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Defying "conversion therapies" of LGBTQ+ persons in Africa: queering Ruth and Boaz's encounter at the threshing floor

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Abstract

The contestation around Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and plus all other (LGBTQ+) persons' genders and sexual identities is considered a colonial inheritance and modern Western imposition. Within this contested space, faith, politics, and culture play a fundamental role in inciting violence on the non-heteronormative embodiment of an LGBTQ+ person's Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression of Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC). One of the ways religion, culture, and politics collectively incite violence is through "conversion therapies", which exacerbates LGBTQ+ vulnerabilities. This pseudo-therapy's goal is to convert and suppress the SOGIESC of LGBTQ+ persons, thus leading to life-denying conditions. To counter "conversion therapies", this article is interested in the encounter between Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor as a site of situational vulnerability. The Hebrew Bible emphasises the depiction of threshing floors as sacred spaces. Threshing floors are traditionally used for essential life-sustaining activities such as food and sustenance. Therefore, this article seeks to queer the holy space of the threshing floor by using nego-feminism, queer agency and third space as theoretical frameworks. This article thus seeks to contribute to the knowledge production of queer agency in spaces of situational vulnerability.

Keywords

LGBTQ+; conversion therapies; nego-feminism; Ruth; queer agency

1. Introduction

"Conversion therapies"[1] seek to alter the sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer plus all other (LGBTQ+) persons, or in this article, collectively referred to as queer persons. Firstly, I will unpack what "conversion therapies" mean, its effects on LGBTQ+ persons, and its role in Africa. Secondly, I will explain three theoretical frameworks namely, nego-feminism, queer theory, and the third space that will be used. These theoretical frameworks become lenses to engage the encounter between Ruth and Boaz. Thirdly, the story of Ruth and Boaz is read from this threefold theoretical framework and offers points of engagement to counter "conversion therapies" in Africa. Lastly, this article outlines queer agency in situational vulnerability which LGBTQ+ persons experience in, during and after "conversion therapies".

2. LGBTQ+ "conversion therapies" in Africa

On the African continent, LGBTQ+ people experience various forms of violence. Moagi and Mavhandu-Mudzusi explain that these forms of violence include sexual violence, criminalisation, derogation, exclusion, rejection, labelling, and banning from social gatherings.[2] On the continent, there has been a phenomenon developing that encompasses these various forms of violence in a systematic manner, namely "conversion therapies".

In 2021, the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria published a *Report on Current Practices in Conversion Therapy, Emerging Technology, and the Protection of LGBTQ+ rights in Africa*.[3] This report

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1 In this article, "conversion therapies" will be placed in inverted commas to indicate that it is a pseudo-therapy.

2 Lefatshe Anna Moagi and Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi, "Violence against LGBT(QI) Persons in Africa," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, ed. Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 876–878.

3 Centre for Human Rights. Report on Current Practices in Conversion Therapy, Emerging Technology, and the Protection of LGBTIQ+ Rights in Africa. [Online]. Available: https://www.chr.up.ac.za/images/centrenews/2021/Current_practices_ in_ conversion_therapy_and_emerging_technology_14_May_2021.pdf [Accessed: March 03, 2024].

defines "conversion therapy" as an umbrella term that uses "therapy techniques or other activities that attempt to change or alter sexual orientation or reduce a person's attraction to other persons of the same sex and instil conventional gender roles".[4] The report also details the various forms of "conversion therapies", including psychoanalytic therapy, faith-based therapy, sexual abuse, and surgical interventions.[5] The impact of "conversion therapies" is both physical and psychological. On a physical level, interventions consist of "surgical procedures, the consumption of chemicals, and electroshock therapy as well as physical assaults and sexual violence such as 'corrective' rape".[6] From a psychological perspective, LGBTQ+ persons "experience conflict over their self-identity, which harms them and can lead to depression. In some cases, this may lead to a negative self-image, trauma responses, and suicidal ideation resulting in some of these individuals committing suicide".[7]

The Report states that in Africa, "conversion therapies" consist of the following forms, namely, religious, traditional, conversion camps and psychoanalytic treatment. Firstly, the religious communities in Africa are known perpetrators of "conversion therapy by organizing religious crusades through which they claim to exorcise what they call 'demons of homosexuality'".[8] Secondly, traditional methods are based on cultural reasons. Thirdly, training camps are used as an "attempt to safeguard the family honour".[9] In these camps, "LGBTQ+ people are taken to isolated camps where they receive advice that will be able to subsequently change their sexual orientation".[10] Finally, this form of "conversion therapy … takes place in person and over the internet, utilising conventional psychotherapy techniques to explain away and combat same-sex desire".[11] "Conversion therapies" is a systematic approach to subvert, suppress and

4 Centre for Human Rights, "Report on Current Practices in Conversion Therapy," 5.

5 Centre for Human Rights, "Report on Current Practices in Conversion Therapy," 5–8.

6 Centre for Human Rights, "Report on Current Practices in Conversion Therapy," 8.

7 Centre for Human Rights, "Report on Current Practices in Conversion Therapy," 8–9.

8 Centre for Human Rights, "Report on Current Practices in Conversion Therapy," 11.

9 Centre for Human Rights, "Report on Current Practices in Conversion Therapy," 11.

10 Centre for Human Rights, "Report on Current Practices in Conversion Therapy," 12–13.

11 Centre for Human Rights, "Report on Current Practices in Conversion Therapy," 13.

destroy LGBTQ+ persons SOGIESC. "Conversion therapies" is a symptom of several sources that perpetuate violence against LGBTQ+ persons.

Moagi and Mavhandu-Mudzusi posit that the sources of violence are multi-faceted. These sources include protecting heteronormativity, adherence to national laws, perpetuating inequality, and religion.[12] These sources of violence impact LGBTQ+ people's access to healthcare, force migration and seeking asylum, and subjugation to abuse and police brutality.[13] In this article, I am particularly interested in the way religion as a source contributes to violence.

3. Role of religion against LGBTQ+ people

As a vast continent, three religions can be identified as significant role players in Africa, namely African Traditional Religions, Christianity, and Islam.[14] Firstly, according to Olali, African Traditional Religions "do not support sexual relationships besides the male-female binary".[15] Secondly, there is also pushback in countries such as Nigeria and Egypt through the marriage of Islam and state sponsorship phobias.[16] Lastly, Christianity, I want to argue that it is a primary perpetrator of violence on the African continent against LGBTQ+ persons. Matebeni contends that "an intimate

12 Moagi and Mavhandu-Mudzusi, "Violence Against LGBT(QI) Persons in Africa," 879–882.

13 Moagi and Mavhandu-Mudzusi, "Violence Against LGBT(QI) Persons in Africa," 882–883.

14 Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe, "Religious Traditions in Africa: An Overview of Origins, Basic Beliefs, and Practices," in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religions in Africa and the African Diaspora,* ed. Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe and Carolyn M. Jones Medine (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 7.

15 David Olali, "African Traditional Religion, Sexual Orientation, Transgender, and Homosexuality," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Traditional Religion,* ed. Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe, and Toyin Falola (London: MacMillan, 2022), 325.

16 Danoye Oguntola-Laguda and Adriaan van Klinken, "Uniting a Divided Nation? Nigerian Muslim and Christian Responses to the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act," in *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*, ed. Adriaan van Klinken, and Ezra Chitando (Routledge, 2016), 35–48; Serena Tolino, "Discourses on Homosexuality in Egypt When Religion and the State Cooperate", in *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*, ed. Adriaan van Klinken, and Ezra Chitando (Routledge, 2016), 49–62.

connection between anti-homosexuality"[17] and religion exists "because the misconception that homosexuality is un-African is similarly applied to homosexuality being un-Christian".[18] Matebeni goes on to argue that "LGBT [persons] did not necessarily exist as named in African societies, but varied practices and people of diverse sexualities and genders did".[19] Evidence exists that before colonisation, "African societies showed a wide tolerance and acceptance of non-normative sexualities and genders".[20] Remnants of the colonial and now postcolonial states bear testimonies to the "legacies, religion, and laws [that] were imposed on the continent".[21] Religion is a key instigator of violence against LGBTQ+ persons in Africa, and Christianity in particular.

The Bible is often cited as the source for gender and sexual views. This is often accompanied by "oft-quoted biblical prohibitions".[22] This is not only limited to Christianity but includes "other religions on the continent, including Islam, Judaism and Hinduism".[23] Even though LGBTQ+ persons experience violence sourced from religion, they "continue to draw strength from faith, even when excluded from formal religious spaces".[24]

4. How LGBTQ+ persons use religion to counter stigma, discrimination, and violence

Religion is a source of strength for LGBTQ+ persons and is the basis for developing their counter-narratives of epistemological and ontological justice on the continent.[25] However, we need to be careful not to over-

17 Zethu Matebeni, "The State of LGBT Rights in Africa," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, ed. Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 471.

18 Matebeni, "The State of LGBT Rights in Africa," 471.

19 Matebeni, "The State of LGBT Rights in Africa," 471.

20 Matebeni, "The State of LGBT Rights in Africa," 466.

21 Matebeni, "The State of LGBT Rights in Africa," 466.

22 John Marnell, *Seeking Sanctuary: Stories of Sexuality, Faith and Migration* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2021), 2.

23 Marnell, *Seeking Sanctuary*, 2.

24 Marnell, *Seeking Sanctuary*, 3.

25 Gerald West, Charlene van der Walt, and Kapya Koama, "When Faith Does Violence: Reimagining Engagement between Churches and LGBTI Groups on Homophobia in

romanticise this notion when LGBTQ+ persons draw from religion. Sibisi and van der Walt have found that in a faith community in KwaZulu-Natal, LGBTQ+ persons perpetuate heteropatriarchal patterns of behaviour and systems by placing masculine-presenting bodies in positions of power.[26] This illustrates the pervasiveness of hetero-patriarchy that structures, controls and codifies the lives of LGBTQ+ persons.

An example of the liberative praxis in the queer faith movement is the use of Contextual Bible Study. Often, the Bible is the site of struggle, but Van der Walt and Davids showed that when reading the story of Joseph together with LGBTQ+ people, contextual Bible Study:

> as a tool to assist in developing interpretative resources for Izitabane believers to enhance resilience and spark hope. In line with the imperative of Queer Biblical Hermeneutics, the essay aimed to illustrate the potential for change when the tool of the master is used against the master.[27]

Heteropatriarchal religious views can only be disrupted if the very same tools are used to subvert their oppressive use. Van der Walt and Davids showed that by reading and interpreting the Bible through a queer hermeneutical lens, the dominant narrative of heteropatriarchy becomes disrupted, disturbed, and destabilised. From the discussion above, it is evident that religion as a space is toxic for LGBTQ+ people. The question is, then, what strategies do LGBTQ+ persons need to use to counter "conversion therapies"? As part of this strategy to continue reading and interpreting the Bible for meaning making, I am interested in Ruth and Boaz's encounter on the threshing floor to explore its possibilities to counter "conversion therapies". Before we get to the threshing floor, I focus on using nego-feminism, queer agency and third space as theoretical frameworks to analyse the encounter between Ruth and Boaz.

Africa," *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2016).

26 Tracey Sibisi and Charlene van der Walt, "Queering the Queer: Engaging Black Queer Christian Bodies in African Faith Spaces," *The African Journal of Gender and Religion* 27, no. 2 (2021).

27 Charlene van der Walt and Hanzline R. Davids, "Heteropartriachy's Blaming Game: Reading Genesis 37 with Izitabane during COVID-19," *Old Testament Essays* 35, no. 1 (2022):47.

5. Theoretical framework: Nego-feminism, queer theorising and third space

This section serves as the theoretical framework for this article. I will focus on nego-feminism, queer agency and third space. Ultimately, this section will serve as frames to look closely at Ruth and Boaz's encounter on the threshing floor. Nego-feminism, a term coined by Obioma Nnaemeka, encapsulates a unique approach to feminism rooted in "African cultures [in] the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance".[28] Nnaemeka explains what nego-feminism means in practice:

> negotiation has the double meaning of "give and take/exchange" and "cope with successfully/go around". African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practised in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework.[29]

According to Byrne, Nnaemeka's "ideas are not popular, mainly because of the unfortunate connotations of the name she chose; but they are worth exploring in more detail"[30] since Nnaemeka insists on "building on the indigenous, and (re)claiming the third space".[31] According to Kaunda and Kaunda, nego-feminism "is an investigative theoretical tool that interrogates the ways in which African women negotiate indigenous knowledge systems for self-empowerment, resistance, and emancipation".[32] Furthermore, nego-feminism posits that African women actively engage

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28 Obioma Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 2 (2004):377.

29 Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism," 378.

30 Deirdre Byrne, "Decolonial African Feminism for White Allies," Journal of International Women's Studies 21, no.7 (2020): 42.

31 Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism," 376.

32 Chammah J.Kaunda, and Mutale Mulenga Kaunda. "Imbusa as a Return to the Divine: Sexual Desire, Gender, and Female Ritual in Bemba Mythology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 37, no. 1 (2021):33.

with and counter patriarchal cultural and religious traditions rather than merely conforming to them. Despite often being viewed on the surface as docile in matters of desire and sexuality, African women skilfully exploit seemingly restrictive environments, such as rituals, to resist and undermine patriarchal dominance and abuse.[33] With nego-feminism in mind, I move to the second theoretical framework of this article.

In *African(a) Queer Presence: Ethics and Politics of Negotiation* (2021), Nyeck delves into the nuances of queerness in Africa, moving away from state-focused approaches to emphasise individual agency, negotiation, and resilience in the queer experience. Nyeck proposes "Africanizing queerness"[34] as a framework for understanding contemporary identities and their negotiation of ethics within African contexts. Nyeck's arguments seek to contribute to African queer studies a strategic and ethical perspective of belonging and negotiation and to theorise the strategic behaviour of queer characters in selected African films as a means of exploring "possibilities of (queer) being and becoming"[35] using the diverse works of African diaspora authors – ethicists, theologians, and artists, including Nnaemeka's nego-feminism. Nyeck "presents an interactionist and intersectional approach to understanding and thinking queer agency. It rests on an ethic of negotiation proper to African cultures".[36]

By expounding on the idea of queer agency, Nyeck refers to Sankofa as "a mythical bird in Akan (in Ghana) cosmology that flies forward while looking backwards with eggs in its mouth" (:10). According to Nyeck:

> the figure of Sankofa adds another relational possibility to understanding negotiation in society: stillness in the present moment; a respite from directional thinking and the recognition of Africa's humanity in the moment and in all forms; an engagement with Africa's already present transformations. A moment of deep contemplation where all directional aspirations collapse in the realization of the puzzling complexity that the image of

33 Kaunda and Kaunda. "Imbusa as a Return to the Divine,"33.

34 S.N Nyeck, *African(a) Queer Presence: Ethics and Politics of Negotiation* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 2.

35 Nyeck, *African(a) Queer Presence,* 5.

36 Nyeck, *African(a) Queer Presence,* 5.

> Sankofa itself evokes; a present fecund with necessary (re)turns and life-bearing transformational paradigms for individuals and communities.[37]

Nyeck imagines a deep relational state of contemplation where positionalities dissipate for the sake of the community, justice, and transformation. Reflecting on the Sankofa mythical bird, Nyeck theorises queer agency as "forward-looking, that is, it is in search of its realization. It is also explained as a relational theology of the body, the body of love, a theology that inflects power, death, and resurrection with queer meaning".[38] Queer agency is vulnerable, simultaneously looking back, looking in the now and looking forward. Where does this take place?

Nnaemeka argues that nego-feminism is practised within a third space. Nnaemeka provides the following explanation of what a third space is not:

> [It is] not the either/or location of stability; it is both/and space where borderless territory and free movement authorize the capacity to simultaneously theorize practice, practice theory, and allow the mediation of policy. The third space, which allows for the coexistence, interconnection, and interaction of thought, dialogue, planning, and action, constitutes the arena where I have witnessed the unfolding of feminism in Africa (2004:360).

This space is not simply a location of compromise but a site of creative resistance and reconstruction where new identities, practices, and forms of knowledge emerge from the interactions between different cultures and power structures. An example of the third space is Contextual Bible Study, a strategy and space where LGBTQ+ persons create counter-narratives of resistance. In the next section, I turn to the encounter of Ruth and Boaz's narrative, keeping in mind that this article is interested in whether this encounter can offer insights into countering "conversion therapies".

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37 Nyeck, *African(a) Queer Presence*, 10.

38 Nyeck, *African(a) Queer Presence*, 10.

6. Encounter at the threshing floor as the third space

The book of Ruth tells the story of Naomi, Ruth, Orpah, and Boaz. This poignant story tells the story of vulnerable women within a patriarchal system. Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah's vulnerability stems from their widowhood. Orpah and Ruth were Moabite women. After the deaths of their husbands, mother-in-law Naomi returns to Bethlehem and encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their respective families in Moab. Orpah returns to her people, while Ruth stays with Naomi and embarks on a journey to Bethlehem (Ruth 1). Masenya sees in this move "[t]he capacity of women to change their undesirable situations".[39] Furthermore, "Naomi's independent move to struggle against poverty by returning to Bethlehem (not prompted by direct divine revelation or male counsel), and Ruth's own decision to cling to Naomi were basically own decisions to address their (not men's) undesirable situation".[40] In other words, Masenya views Naomi and Ruth's actions as "agents for the security of their socio-economic freedom".[41] What is evident from the get-go of this story is that Ruth, Orpah and Naomi are vulnerable because of their situation. Interestingly, Brown defines situational vulnerability as a condition "referring to biographical circumstances, situational difficulties or transgressions – this can include the input of a third party or structural force and can also involve human agency (often to a contested extent)".[42] (2015:28). Based on Brown's definition, Ruth, Orpah and Naomi are experiencing situational vulnerability.

In Bethlehem (Ruth 2), Ruth gleans amongst the sheaves in the fields collecting grain – again showing socio-economic agency for freedom. Unbeknownst to Ruth, she stepped into the fields of Boaz, a distant relative of Naomi's late husband. In the field, Boaz encounters Ruth and shows her generosity as a reward for her kindness towards Naomi. Reading chapter 2 against the grain, a sexual undertone comes to the fore. Boaz tells Ruth that

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39 Madipoane Masenya, "Struggling with Poverty/Emptiness: Rereading the Naomi-Ruth Story in African-South Africa," *Journal of theology for Southern Africa* 120 (December 2004):47.

40 Masenya, "Struggling with Poverty/Emptiness,"47.

41 Masenya, "Struggling with Poverty/Emptiness,"47.

42 Kate Brown, "Vulnerability and Young People: Care and Social Control in Policy and Practice" (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 28.

he instructed the men not to bother her. Later, Naomi tells Ruth that the fields she collected grain in should belong to Boaz; if she didn't, other men might have molested her. Masenya posits that:

> [I]n the Hebrew text, the word "bother", when used in the textual context in which the object of the act of bothering is a female person, implies sexual molestation. Earlier on, even Naomi had advised Ruth to stay with Boaz's young women as she might be "… bothered in another field" (2:23). It would appear though that in her relentless efforts to seek marriage/security for Ruth at all costs, Naomi did not "bother" if her daughter-in-law were to be bothered by Boaz![43]

Although this idea of Naomi using Ruth can initially be challenging to comprehend, chapter 3 solidifies Masenya's argument. In chapter 3, Naomi tells the situational vulnerable Ruth how to seduce Boaz on the threshing floor. Waters posits that threshing floors "were regarded as more than agricultural spaces"[44] instead, they were "sacred spaces"[45] and "Yahweh was considered intimately connected to threshing floors because of the essential life-sustaining activities that happen at these locations".[46] Ruth's initiative to approach Boaz on the threshing floor exemplifies a bold challenge to traditional gender norms and societal expectations in a patriarchal context. As a Moabite widow, her act of seeking out Boaz—a relative of her late husband – demonstrates a strategic exertion of agency aimed at securing protection and support for herself and her mother-in-law.

However, Linafelt, commenting on what happened between the moment Ruth left Naomi and encountered Boaz, posits that:

> Ruth the obedient and submissive recedes before Ruth who demonstrates a fierce solidarity with Naomi, but who is far from obedient and never entirely forthcoming. She demonstrates a strong

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43 Madipoane Masenya, "Is Ruth the ʾēšet Ḥayil for Real? An Exploration of Womanhood from African Proverbs

to the Threshing Floor (Ruth 3:1-13)," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36 (July 2010):15.

44 Jaime L. Waters, *Threshing Floors in Ancient Israel: Their Ritual and Symbolic Significance* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 14.

45 Waters, *Threshing floors in Ancient Israel*, 14.

46 Waters, *Threshing floors in Ancient Israel*, 14.

> agency in the narrative, pushing Boaz to drop his veneer of social acceptability through her verbal sparring in which she employs subtle yet recognizable double *entendres*. [47]

What we noticed on the threshing floor is Ruth's agency in a time when women were marginalised because of the patriarchal system. Ruth negotiates a way out for her and Naomi in this sacred space. Brueggemann is also of the opinion that this "story of Ruth is about careful negotiation between a vulnerable outsider woman and a man of substance in the community, a negation that has to do with honour and shame, but that is also a self-consciousness about economic issues in the exchange".[48]

This encounter, viewed through both nego-feminism and queer agency, symbolises a rejection of passive womanhood dependent on male agency – instead, Ruth's agency advocates for the "no ego" principle, balancing assertion with accommodation. Furthermore, Ruth's situational vulnerability and Boaz's response disrupt conventional power dynamics, highlighting a relationship model based on empathy, care, and mutual respect. Perhaps Mona West depicts what happens here even better:

> The strategy of Ruth and Boaz invites us to join forces to create communities in which all of us have equal access to goods and services. Like Boaz, those of us with some privilege (those of us who are white, male, able-bodied, educated and have economic resources) can use those privileges to resist oppressive structures and go above and beyond the law to ensure that those less fortunate in our community are provided for.[49]

This story not only reflects a negotiation of gender norms but also explores the creation of kinship and community that extends beyond biological connections, emphasising the value of chosen families and supportive networks in challenging traditional kinship structures. The narrative of Ruth and Boaz invites readers to reflect on the complexity of relationships,

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47 Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), iv.

48 Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (*Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003*): 321.

49 Mona West, "Ruth," in The Queer Bible Commentary., ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 192.

agency, and social norms, showcasing the transformative power of unconventional bonds in fostering understanding and societal change. West rightly then points out that "Ruth and Boaz remind us that even amid hostile environments we can create communities that affirm our relationships, provide protection and sustain us".[50]

The encounter at the threshing floor, a space of substance and support in the Ruth and Boaz narrative, is not simply a location of compromise but a site of creative resistance and reconstruction where new identities, practices, and forms of knowledge emerge from the interactions between Ruth and Boaz, between culture and power structures. In the following section, what does the threshing floor as a space of queer nego-feminism means for queer agency to counter "conversion therapies"?

7. Defying "conversion therapies"

Earlier in this article, "conversion therapies" were identified as a contextual problem that LGBTQ+ people face on the African continent. Groups that enact these forms of violence are often from religious groups. These religions incite various forms of violence based on a binary understanding of gender as male and female and perceive normal sexuality as heterosexual. This article showed that LGBTQ+ persons are epistemologically and ontologically contesting these narratives by making use of queer biblical interpretation. However, the counter-narratives are not always positive ones from the community itself. The theoretical framework of nego-feminism and queer agency of Nnaemeka and Nyeck, respectively, assisted in reading the story of Ruth against the grain. The encounter at the threshing floor helps us to unpack queer agency in situational vulnerability. There are three points I would like to highlight from the encounter between Ruth and Boaz.

Firstly, Ruth diverts from Naomi's plan, and we read about her agency. Although situations of violence are paralysing, queer people like Ruth have found ways and means to subvert structural injustices. Davids and Davids found that although children and adolescents experience situational vulnerability due to violence, children develop agency in

50 West, "Ruth,"192.

these circumstances.[51] Thus, queer people who experience situational vulnerability develop agency. An indicator of this agency is victims/survivors speaking against the impact of "conversion therapies". I would even go further and argue that migration and seeking asylum is also proof of queer agency, with the hope of seeking safety and security. Queer agency is forward-looking and hopeful.

Secondly, the story of Ruth elucidates the power of negotiation in and at sacred spaces. As stated earlier, the African continent is vast and consists of many cultures, languages, and tribes. One of the spaces that tribes have in common is the *kraal*. According to Band and van der Merwe, the kraal has different functionalities that signify "inter-connectedness of existence"[52], economic role, the storehouse of sustenance, "a burial space"[53], officiation space for marriage, it also operates "as a court (and even a school) for instruction, discipline, justice and reconciliation".[54] What transpires at the kraal "captures the notion of existing together in a mutually beneficial and protective manner".[55] Like the threshing floor, the kraal is a sacred space where negotiation takes place and, in light of Nnaemeka's explanation, it is where give and take, compromise and balance take place. From the explanation of what takes place at the kraal and threshing floor, we can see a particular rhythm of life-affirming practices that take the place of care and community. Negotiation has a rhythm that is exemplified by the kraal and threshing floor.

Lastly, Ruth exemplified resistance amidst situational vulnerability. Ruth resisted being used in Naomi's plan sexually and destabilised cultural norms to foster a future. Claassens, writing about female resistance in the Old Testament, notes that victims of injustices "have found nonverbal ways

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51 Hanzline R. Davids and Eugene Lee Davids, "Can Vulnerability and Agency Co-exist in the Presence of Violence?" *The Thinker* 98, no. 1(2004):9–17.

52 Collium Banda and IJ van der Merwe, "The Ecclesiological Significance of the 'African Kraal' metaphor in a Context of Urban Poverty in Zimbabwe," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3, no. 2 (2017):252.

53 Banda and van der Merwe, "The Ecclesiological Significance of the 'African Kraal' Metaphor," 252.

54 Banda and van der Merwe, "The Ecclesiological Significance of the 'African Kraal' Metaphor," 252.

55 Banda and van der Merwe, "The Ecclesiological Significance of the 'African Kraal' Metaphor," 252.

of expressing their resistance to their oppressors' actions that have sought to deny their humanity and assault their dignity".[56] Claassens goes on further and says, "These acts of protest serve as a testimony to the resilience of the human spirit that desperately seeks to survive even amid the most terrible of circumstances".[57] Ruth exemplifies resistance and resilience to advance her dignity and Naomi's. Davids further showed the importance of un-silencing "conversion therapies" and queering the doctrine of the Trinity as a way to resist heteropatriarchal views that are used to "correct" LGBTQ+ persons by using the matters tool to dismantle the Master's House.[58] Using Scripture and doctrine is part of the acts of resistance and resilience. These three main points illustrate how "conversion therapies" can be defied to the point where LGBTQ+ persons counter the life-denying narrative. Even so, we must acknowledge that religion in Africa is complacent in perpetuating and sustaining violence against LGBTQ+ persons.

Conclusion

In this article, I highlighted how "conversion therapies" are used as a weapon of violence by religions in Africa. By using nego-feminism, queer agency and third space, I read the story of Ruth and Boaz's encounter on the threshing floor. Reading this encounter at the threshing floor against the grain, three main points were made when defying "conversion therapies" LGBTQ+ persons develop a sense of queer agency and use sacred cultural spaces to negotiate and enact resistance by using cultural norms and values to flourish. In this manner, I hope this article contributes to the continued discussion and development of strategies collaboratively with victims/survivors and organisations that assist in using religion in a life-affirming way.

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56 L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Claiming Her Dignity: Female Resistance in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016), xiii.

57 Claassens, *Claiming Her Dignity*, xiii.

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