia of the postexilic Jewish community. Rather than rejection of the Moabites and acceptance of the Israelites, then, Ruth's story conjures a vision of ethnic and cultural harmony through the house of David, which claims her as a direct ancestress.

While the presentation of Ruth as a character manifesting the virtues of tolerance and multiculturalism is appealing, Robert Maldonado's attempt to develop a *malinchista* hermeneutics<sup>21</sup> complicates this view by exposing its political and historical ambiguities. For Maldonado, a theologian of Mexican and Hungarian descent, the biblical figure of Ruth foreshadows the existence of *La Malinche*, or Doña Marina, the Aztec woman who became a consort of, and collaborator with, the conquistador Hernán Cortés. *La Malinche's* legacy endures not only in historical Mexican consciousness but also in its linguistic vernacular: '*Malinchista* is a common term for a person who adopts foreign values, assimilates to foreign cultures, or serves foreign interests... The usage ties the meaning of betrayal in Mexican Spanish to the history of colonialism and Indian White relations...'<sup>22</sup> Yet *La Malinche* harbors deeper and even more personal levels of betrayal, since she was sold as a young girl to some Mayan traders—an experience that generated the bilingualism so crucial to her equivocal status. After she had been acquired by Cortés she was 'given' to one of his officers and subsequently married to another conquistador. We begin to glimpse at least some of the complex and disturbing elements underpinning *La Malinche's* collaboration

embodied the capacity 'to care passionately about the quality of another woman's life, to respect each other's choices, and to allow for each other's differences' (Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* [San Diego: Lura Media, 1988], p. 34).

20. William E. Phipps, *Assertive Biblical Women* (Contributions in Women's Studies, 129; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 67.

21. R. Maldonado, 'Reading Malinche Reading Ruth: Toward a Hermeneutics of Betrayal', *Seminaria* 72 (1995), pp. 91-109.

22. Mary Louise Pratt, "'Yo soy la malinche': Chicana Writers and the Poetics of Ethnonationalism', *Callaloo* 16 (1993), pp. 859-73 (860); as cited in Maldonado, 'Reading Malinche', p. 99.

with her colonizers. The similarities between the story of Doña Marina and the actions of Ruth lead Maldonado provocatively to ask: 'Could Ruth be a Moabite Malinche'?<sup>23</sup> Maldonado answers his own question with a strong 'maybe'—precisely because of the redundant identification of Ruth described above, as well as his own investment in *mestizaje*, or the resistant discourse of racial and cultural mixing.

American Indians have a much more suspicious attitude toward the privileging of mixedness, be it *mestizaje*, *métissage* or life in the borderlands. After all, 'mixing' is precisely what Thomas Jefferson proposed as the final solution to the seemingly irresolvable 'Indian problem'. To a visiting delegation of Wyandots, Chipewas and Shawnees he confidently predicted that 'in time, you will be as we are; you will become one people with us. Your blood will mix with ours; and will spread, with ours, over this great island.'<sup>24</sup> And what better way to accomplish this commingling than with **the paradigm of intermarriage** that we glimpse in the book of Ruth? Indeed, one could argue that this 'moment of serenity in the stormy world of the Hebrew Bible' exists as the **prototype for both the vision of Thomas Jefferson and all those who facilitated conquest of indigenous peoples through the pro-motion of assimilation.**

This social absorption prophetically evokes the fate of many American Indian women and children. In the historically matrilineal Cherokee culture, for example, Jefferson's vision of 'mingling' and the realities of intermarriage wreaked havoc upon tribal organization and development. Wives now went to live with their white husbands—a practice that was contrary to the ancient custom of husbands residing in their wives' domicile. Further, according to Wilma Mankiller (the former Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation), the children of these relationships assumed their fathers' surnames and became heirs to their father's, rather than their mother's, houses and possessions.<sup>25</sup> Intermarriage

23. Maldonado, 'Reading Malinche', p. 101.

24. T. Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (ed. A.E. Bergh; Washington, DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1907), p. 464.

25. Wilma Mankiller with Michael Wallis, *Mankiller: A Chief and her People* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1984), p. 26.

between whites and Indians severely disrupted the traditions of Cherokee women, since a genealogy that had for time immemorial passed from mother to son or daughter now shifted to the father and drastically curtailed women's power. In contrast to Maldonado, I would argue that the book of Ruth similarly foregrounds the use of intermarriage as an assimilationist strategy.

Soon after Ruth marries Boaz, the text states that she conceives and bears a son.

Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi'. They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David (4.13-17).

As Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn note, through this announcement **Ruth effectively disappears into the household of Boaz, and the legacy of the future king David closes the door upon her story.**<sup>26</sup> In other words—although Fewell and Gunn do not use these terms—Ruth's assimilation becomes complete through Obed's transfer to Naomi, the proper Jewish woman, and to Boaz, the Israelite husband. The issue then becomes, What motivates this effacement and what ideological ends does it fulfill?

Even to begin answering this question, however, we must first understand how Ruth is linked to two seemingly disparate female icons—one from the Hebrew Bible and the other from the annals of American Indian history: Rahab and Pocahontas. Both of these women have played important roles in the construction of national narratives and both, **like *La Malinche*, have been mythologized as facilitating conquest through their relationships with colonizing men.**

#### *The Anti-Pocahontas Perplex*

You made a decision. My place is with you. I go where you go.  
(Stands With A Fist to John Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves*)

Rahab, of course, is Ruth's other mother-in-law and the Canaanite prostitute who gave birth to Boaz (see Mt. 1.5). The events leading to this remarkable transformation of status are memorialized in the book of Joshua, ch. 2, and can be briefly summarized as

26. Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, p. 105.

follows. Joshua, who was leading the Israelite invasion of Canaan, sends two spies to reconnoiter the city of Jericho. These two men 'entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab and spent the night there' (2.1). When the king of Jericho hears of the spies' presence, he orders Rahab to surrender them. She refuses and hides them under stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. After nightfall she visits the men and requests that, since she has dealt kindly with them, they might in turn spare her and her family 'and deliver our lives from death'. Jericho does indeed fall: 'But Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, Joshua spared. Her family has lived in Israel ever since' (Josh. 6.25). Further, she is extolled in the Greek Bible as a paragon of faith and granted a high status as the ancestress of David and Jesus. Like her daughter-in-law Ruth, Rahab embodies a foreign woman, a Canaanite Other who crosses over from paganism to monotheism and is rewarded for this act by absorption into the genealogy of her husband and son—in this case, into the house of Salmon and, ultimately, of David. And, like Ruth, she represents the position of the indigene in the text, or of those people who occupied the promised land before the invasion of the Israelites.

However, the narrative figures of Rahab and Ruth conjure not only the position of the indigene in the biblical text but also the specific cultural and historical predicament of American Indian women. Cherokee scholar Rayna Green has identified this predicament as 'the Pocahontas Perplex'—one of Euramerica's most important master narratives about Native women. It is named for the daughter of Powhatan and the mythology that has arisen around one of the most culturally significant encounters between Indians and whites. In this version of the story Powhatan Indians capture Captain John Smith and his men while they are exploring the territory around what is now called Jamestown, Virginia. After marching Smith to their town, the Indians lay his head on a large stone and prepare to kill him with their clubs. Precisely at that moment, Pocahontas—the favorite daughter of Powhatan—uses her body as a human shield and prevents Smith from being executed. She then further intercedes on behalf of the English colonists, who were starving after a long winter, and consequently

saves not only the colonists but also the future of English colonization.<sup>27</sup>

As a master narrative with an ideological function, the Pocahontas Perplex construes the nobility of Pocahontas and other Indian women as 'princess' who

'must save or give aid to white men'. As Green notes, 'the only good Indian—male or female, Squanto, Pocahontas, Sacagawea, Cochise, the Little Mohee or the Indian Doctor—rescues and helps white men'. But the Indian woman is even more burdened by this narrow definition of a 'good Indian', for it is she, not the males, whom white men desire sexually.<sup>28</sup>

A consequence of this desire is that the 'good' feminine image also implies the 'bad' one. She is the Squaw whose degraded sexuality is vividly summarized in the frontier song 'Little Red Wing': She 'lays on her back in a cowboy shack, and lets cowboys poke her in the crack'.<sup>29</sup> The specter of the Squaw—also known as a daughter of Lot—retroactively taints Rahab and Ruth; after all,

27. While most Americans still believe in the myth that Pocahontas loved John Smith, a growing body of scholarship has significantly revised this tale of their encounter. Rayna Green and Kathleen Brown are among those who have persuasively argued that Smith's own account of his captivity, near-execution and rescue by Pocahontas eloquently testifies to yet another example of misrecognized and misinterpreted cultural difference. Brown, for example, contends that Smith's recording of Pocahontas covering his body with her own was most probably part of an adoption ritual in which Powhatan defined his relationship to him as one of patriarchal dominance ('The Anglo-Algonquian Gender Frontier', in Nancy Shoemaker [ed.], *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on American Indian Women* [London: Routledge, 1995], pp. 26-48 [39]). Unfortunately, 'Smith understood neither the ritual adoption taking place nor the significance of Powhatan's promise to make him a werowance and to "for ever esteeme him as [he did] his son Nantagouud"' (p. 40). Green (in 'The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture', *Massachusetts Review* [autumn 1975], pp. 698-714) provides a further gloss. She notes that, as the daughter of the tribe's leader and a woman of considerable status, Pocahontas served as Smith's 'mother', for he had to be reborn, after a symbolic death, as one of the tribe. Thus, Pocahontas was not delaying Smith's execution and thwarting her own people when she threw her body over his. She was in fact acting on behalf of her people (p. 35).

28. Green, 'The Pocahontas Perplex', p. 703.

29. Green, 'The Pocahontas Perplex', p. 711.

the former earns her living as a prostitute and, according to Thomas Jefferson and company, the latter's behavior in the biblical counterpart of the cowboy shack was shockingly immoral. Such a debased starting point enables the scriptural stories to proclaim even more stridently the metamorphosis of Rahab and Ruth into the Israelite version of the Pocahontas Perplex. In this scenario, Salmon and Boaz stand in for John Smith. The result, however, remains the same. An indigenous woman forsakes her people and aligns herself with the men whom Yahweh had directed to 'break down their altars, smash their pillars, burn their Asherah poles with fires, and hew down the idols of their gods, and thus blot out their name from their places' (Deut. 12:3).

From an American-Indian perspective, then, the midrashic interpretation of Ruth as the paradigmatic convert who 'turned her back upon wicked Moab and its worthless idols to become a God-fearing Jewess'<sup>30</sup> seems a much more accurate description of the text's actual function than Robert Maldonado's appeal to some undecidable state of *mestizaje*. Indeed, even Ruth's name affirms the hermeneutic acumen of the rabbis, since it derives from the Hebrew root *rw**h*, meaning 'watering to saturation'.<sup>31</sup> However, whereas the success of this ideological irrigation inspires rejoicing on behalf of the Israelites, it is an instance of mourning for American Indian women. Yet another relative has succumbed to—been filled up by and 'saturated' by—a hegemonic culture.

Is there no hope in the book of Ruth? Is it nothing but a tale of conversion/assimilation and the inevitable vanishing of the indigene in the literary and social text? In fact, there does exist a counter-narrative—a kind of anti-Pocahontas—whose presence offers some small hope to the Native reader: the sign of Orpah, sister-in-

30. Darr, *Far More Precious*, p. 72.

31. In *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive figures in Israel's Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), Andre LaCocque observes that most biblical exegetes 'stubbornly propose' the Syriac translation of 'Ruth' as an abbreviation of *Re'uth*, or female companion. Like other scholars who have carefully studied the book of Ruth, LaCocque persuasively argues that, philologically, the name 'Ruth' has nothing to do with *r'h* (to be a companion), but rather is a cognate of *rw**h* (to water to saturation). See his discussion, pp. 115-16.

law of Ruth and the woman who returned to her mother's house.

'They broke once more into loud weeping. But while Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, Ruth clung to her' (Ruth 1.14, translation by Sasson). The figure of Orpah is only mentioned twice in the book of Ruth—1.4, which names her as one of the 'Moabite wives', and 1.14, which describes her decision to part ways with Naomi and Ruth. Unfortunately, however, most contemporary scholars mimic the biblical text by leaving her to return home unattended, both literally and critically. Traditionally, Orpah generated much more scrutiny, although much of it was negative. According to midrashic literature, for example, her name allegorically connotes the opposite of Ruth's, since it originates in the root '*oreph*, that is, the nape of the neck, and describes how she turns the back of her neck to Naomi when she decides to return to Moab. 'That the sages name Orpah for this moment in her history indicates that they also consider it the most important part of her story'<sup>32</sup>—and it explicitly charge her with the narrative role of abandoner.<sup>33</sup> Some writers even suggest that she later becomes the mother of Goliath, the famous enemy of Israel, and that Goliath himself was 'the son of a hundred fathers'.<sup>34</sup> But what else could one expect from a 'daughter of Lot'?

William Phipps expresses a more current and enlightened view of Ruth's sister-in-law:

Orpah displays wrenching ambivalence, deciding first one way and then another. She finally takes Naomi's common-sense advice and, after an affectionate goodbye, returns 'to her people and to her gods'. Her life is difficult enough without taking responsibility for an older widow in a land presumed to be governed by a deity different from the ones she worships (the Moabite Stone refers to Chemosh and to goddess Ashtar, or Ishtar)... She does the prudent thing and heads for her family home to await an arranged remarriage.<sup>35</sup>

32. Leila Leah Bronner, 'A Thematic Approach to Ruth in Rabbinic Literature', in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (Feminist Companion to the Bible, 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 146-69 (155).

33. M. Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 74.

34. Bronner, 'Thematic Approach', p. 155.

35. Phipps, *Assertive Biblical Women*, p. 53.



While I do not disagree with Phipps's summary, I also believe that he fails to recognize what is perhaps the most important element of Orpah's decision. She does not just take the path of least resistance—the path of prudence, freedom from responsibility and passivity. Rather, Orpah returns to *bêt 'immañh*, 'her mother's house'.<sup>36</sup> Carol Meyers observes that the use of *bêt 'immañh* is quite rare in the Hebrew Bible and indicates a family setting identified with the mother rather than the father.<sup>37</sup> In fact, she notes, each biblical passage using this phrase shares a similarity with all the others: a woman's story is being told; women act as agents in their own destiny; the agency of women affects other characters in the narrative; the setting is domestic; and finally, a marriage is involved.<sup>38</sup> Meyers further concludes that all biblical references to 'the mother's house' offer female perspectives on issues that elsewhere in the Bible are viewed through a predominantly androcentric lens. I would argue that the female perspective offered by 'the mother's house' in Ruth is a profoundly important one for Native women, since it signifies that Orpah—the one whose sign is the back of her neck—exists as the story's central character.

To Cherokee women, for example, Orpah connotes hope rather than perversity, because she is the one who does not reject her traditions or her sacred ancestors. Like Cherokee women have done for hundreds if not thousands of years, Orpah chooses the house of her clan and spiritual mother over the desire for another culture. In fact, Cherokee women not only chose the mother's house, they also owned it (along with the property upon which it stood as well as the gardens surrounding it). Read through these eyes, the book of Ruth tells a very different story indeed.

Ojibway poet Kimberly Blaeser illuminates this transformative process of reading through a concept she describes as 'response-ability'. In her essay, 'Pagans Rewriting the Bible', Blaeser defines

36. 'But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house"' (Ruth 1.8).

37. Carol Meyers, 'Returning Home: Ruth 1.8 and the Gendering of the Book of Ruth', in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (Feminist Companion to the Bible, 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 85-114 (91).

38. Meyers, 'Returning Home', pp. 109-110.

response-ability as the need of American Indian people to 'reconsider, reevaluate, reimagine what [religious] terms might mean or have meant to Indian people as well as what they might come to mean to all people'.<sup>39</sup> This is precisely what Rigoberta Menchú accomplishes in her choosing of Judith over Moses and in her insistence that the meaning of any biblical text reflect her people's reality. It is also what I have tried to effect in my own rereading of Ruth through a Native perspective and, more particularly, through the perspective of Cherokee women. I have reconsidered the dominant exegesis of Ruth as either a paradigm of conversion or a woman-identified woman. I have reimaged this literary jewel of the Hebrew Bible as the narrative equivalent of a last arrow pageant.

During the implementation of the Dawes Act,<sup>40</sup> the 'last-arrow pageant' was a public ritual that marked the translation of American Indian identity into its more 'civilized' white counterpart. Etymologically, the word 'translation' means 'carried from one place to another', or transported across the borders between one language and another, one country and another, one culture and another.<sup>41</sup> In the context of last-arrow pageants, participants performed and acknowledged their own translation into the idiom of Euramerican culture:

This conversion of Indians into individual landowners was ceremonialized at 'last-arrow' pageants. On these occasions, the Indians were ordered by the governments to attend a large assembly on the reservation. Dressed in traditional costume and carrying a bow and arrow, each Indian was individually summoned from a tepee and told to shoot an arrow. He then retreated to the tepee and re-emerged wearing 'civilized' clothing, symbolizing a crossing from

39. Kimberly M. Blaeser, 'Pagans Rewriting the Bible: Heterodoxy and the Representation of Spirituality in Native American Literature', *Review of International English Literature* 25.1 (1994), pp. 12-31 (13).

40. Passed in 1887 and named for its sponsor, Massachusetts senator Henry L. Dawes, the Dawes Act attempted to detribalize American Indians by privatizing communally held Indian lands and partitioning reservations into 160- and 80-acre lots subject to sale or lease by the government. Between 1887 and its end in 1934, the Dawes Act reduced the total land base of American Indian peoples by two-thirds.

41. J. Hillis Miller, *Topographies: Crossing Aesthetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 316.

the primitive to the modern world. Standing before a plow, the Indian was told: 'Take the handle of this plow, this act means that you have chosen to live the life of the white man—and the white man lives by work.' At the close of the ceremony, each allottee was given an American flag and a purse with the instructions: 'This purse will always say to you that the money you gain from your labor must be wisely kept.'<sup>42</sup>

For 'Ruth the Moabite', the translation from savagery to civilization (or from Asherah to Yahweh) similarly involves the relinquishing of her ethnic and cultural identity. For Orpah, it necessitates a courageous act of self and communal affirmation: the choosing of the indigenous mother's house over that of the alien Israelite Father.

In this interpretation, my responseability as a person of Cherokee descent and as an informed biblical reader transforms Ruth's positive value into a negative and Orpah's negative value into a positive. Such is the epistemological vertigo inspired by reading in the contact zone. Indeed, paraphrasing Blaaser, recognizes that life—or meaning in the book of Ruth—cannot be produced for easy consumption. Chinese feminist theologian Kwok Pui Lan echoes a similar sentiment in her statement that 'these attempts at indigenization [of the Bible] show clearly that biblical truth cannot be pre-packaged, that it must be found in the actual interaction between text and context in the concrete historical situation'.<sup>43</sup> I can only hope that my indigenization of Ruth has located new meaning in the interaction between biblical text and American Indian context—a meaning that resists imperial exegesis and contributes to the empowerment of aboriginal peoples everywhere.

## Local is Lekker, but Ubuntu is Best: Indigenous Reading Resources from a South African Perspective

GERALD O. WEST

### Introduction

As the first part of my title suggests, vernacular hermeneutics is vernacular! To speak of vernacular hermeneutics is to speak of the reading strategies and resources of ordinary people. However, as soon as I 'speak of their reading strategies and resources, vernacular hermeneutics ceases to be vernacular.

So, at the heart of vernacular hermeneutics is the relationship between the socially engaged biblical scholar and the ordinary indigenous reader. By 'ordinary reader' I mean generally, any non-specialist reader. But more specifically, I use the term to designate poor and marginalized indigenous reader/hearers of the Bible. My presence in 'speaking of' vernacular hermeneutics cannot, and must not, be elided; indeed, it must be foregrounded. This is particularly true because I am a white, middle-class, male South African, and we have too often spoken on behalf of others; but it is also true, I would argue, for those biblical scholars who are closer to ordinary indigenous readers of the Bible than I am. Our presence takes up the space and the place of the ordinary indigenous reader; we re-present her and him.

### Ordinary Readers

I want to limit talk of vernacular hermeneutics to the reading strategies and resources of ordinary readers of the Bible (West 1999: 10). Biblical scholars are, by definition, not ordinary readers. We are (academically) trained readers. This is the case for those

42. Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1993), pp. 235-36.

43. Kwok Pui Lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World: The Bible and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 11.