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# Sustaining Lamentation in Traumatic Grief Through the Contemporary Elegy: A Practical Theology of the Poetics of Testimony

## Abstract

This project addresses the problem that sustaining lamentation for particular testimonies of bereaved people is not supported culturally or spiritually by current practices of mourning. In a democracy, religious leaders become public theologians who respect and respond to diverse religious, political, historical, and economic interests without losing focus on the individual, family, and corporate systems and the ongoing elements of traumatic grief. In the context of lamentation and memorialization, when spiritual caregiver fail to acknowledge potentials for particular ways of mourning to contribute to empowerment and healing, mourners' grief can be foreclosed.

In North America, the dominant rhetoric of public lament often excludes the particular histories and cultures of underrepresented communities. Thus, stories of traumatic and historical deaths are silenced and go ungrieved. Furthermore, in the context of hospital chaplaincy methods focused solely on bringing resolution to the challenges of grief or solely on keeping the experience of grief unresolved without exploring what views of God are relevant to mourners can promote dominant cultural norms and are problematic.

It is important for spiritual caregivers not only to be aware of the mechanisms of power by which many individuals and communities are rendered invisible or denied legitimacy, but also to respond with liberative action. Feminist theologian, Rebecca Chopp names this ethical call, "the poetics of testimony" This project builds on poets and theorists from the field of the poetic elegy and on the work of liberation, womanist, and feminist theologians to claim that contemporary elegies, as forms of the poetics of testimony, bear witness to the complex dimensions of traumatic grief in liberative ways that do not foreclose on alterity but sustain lamentation in the intercultural spiritual care of persons and communities. The poets explored are Akilah Oliver, Benjamin Alire Saénz, Anne Carson, Rebecca Lindenberg, David Ferry, Claudia Rankine, M. NourbeSe Philip, and Susan Howe.

Based on a revised practical theology approach grounded in Thomas Groome's methodology, this project culminates in a vignette based on my experience as a hospital chaplain and demonstrates the importance of both arts-based and evidence-based intercultural chaplaincy care of persons and their communities experiencing traumatic grief.

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Sustaining Lamentation in Traumatic Grief Through the Contemporary Elegy:

A Practical Theology of the Poetics of Testimony

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the University of Denver

and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD Program

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

P. Shawn Fawson

November 2019

Advisor: Carrie Doehring, Ph.D.

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Title: Sustaining Lamentation in Traumatic Grief Through the Contemporary Elegy:  
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I want to thank our three children who encouraged me to finish this project as they grew through their teens into loving young adults with their own engaging lives. Lastly, I am thankful for the everyday love and wisdom of my dear friend and partner, Steven, who has been a passionate advocate, perceptive listener, and a source of strength. I am able to see what is possible because of him.



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## **Preface**

There are many kinds of responses to loss. During the years spent working on this dissertation, its themes came to echo occasions in my life. The past three years have cradled significant departures. First, Rev. Lincoln Ure, my Clinical Pastoral Education supervisor from whom I had been learning the practice of spiritual care since 2002, died in the same hospital I happened to be working in as a chaplain on the night of June 10, 2016. His love of language made it necessary for me not to dismiss my passion for poetry in the context of spiritual caregiving, but to imagine ways of including it in collaborative care conversations. Secondly, perhaps the most poignant and pervasive loss during this time was the decline of my mentor, Larry K. Graham, and his death on October 19, 2017. His engaging curiosity about poetry and his reassurance—that it is never too late to bring strength, wisdom, compassion, and words to our current living—provided one of the threshold moments through which my own imagination, intellect, and spirit now read the world.

My interest in an interdisciplinary exploration of responses to loss began before the actual dissertation topic took shape—it began in the events that linked my life, identity, and world to specific sociohistorical events. The 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami linked me to the very Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear reactor that my father, an engineer, helped build in the late sixties. While inside the Dai-ichi reactor, he was

severely burned and disfigured after a pipe of sulfuric acid exploded. One of the hardest parts of growing up with a father with disabilities was observing other people's responses to him. A stranger's quick glance would seemingly be enough to pass judgment on his quality of life, its prospects, and his basic goodness. "I can't imagine how you live," someone would say. "Day by day, just like anybody else," he would answer.

Another historical event—the kidnapping and assassination of the Christian Democrat statesman Aldo Moro in Italy—sparked anti-US sentiments, and my father, now working in Genoa, received death threats from the Red Brigades, the terrorist group. In 1978 the night after Aldo Moro was found dead in Rome, where I'd been attending boarding school, our sudden departure across Italy's border became necessary. While in Zürich, in 11<sup>th</sup> grade English our class read, wrote, and discussed poetry each week for a year. I started writing poetry for the first time after we had read poet Adrienne Rich's (1978) book "The Dream of a Common Language." Not Longfellow or Gray with their seemingly antique diction, rather a woman spoke to me and made me feel it was possible to speak back.

Through writing and discussing poems in the classroom, I sensed new ways that complexities of experiences could be depicted and that really helped me hold in counterbalance and "normalize" the ambiguities of diverse cultures, religions, and languages that had been shaping my life with multicultural complexities. As our class explored poetry, our teacher made it possible for us to understand how the act of reading and discussing poems could create some of the conditions necessary for establishing enough trust to speak openly. When poems are discussed in community, they can create

what poet-critic Allen Grossman (1992) calls “a common place, a *locus communis*, where persons can gather to address a problem of thought” (p. 151). In this way, our class could forge connections both between poems and among—people with vastly different social, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds.

In our class most of us grew up as “third culture individuals”<sup>1</sup> (TCI) or “global nomads” (Grappo, 2008, p. 76), terms that name a strangeness, a seemingly particular fate that makes some of us live in the in-between spaces of belonging to different countries and sometimes finds us in the interstices between academic fields, reluctant to put down roots solely in any one of them.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it might make sense how anyone, being away from a supposed “home” for two decades, would return there being more aware of cultural differences and multiple religious belonging, rather than of the privileges that had enabled one to leave those countries safely, privileges that had come at a cost to others and whose deaths would be lamented rarely in public. Consequently, I became interested in ungrieved losses and the ways people use language through poetry to convey them.

Thirty-seven years ago, I entered the B.A. program in English at the University of Utah and studied with the poets Larry Levis and Richard Schramm. In a seminar I found peers who opened dimensions of poetry by using words I had never heard of such as: “Foucault” and “hegemony.” Later, in the MFA program at Vermont College of Fine

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<sup>1</sup> A third culture individual is “a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture.... [He/she] builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, p. 13).

<sup>2</sup> Recent research suggests that third culture individuals’ experiences of non-death loss are “are rarely socially acknowledged” (Gitterman & Knight, 2018, p. 8), “ambiguous,” and their grief “is frequently disenfranchised” (K. Gilbert, 2008, p. 93).

Arts, conversations began to question what role poetry can have in a world where injustice and political chicanery rule. For example, we learned that Osip Mandelstam's poems grapple with violence and press into deeper social concerns. As a poet whose voice is intimate and interior, Mandelstam seemed to always take the resources of that interior lyric sensibility and use them in an engagement with the culture, history, and life around him before, during, and after the Russian Revolution and under Stalin's repressive regime of the 1930's.

From my studies in Vermont, the poet who stands out as an example of the role of poetry and injustice in the world is Paul Celan, who was born to a German speaking Jewish family in Romania and worked in a forced labor camp during World War II. His elegies express horrendous losses and struggle with a particular language and form for emotions—ones which he had no clear name or frame of reference, yet ones that seem to be on the move. In Bremen, forty-five years after Mandelstam wrote "On the Addressee," Celan borrowed Mandelstam's (1979) concept of "message in a bottle" to describe the relationship between poetry and dialogue. Celan (1958/2001) writes:

A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and some time it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense too are under way: they are making toward something. (p. 396)

For both Celan and Mandelstam, "essentially dialogue" itself served as poetry's source. As I will explain in Chapter 3, the dialogic quality of poetry can foster collaborative conversations and engage a deeper awareness of socio-culturally constructed power dynamics that often underlie diverse human communications and relationships.

Arrested for being a poet, Mandelstam was sent to a camp in Siberia where he died in 1947. At age 50, Paul Celan died by taking his life in 1970. Clearly, poetry survives traumatic events. Its making carries it to a larger context of history, culture, and continuity. It moves from individual to individual, community to community, derailing us from what habitual track we have been on. While we might wish for a verbal whirlwind to blow away from earth all injustices and prejudices, in fact it may be in poetry's very lack of such power—the absence of tyranny—that poetry is most important. Poetry speaks to us of our capacity to reflect, reconsider, and to connect our responses to larger worlds. What are the elements of poetry's craft that make it survive? In Mandelstam's poems we hear an almost palpable voice, a genius for metaphor, and a rapidity of associations. In Celan's poems we hear an intention of language and we feel a physicality of words.

At the University of Denver's Department of English and Literary Arts, I experienced poetry flourishing through community and community flourishing through poetry. Furthermore, we looked at ways poets draw on an awareness of history, modern art, world culture, and capture a frame of reference and sensibility larger than their own moments. We explored how poets deploy form, literary devices, and imagination in their craft to grapple with tragic losses on both a personal and global scale. We read contemporary poets (born since 1920) who are using the practice of writing poetry as a means of cultivating felt connections with the deceased. Some poets use the practice of writing to resist what Osip Mandelstam's wife Nadezhda Mandelstam (1999) describes as, "social change that demand[s] blind faith and obedience to authority" (p. 257). Other



poets problematize the individualistic by questioning the capacity of writing practices to contend with large-scale public tragedy.

In 2002, during my chaplaincy training (CPE) I was assigned to an oncology floor of a hospital, and every patient I read poems with died. They died of diseases, mostly cancers that are often cured once, but then turn up again somewhere else. Some patients I knew for one week. Some I knew much longer. Like Adya,<sup>3</sup> who was a thin, shiny-eyed young woman from India. Once she and her family received news of her impending death, she wasn't afraid of dying and she wasn't angry at the world. She seemed to have a calm understanding of what would be happening at the end of her life.

Adya's dying initially made me think that all terminally ill patients would die with a calm and seemingly fearless, even transcendent understanding of dying. In the time we had together, I witnessed how Adya's family supported her with affirming words and shared feelings as they remembered specific times. Their memories of both joy and sorrow also evoked strong memories of gratitude amongst them. They had their strengths available to them in order to find resources to cope with their pain. As time went on, I learned quickly that this family's transformative and empowering approach to death would be uncommon.

Back then co-leading a weekly poetry reading group with an oncology nurse, I learned more than a few things about being with terminally ill people in a poetry group.

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the dissertation I will be using composite vignettes as a means of representing a situation without disclosing personal information or a particular place that would make a particular person or family identifiable.

Sometimes they wanted us to look into the “void of death”<sup>4</sup> with them as Adya and her family had invited each other to do. Other times, when faced with their mortality, patients didn’t want to read poetry that gave them more of the unimaginable. They wanted poetry that was tangible and real. Mr. K, diagnosed with terminal bladder cancer, wanted poems that gave him glimpses of a tangible life: the sound of red-winged blackbirds, the stillness of reeds, the hum of a washing machine, or a furnace clicking on and off during the night. He liked Jack Myers’s (2001) poem, “The Flicker:”

This is in honor of the flicker  
that sings its heart out on my roof everyday  
though no other flicker comes.

If I can’t be sure of the language of joy  
can I at least know what it is?

There is a flicker flapping its wings and playing  
with the name of whatever it’s doing.

The tiny bit of him that weighs something  
is holding down the house

While the larger part of him that weighs nothing  
lifts it up. (p. 10)

Mr. K spoke of the last two stanzas of this poem as giving him a way to visualize the kind of balance that kept his days from falling into chaos. He said this poem helped him see the elm tree out his window in a balance: The tree held up the sky, and the sky steadied the branches so that the tree would not fall. Another patient, M, wanted poems about daily life. For example, Gregory Orr’s (1980) “Weeds” about a mother and son pulling dandelions in the summer vegetable garden or the poem about doing dishes while the

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<sup>4</sup> Theologian Richard Coble (2018) names the “void of death” as the act of sitting with a patient and looking at “death square in the eye . . . to peer into its void” (p. 3).

speaker's wife is sleeping at their home in rural Virginia. M liked these poems because they connected her to the ordinariness of being alive. Poems matter a great deal because the emotional tone they set can be strong, tender, and real. They wrap us in care and promise of feeling connected.

Christian Wiman, poet and professor of religion and literature at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music is living with incurable cancer. In a radio interview with Krista Tippett (2018), Wiman talks about being in the hospital after a bone marrow transplant. He says:

I think we often talk about poetry getting us beyond the world, taking us to the very edge of experience and then getting us into the ineffable. And I have to say, when I was faced with the actual ineffable, I didn't want poetry that gave me more of the ineffable. What I wanted was some way of apprehending the world that was right in front of me that was slipping away. I wanted the world in front of my eyes. And the poems that I found useful were absolutely concrete: sometimes not at all about religious things and not at all about spiritual things, but simply reality, and reality rendered in such a way that you could see it again. There's a great quote from the mid-20th century literary critic, R.P. Blackmur. He's talking about John Berryman. He said that his work 'adds to the stock of available reality.' It added to the stock of available reality. And that's a good way to think about what a real poem can do. It suddenly makes the amount of reality that you have in your life greater. You're able to apprehend more of it.

"The passionate pursuit of the Real," is how the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz defines poetry (1983, p. 25); it is a pursuit that is urgent and demanding. On the oncology floor, the poetry group wanted to read poems that engaged with that ever-shifting "Real." Poems about facing life in its concrete aspects as they were happening were often the poems that led us to discover and become who we were in the conversation itself.

In 2009, I completed Clinical Pastoral Education residency training which focused on the Emergency Room and the Intensive Care Unit where traumatic deaths (by

suicide, heart attack, stroke, etc.) were common and the shock of grief for the families was raw, often inconsolable. Spending time with these families, I began to hear their disclosures of ungrieved losses often within the first hour we'd met, much sooner than I'd heard with terminally diagnosed patients and their families.

For example, in the family conference room I met B, a sixty-year-old Jewish father whose son, on the way to the ER, had died of a heart attack after a vigorous day of skiing. B looked very sad with disbelief and in shock. His wife talked most of the time, commenting, "B is always quiet when terrible things happen. His father was a Holocaust survivor and it was such a horrible story that his father could never tell his actual experiences. So, he had nervous breakdowns whenever loved ones died in our family." I wondered whether B's silence, like his father's, was going to be total.

Another example of an early disclosure of an ungrieved loss was after a twenty-seven-year-old man who had been incarcerated, died of liver cancer in the ICU two weeks after his release. His mother a single woman of color said, "I'm not going to say that I'm not bitterly angry. How did my son die? From liver cancer two weeks after he was released from prison. He got diagnosed one day after he was released. He did not receive medical care in prison. There were times when I thought about driving my car off the road. I shook my fist at God. Absolutely. Because I was like, I'm out here in the wilderness and praying, okay. I taught my boy the Bible. The world has never been safe for my son. I have a hard view of the world. I know how society views us."

Compared to being on the oncology floor, I felt challenged in a new way. I noticed a pattern of families expressing previous trauma, intergenerational grief, as well

as moral distress and spiritual despair, such as being abandoned by God or punished by God. It was as if the suddenness of the traumatic death not only brought about a sudden expression of histories of ungrieved losses, but also raised theological questions and struggles. In Chapter 2, through Ken Pargament's research in religion and psychology, I describe traumatic losses and how they might stir up questions and doubts concerning God's goodness, human goodness, and general benevolence in the world. *How could a good God allow such unimaginable suffering? Is God absent in the midst of trauma? How does one "move on" with life when no signs of life can be found?*

In the conference room, at the bedside, or in the chapel I needed to forge a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical impacts on bereaved families following traumatic losses of their loved ones. I needed to interrogate my privileges of being white.

During monthly grief groups at the hospital, I began to notice that most mourners wanted language that did not merely comfort, but wrestled with lived experience, ideas, history, social concern, and psychic drama in a way that uttered the complex struggles for survival and particular emotional responses we have to traumatic loss. Unlike many terminally diagnosed patients who had wanted poetry that addressed the concrete and apprehended the real in the ordinariness of daily life, most bereaved families struggling with traumatic loss wanted language that articulated complex meanings and words that could bear the weight of ongoing suffering.

Biblical laments are poetic examples of powerful words that bear the weight of ongoing suffering through complaints, testimonies, and pleas to restore justice addressed

to a monotheistic God. University of KwaZulu-Natal June Dickie's (2019) postdoctoral work explores psalms of lament that

lead to a deeper understanding of who God is and can also help a person find a new 'identity' and vision for the future . . . . There is movement away from fear and the sense of being overwhelmed to the confident assurance of receiving a blessing. (p. 150, 151)

In an intercultural spiritual care group setting, I thought that biblical psalms and texts of lament would contribute to a step toward a more secure sense of well-being as Dickie's work suggests. Yet, I noticed that not all mourners aimed for a 'successful lament.'<sup>5</sup>

Intercultural bereavement communities practice many different lamentation stories, thus challenging a singular understanding of the Christian tradition. Many did not want a prescribed, step-wise structure or form to express the language of pain. Instead, they wanted language that both held ambiguity and that was more relevant and contextual than the language used in the Psalms. An act of reimagining poems in community highlights possibilities for fuller expressions of lament. Lament gets recast as the practiced communal embodiment of an ambiguous and open future. As pastoral theologian Larry K. Graham (2011) writes, "Lamentation helps us to acknowledge the truthful reality of our pain . . . by offering a *needed* language of pain . . ." (p. 10, emphasis added). I wondered what contemporary poetry and its language might teach mourners about ungrieved losses. What could chaplains learn from contemporary poems about sustaining

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<sup>5</sup> Dickie describes a successful lament as follows: "First, the victim recovers agency. The psalmist lifts his or her voice to describe the problem, and to complain to God about it being an unacceptable situation. Second, the poet seems to have a sense that justice is restored in that the perpetrators have been punished . . . . And third, the lamenter achieves a new way forward, leaving behind the initial panic" (2019, p. 151).

lamentation when “grieving losses and learning to live with what’s ‘left over’ is sometimes the most we can embrace as a caregiving outcome” (L. Graham, 2017, p. 53)?

I have come to these questions with specific ideas about how I will present an interdisciplinary project within the field of practical theology, wherein lies the danger of overemphasizing particular human experiences over others. Theologians bring their own traditions, worldviews, values, and assumptions to their work, at times uncritically reinforcing their own theological assumptions and practices while ignoring other human experiences and insights. This project is, in large part, informed through my background as a third-culture individual, chaplain, ordained minister, and a person who writes. In addition, my role as a student and mother also provide a narrative background for how I think about and interrogate theories utilized in this dissertation. Finally, I am aware that privilege in life affects my thinking process and my socio-cultural location. To that end, I identify myself as a straight, lower middle-class, able-bodied, white female. Having been influenced by past circumstances and decisions, I come to experiences, observations, ponderings, and projects like this one. In fact, this preface represents the first step in practical theological method that begins with lived experience in a particular context, generating theological questions.

What follows is a dissertation that explores the question: What can practical theologians learn about mourning from the field of the poetic elegy? The dissertation moves back and forth among: 1) pastoral theologies of lament and spiritual care in the context of hospital chaplaincy and public theology; 2) psychological research on grief and religious coping; and 3) poetic studies of contemporary elegies and its criticisms.

This project culminates in a composite vignette from my summer work as a hospital chaplain during my time as PhD student.

This dissertation presents a focused inquiry of contextual communal practices of living with traumatic loss. I investigate how contemporary poems about loss, called elegies, can hold the complexities of the impacts of traumatic losses, discover hidden griefs, and lament them as fully as possible without foreclosing on alterity. By reading and discussing elegies, mourners renew the concept and practice of lamentation. The dissertation is located in practical theology because of its emphasis on embodiment and imagination, which is in alignment with *mujerista*, womanist, and feminist commitments to mediate everyday practices and relationships with a greater awareness of the daily mechanisms of power by which many are rendered invisible or denied legitimacy.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Introduction to the Issue**

Even though all individuals will eventually die, contemporary western society has been described as death-denying by historian Philippe Ariès (1974), pastoral theologians Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson (1983), Ryan LaMothe (2013), Richard Coble (2018), and womanist Emilie Townes (2006), among many others. They argue that death has become medicalized, institutionalized, stereotyped, and shunned as a result, at least in part of “the de-humanizing machine of corporate capitalism” (Coble, 2016, p. 7), the commodification of healthcare, and the disenfranchisement of the black community (Townes, 2006). Grief, too, has become medicalized, hidden, and denied.

Ungrieved losses continue to haunt the public body. When spiritual caregivers fail to acknowledge the particularities of mourning and their potential to contribute to empowerment and healing, dominant cultural norms are promoted. This problem is expressed in the following four ways.

Firstly, in the public arena for lamentation (e.g., in public memorial services and within institutions such as hospital chapels), chaplains and religious leaders might respond to grievous losses by turning only to biblical scripture that usually brings premature resolution to grief through language that promotes closure, control,

acceptance, and moving on. For example, in theistic traditions, lament-based scripture (such as the Psalms) often functions through an appeal.

Biblical scholar Claus Westermann's (1980) work on the lament psalms reveals a pattern that begins with the psalmist complaining and protesting the painful reality of an absence when coping with losses (p. 30). Although an act of petition is inherently relational (in that the lamenter is trying to engage another's and/or God's attention in hopes of establishing a dialogue), Westermann (1987) points out that the scripture of lament often portrays God as righteous (p. 58) and having ultimate control over judgment and punishment. As Westermann (1980) points out in these laments, their form has a particular structure, which I think is also controlled by a sonorous order of language, amplifying the message that God is in control.

What effect might the form of the lament psalms have on mourners? Those mourners who hold a view that God is in control might be more influenced to think bad things have happened not only as a natural consequence, but also as a divine punishment. They may be thinking, what did I do to deserve this? For other mourners, an amplified message that God is in control may make them conclude that biblical scripture is irrelevant to their views. In both instances, the spiritual caregiver's default ways of addressing a family's grief by turning solely to biblical scripture foreclose on an understanding of each person's particular grief and views of God at deeper and more nuanced levels. Another danger when caregivers default to biblical scripture in public lamentation is to Christianize public forms of lamentation. In a democracy no one

religion and no one form of a given religion can dominate. So, a task of spiritual caregiving would be to practice lamentation in a broad context of respect.

Secondly, spiritual caregivers fail to acknowledge particularities of mourning when they respond to grievous losses with religious practices and meanings that attempt either to bring resolution to grief *or* to normalize ongoing mourning. Western therapeutic approaches to grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Rando, 1984) have been rooted in Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" wherein he makes the binary-like distinction between healthy mourning and pathological melancholia. According to S. Freud's theory, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, normal mourning culminates in an act of substitution, in which the mourner severs his/her attachments to the lost other and redirects his/her ties to new others and objects. Although S. Freud's (1923) later revisioning of his original theory would posit the experience of mourning as having a cyclical timeframe rather than a linear one with an end, the legacy of his original essay is pervasive not only in contemporary psychological theories such as stage theory and in critical literary thought about elegiac writing, but also in public religious leaders' rhetoric of grieving. The phrases "letting go," "moving on," "working through," and "getting over it" can be heard as echoing S. Freud's early presupposition that mourning is a process of 'breaking bonds' with the deceased and that consolation awaits on the other side of the renunciation of one's attachment to the deceased. The act of publicly naming a step-wise notion of grief ending in acceptance/closure denies the often shocking and irrevocable void of death.

Furthermore, recent psychological research and literary critical tendencies reconstruct Freud's melancholia and its pathological aspects as normative. For example,

literary critics Jahan Ramazani and Patricia Rae focus on elegiac writing where the shock of loss is ongoing. Such writing, as Ramazani (1994) asserts, “tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss” (p. 4). The resistance to closure (that is, the imperative to ‘never forget’) becomes especially pressing as traumatic losses can be perpetuated in contemporary political, global, neo-liberal economies. Moreover, literary critic Patricia Rae (2007) describes the “resistance to mourning” as:

a resistance to reconciliation, full stop: a refusal to accept the acceptance of loss, whether through the severing and transference of libidinal ties or through the successful expansion of identity through introjection, or through any other kind of compensatory process. (p. 17)

Such “resistance to mourning” may be heard in public religious leaders’ words: “we will never forget,” or “our grief is ongoing.” Such resistance can be described as having a melancholic relationship with the past in which a traumatic history such as slavery, genocide, etc., is never put to rest. Is an open relationship to loss and trauma ethically desirable? Is forgiveness possible and letting go of resentment possible without closure? What happens when public religious leaders assume that mourning is either step-wise *or* melancholic and not the possibility for both? Do they foreclose on particular ways mourners express their grief? Do they isolate mourners and deprive them of having their strengths available to address their situation with courage and dignity and/or prevent them from finding the resources to bear their pain?

Thirdly, spiritual caregivers may not acknowledge the particularities of mourning because few evidence-based research studies have constructed new grief theories for understanding the legacies of colonialism and their relation to religious and spiritual

struggles. Many Native Americans, African Americans, Japanese Americans, and Latinx Americans are affected by chronic and ongoing traumatic losses and how those losses impact their views of God and their potentials for resiliency have not been widely studied. In addition, until recently, few evidence-based studies in the field of psychology have approached the idea of understanding racism as a traumatic-grief experience or the impact of homicide on African American spiritual distress (Neimeyer & Burke, 2011). It is essential that public religious leaders recognize that diverse groups have particular grief experiences. Pastoral theologian Herbert Anderson (2010) insightfully writes, “The inability of human systems to mourn also makes it harder for individuals within those communities to grieve their own particular loss as well” (p. 130).

Fourthly, spiritual caregivers can be unable to acknowledge the particularities of mourning when safety and support are absent in the places and spaces of mourning losses. Some populations in the US are more vulnerable to violence than others. According to the American Psychological Association, socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, lack of access to healthcare, and lack of access to quality education all contribute to higher death rates due to violence in lower-income communities (APA, 2018). Researchers assert that people living in lower income, Black, and Latinx communities are more at risk to experience violent deaths (Geronimus, Bound, & Colen, 2011); Blacks are ten times more likely to die violently than their white counterparts (Sharpe & Boyas, 2011). In communities continually exposed to violence, spaces of safety, support, and time to lament traumatic deaths would be hard to find.

The above examples have shown reasons why ungrieved losses continue to haunt the public body. In a democracy chaplains and religious leaders become public theologians who respect and respond to diverse religious, political, historical, and economic interests without losing focus on the individual, family, systems, and ongoing elements of traumatic grief. Questions still remain as to how public religious leaders—whether speaking to hundreds at a public memorial or speaking with a few after a death in a hospital—might more fully enact new behaviors of care and justice-making in lamenting traumatic losses and cultural wounds that acknowledge the particularities of mourning and their potential to contribute to empowerment and healing. The problem is that sustaining lamentation for particular testimonies of bereaved people is not supported culturally or spiritually by current practices of mourning.

**Vignette illustrating the issue.** During a memorial service in a hospital chapel for a 42-year-old man, a concerned white person walks by and calls hospital security because of “the yelling and wailing going on.” When a security guard arrives to check out what is happening, the deceased man’s spouse, P explains, “When my Auntie died there was a lot of crying, arguing, and everybody in the church was wailing, you know like a cleansing wailing. People yelled and shouted like she was alive. Her spirit was there. My husband’s spirit is here.” Then P begins describing the hardships of her aunt’s life and explaining the hardships she herself and her husband endured. She begins to weep as she recounts the day on which her husband lost his job for spilling a can of paint in the company van. Soon she is sobbing. She recalls losing their apartment and having to find a way to hold themselves together. P’s son steps in to protect his mother. He tells

the security guard that people like the man who complained are what eventually killed his father. The son goes on to describe that his family did not deserve to be told they were mourning too loudly. “We did nothing wrong,” he relates.

After the security guard leaves, P’s son continues talking to P and the chaplain. P’s son attributes his father’s death to the cruel hand of God. “We followed God’s way,” he remarks, “and he let these bad things happen to Dad.” P interrupts her son and wants to make known to the chaplain that she does not attribute her husband’s lost job or his death to an act of God. “I find solace in my faith and strength from God,” she says, “and through my community of friends and church. I wish my son felt about God the way I do.” P believes God is good no matter what can happen and expresses a desire for her son to feel the same way about God.

On that day in the hospital chapel, the complaint from a passer-by initiated a cascade of hidden grief to emerge. Hidden grief became active mourning not only for the death of P’s husband and not only for the racism and microaggressions she and her family had endured, but also for the differing views about God. P finds comfort in God and does not attribute bad things to a good God. Her son blames God for not keeping God’s promise to protect his father.

I present this vignette to illustrate two things: 1) the concerned passerby’s expectations of the way death is “supposed to be mourned.” Different modes of mourning were perceived as being subversive to the status quo and disruptive to a “normal” grief experience; and 2) Unequal power structures impact individuals’ views of God in different ways. Views of God can be dissonant in families and do not always lead

to positive outcomes. As a spiritual care provider, it is not enough to be present with this family grieving losses. To foster ethical intercultural spiritual care, chaplains must be aware of the daily mechanisms of power by which many are rendered invisible or denied legitimacy.

Our Anglo-American culture often denies grief and pain from the impacts of systemic racism and dismisses historical violence such as slavery, genocide, mass shootings, etc. Such a stoic discounting of pain isolates those who show difficulties in living with losses. This must be countered for resiliency and strength to emerge. This dissertation is interested in modes of language that can empower the potential for individuals, communities, and nations to mourn particular trauma and loss.

### **Thesis**

As the above section indicates, particular testimonies of mourners have been silenced or foreclosed in public places. In North America for example, the dominant rhetoric of public lament often excludes the particular histories and cultures of underrepresented communities. In a variety of contexts, stories of traumatic deaths and historical deaths have been silenced and have gone ungrieved for a variety of reasons and because of the disturbing forms they take. It is important not only to be aware of the mechanisms of power by which many individuals and communities are rendered invisible or denied legitimacy, but also to respond with liberative<sup>6</sup> action. Feminist theologian, Rebecca Chopp (2001) names this ethical call, “the poetics of testimony” and defines it

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<sup>6</sup> The word “liberative,” rather than “liberatory,” has been historically used by theologians who emphasize social concern for the poor and political liberation for oppressed peoples. The word “liberative” has its roots in Liberation theology, a term coined by the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez (1971/1988).



as “attempts to speak of the real . . . and tell of the suffering and hope of particular communities who have not been authorized to speak” (p. 61). Because many marginalized voices have been silenced, their testimony and witness are subversive and powerful. Chopp (2001) writes, “The poetic quality of testimony not only summons us to attend to the practice of language, but refigures theory: Theory should give voice to particularity and difference” (2001, p. 64).

Therefore, using Rebecca Chopp’s definition of “the poetics of testimony” as “a genre of literary theory . . . that expresses unique events or experiences outside the representation of modern rational discourses” (2001, p. 56), I claim that contemporary elegies, as forms of the poetics of testimony, bear witness to the complex dimensions of traumatic grief in liberative ways that do not foreclose on real difference, but sustain lamentation in intercultural spiritual care of persons and communities. I will argue that an empowered intercultural spiritual care practice of lamentation would include the field of poetry and its criticisms as testimonies in order to make the dominant culture aware of the mechanisms of power by which many are rendered invisible or denied legitimacy.

This thesis takes as a precedent the work of the feminist theologian, Rebecca Chopp (2001) and the significance she places on testimonies as occasions of listening and telling. Chopp writes:

Testimonies challenge the dominant narrative to reimagine theory as the language that serves the fragments, the uneasy nature, the words against words in order to describe the real . . . . Testimonies describe the real in ways that require people to see these events that reason and theory do not count, do not authorize, do not signify (2001, p. 64).

When theology is asked to include the testimony of particularity and difference, theologians are asked to acknowledge the deep interconnectivity of all creation. If poetry assists us to attend to our real differences and to acknowledge our deep connections, we would be unable to ignore the suffering of others and we may focus our attention to responding with liberative rhetoric and actions to individual souls and the body politic.

**Vignette illustrating the thesis.** In the context of a hospital bereavement group reading elegies as modes of listening to and discussing sorrow, a mother, K, was grieving a son who died from complications of a gunshot wound. She read a psalm of lament affirming the magnitude of traumatic loss and found its language—to complain to God and protest unfairness—to be a resource. Although the conceptual structure of a biblical psalm of lament has merit, she began to wonder how would it pertain to her black community of people who must negotiate mourning in cultural and social worlds? Trying to fit her narrative of traumatic grief into the structure of a lament psalm, she reduced her experience to a set of predefined categories (complaint, protest, petition, praise, etc.) that were not adequate for her complex experience. A literal interpretation of the scripture process excludes her story that could speak about the particular everyday ongoing struggles with socioeconomic inequities. Do psalms of lament and other scripture-based laments disclose, protect, and honor the alterity of the other in adequate ways? Where do they foreclose on that alterity?

Many poems outside of scripture do not foreclose on mourning. For example, through reading and discussing the contemporary Black poet Akilah Oliver (whose son died in a case of medical neglect) and whose work I explore in Chapter 5, the mother, K,

felt safe and began to question and name her previously unsaid ambivalence for her own son's traumatic death. Akilah Oliver (2009) casts the traumatic grief brought about by her son's death in a particular light, one that enabled K to recognize, think about, and name details of her own son's traumatic death.

The poet Claudia Rankine's (2014) *Citizen: An American Lyric* led K to reflect on, uncover, and lament the impacts of race and segregation in her own family of origin, which fostered social empathy in the group.<sup>7</sup> Rankine (2015) illustrates the challenges of social empathy in a *New York Times Magazine* article titled "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning" when she asks her friend what it's like to be the mother of a black son. Rankine writes:

... Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black, driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black. (Rankine, 2015)

Comparing Oliver's and Rankine's different poetic forms led us to discover how Oliver's and Rankine's poems are experimental, especially when it comes to the complicated matter of a woman of color's selfhood. A poem's form can be shaped by theological and social issues. Thus, after reading Rankine's and Oliver's work, K discussed her own particular testimony outside of the psalmist narrative of a frequently absent God and

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<sup>7</sup> Social empathy is the capacity to imagine how intersecting social oppressions shape suffering (Segal, Gerdes, Lietz, Wagaman, & Geiger, 2017, p. 12).

outside of the dominant cultural narrative of dismissing historical traumatic losses.<sup>8</sup>

Oliver's innovative form led K outside the structure of the lament psalm and into K's own discovered poetic form. She began to discuss the emotional shock waves that resulted from other violent family deaths that had taken place many years ago.

In 2005, psychology researchers Paul C. Rosenblatt and Beverly R. Wallace contributed a resourceful book for professional workers in the healthcare fields. In the context of North America, their book *African American Grief* considers the effects of slavery, racism, and white ignorance and oppression on the African American experience and conception of death and grief. They write, "African-Americans grieve more intensely because they know how rough racism has made the life of the deceased" (p. 165). Grief for a particular loss taps into the great sea of grief from many other pervasive and cumulative losses, violations, and violence. What are the resources available that account for such endurance and survival?

Regarding the experimental language of Oliver's poetry as a resource that may have helped the poet to incorporate particular embodied and /or disembodied<sup>9</sup> losses, K connected to her own particular lament of traumatic grief. Oliver's poems kept K talking

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<sup>8</sup> Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann (2008) writes of the psalms of lament and their purpose being to "summon God back into action trusting that . . . things may change . . . [to] end the unbearable reality of present arrangements" (p. 232).

<sup>9</sup> In some cultural histories, the past can inhabit both the material and immaterial worlds through disembodied ghosts or spirits who can play a crucial role in the present, sometimes being summoned by the living or appearing uninvited and of their own accord. For example, poet NourbeSe Philip (2008) describes her book *Zong!* as bearing "witness to the 'resurfacing of the drowned and the oppressed' and transforms the dessicated, legal report into a cacophony of voices—wails, cries, moans, and shouts that had earlier been banned from the text" (p. 203). The text is haunted by the ghosts of drowned Africans. In *The Toronto Review of Books*, Paul Watkins (2014) interviews Philip, who links social amnesia to the media and western capitalist governments and says, "It is the amnesia that, in part, generates the haunting" (para. 9).

about her lost loved ones and her hopes and dreams, what legacy she wanted to carry from her son, and the strengths of her family. Furthermore, at a later time, if she were to connect her experience of traumatic grief with transcendence that “expresses the hope that the memories of suffering will be told and not go unredeemed, the hope that personal and social existence can and will be transformed” (Chopp, 2001, p. 67), then spiritual communities would no longer ignore gun violence as a central issue in their communities.

## **Methodology**

### **Liberative modes: Particular voices, the turn toward community, and the attention to language.**

*We live in very exciting times in which it is still possible to engage in traditional forms of empirical research to useful ends, but in which we can also employ the techniques more commonly associated with the creative arts to understand our social and spiritual worlds.*

—Heather Walton (Bennett, E. Graham, Pattison, & Walton, 2018, p. 28)

Theological practices must be contextualized, otherwise they will portray a false universalism, result in oppressive ideologies, and perpetuate theologies which fail to address the issues and questions of particular communities. Following feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp’s (2001) concept of the potential of theology as “continually engag[ing] in creating spaces, building bridges, and forming new discourses as practices of emancipatory transformation” (p. 67), the core of this project is to explore contemporary elegies as liberative modes of sustaining lament through collaborative conversation in the aftermath of traumatic loss until some other way of living emerges.

In order to investigate sustaining lament, this project deploys a constructive practical theological method. Generally, practical theology provides models, methodologies and understandings of theologies which equip theologians to turn to the

daily lives and practices of people shaped by their communities, contexts, and lived experiences as possible sources of theological insight. Specifically, practical theology approaches social problems by turning to other fields for resources, exploring theological significances and relationships, and making constructive proposals for changes in practice. For example, the identification of social problems in the lived experiences of Latinx women are found in *mujerista* practical theologies. Several scholars in this area—such as Ada María Isasi-Díaz (1993, 1996), Nancy Pineda-Madrid (2011), and Marcella Althaus-Reid (2004, 2005) have worked with the poor and oppressed.<sup>10</sup> Isasi-Díaz uses an ethnographic approach to focus on individual voices of Hispanic women, rather than applying a quantitative method which would turn the experiences of her community into raw data. Womanist scholars such as M. Shawn Copeland (1993) and A. Elaine Crawford (2002) also engage liberative methodologies in their work in practical theology.

In her essay “Liberationist Practical Theology,” Iliff School of Theology Professor of Practical Theology, Dr. Katherine Turpin describes liberationist practical theology approaches as ones that are grounded in the lived praxis of individuals and communities and are focused on liberative norms such as equality and the flourishing of all people. Turpin (2014) writes:

. . . liberationist practical theology turns its focus to situations of suffering and oppression that demand redress. Grounding its reflection in the experience of persons who suffer from the oppression generated by structures of unequal power, liberationist practical theology pursues praxis, the rich interplay of theory and praxis, which increases justice and recognition of the full humanity and equality of all persons. (p. 153)

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<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Ashley Theuring, assistant professor of theology at Xavier University, for opening the door to this conversation.

Recognizing the impacts *generated by structures of unequal power*, this project seeks to ground its reflection in bereaved communities who “have not been authorized to speak” (Chopp, 2001, p. 61) and in their testimonies of ongoing traumatic grief. It does so by: paying attention to particular voices, turning toward community, and focusing on language.

***Particular voices.*** The turn to particular voices in religious communities is not a new concept in the field of practical theology. Cuban born Ada María Isasi-Díaz, professor emerita of ethics and theology at Drew University, coined the term *mujerista* theology, which explores the theological significance of the lives and voices of Hispanic/Latina women, especially those who are poor and oppressed. Her work brings liberation theology and class into conversation with feminist theology. Isasi-Díaz’s work argues for the theological exploration into the particular aspects of individuals, rather than the systematic search for universal claims. About *mujerista* theologians, Isasi-Díaz (1993) writes:

Instead of attempting to present a universal voice, our attempt has been to point to the universal by being as specific as possible. Just as radical immanence is a different way of understanding what up to now has been called transcendence, so, too, the more specific and particular the voices we present in *mujerista* theology, the more they encompass the reality of all Hispanic Women. (p. 81)

Isasi-Díaz’s work focuses on particular experiences of Latina women’s suffering and resilience. From within particular voices there emerge different meanings which connect to the larger community and can be an act of resistance against attempts to silence them. Isasi-Díaz’s work shows that without paying attention to individuals’ particular voices

and their lived experiences as Latina women as a source of theology, these emerging meanings would be overlooked.

On the other side of the world, particular voices of women's suffering and their courage to cry out have delineated Hong Kong born Kwok Pui-Lan's (1984) work in postcolonial feminist theology concerning women in Asia. She writes:

I only know feminist theology in Asia will be a cry, a plea and invocation. It emerges from the wounds that hurt, the scars that hardly disappear, the stories that have no ending. Feminist theology in Asia is . . . scribed on the hearts of many that feel the pain, and yet dare to hope. (p. 228)

Kwok Pui-Lan's goal in her work is to make known Asian women's narratives so that their beliefs and understandings can contribute to giving theological meaning to and transforming social structures.

***The turn toward community.*** Practical theologians turn to the practices and insights of communities in order to get a fuller picture of the ways God's presence is expressed in the world. For example, in "Mujerista Theology," Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz (1996) makes clear the life experience of Latinas as its source. She argues for a theological exploration into the particular aspects of individuals and *their communities* rather than a systematic search for universal claims. She writes:

I have gotten the best clues for understanding how Latinas understand and deal with suffering by looking at Latinas' capacity to celebrate, at our ability to organize a fiesta in the midst of the most difficult circumstances and in spite of deep pain. The fiestas are, of course, not celebrations of suffering but of the struggle against suffering. The fiestas are, very often, a way of encouraging each other not to let the difficulties that are part of Hispanic women's daily life overcome us. (1996, p. 130)

Isasi-Díaz understands the lived experience of Latina women in community as a source of theology and gathers that source through her *mujerista* methodology, where the



community is key because of its ability to heal by announcing a promised future and denouncing oppressive structures. It is through the “practical reality as they struggle to survive” that Latinas practice and reflect on the theological meaning in their lives (Isasi-Díaz, 1993, p. 21).

Associate professor of Theology and Latina/o Ministry in Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry, Nancy Pineda-Madrid turns to the particular human experience of Latina women and then to solidarity through their communal practices of lament in religious communities that experience trauma. In her book, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez*, Pineda-Madrid (2011) employs “a social-suffering hermeneutic” (in the context of femicide in Ciudad Juárez) that “foregrounds the ways in which wider social forces coalesce to mar individual human lives” (p. 21). She continues,

If we employ a social suffering hermeneutic, then we will ask questions of the femicide such as: Which population is most at risk of great suffering? How might we identify those who are most at risk to sustain debilitating suffering? chronic suffering? Who will likely experience the enduring assault of racism? sexism? classism? rape? torture? Whose economic, ecclesiastical, political, social, and commercial interests are served by keeping this experience of suffering invisible? (p. 25)

In her method, she focuses on the particular role of Christian symbols (such as pink crosses with names of the deceased painted on them) in vigils for victims and protests of mass gender-based violence Ciudad Juárez. When changing the unseen and unheard pain into communal practice, she describes this gesture as transforming the “private suffering of victimized families into a public discourse that makes evident the absence of public standing and civil rights for the economically poor in the borderlands” (2011, p. 116). As

Christian symbols, the pink crosses subvert the often masculine understandings of the cross and direct grief into new feminine forms and subjects of theological reflection. Pineda-Madrid (2011) notes, through the “reinterpretation of the Christian symbol of the cross, the creators of the practices of resistance shine a spotlight on the relationship between female humanity and the possibility of salvation” (p. 145). The pink crosses bring private mourning into public attention and put women at the center. This “practice of resistance,” as Pineda-Madrid calls it, subverts a common symbol and connects a particular experience of pain and suffering with a universal symbol (p. 98). These types of practices are life-giving in their ability to make meaning and ground practitioners within their communities.

While refusing to dissolve the tensions between varying contexts, Pineda-Madrid’s methodology is clear to maintain the particularity of the practices and communities she engages. The importance of liberation for both Isasi-Díaz and Pineda-Madrid means that their methodologies must present particular ethnographic voices as legitimate theological sources, rather than speaking for a community. Their approach is to listen to ethnographic voices and discern the theological questions, wisdom, and insights of communities while acknowledging the complicated nature of story-telling and observations in the midst of gender and class oppression. Through this method, practices of resistance are particular to each community.

*The attention to language.* The subjects of theological study in Isasi-Díaz’s and Pineda-Madrid’s work are also part of the production of knowledge through the telling of their experiences. The act of story-telling becomes a critical reflective action through

challenging the dominant cultural narratives. Pineda-Madrid's "practices of resistance" provide agential language. The pink crosses of Juárez provide a space where the violence can be named, the evil of femicide can be denounced, and the system, which allowed this evil to continue, can be questioned. The act of paying attention to the ways language is being spoken and written reflects particular aspects of one's history, influences, and culture. Although not much is said about the translation of Isasi-Díaz's and Pineda-Madrid's original work from Spanish into English, part of the liberative method in this dissertation is to pay attention to language.

This dissertation is written in English. Since the emergence of nineteenth-century thinkers (like Herder and Schleiermacher), most philosophers agree that the concepts our mind uses to shape our experience are linguistic. Thus, language and culture form experience and what kinds of persons it would be possible to become.

In a Foucaultian move, American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler (1997) points out that language also embeds power relationships. In her book *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, she explicitly connects the logic of grammatical construction to Foucault's notion of subjection by referring to the definition of subjection from the Oxford English Dictionary as "the act of supplying a subject to a predicate" (1997, p. 1). This project acknowledges that because of its global dominance, English imposes its characteristic syntax, diction, and structure so widely that its grammar is especially hegemonic. When legitimating human discourse, English grammar dictates philosophical and theological assumptions and research about how

relations are to be thought, managed, imagined, legislated, valued, lamented, and lived. Grammar shapes, enables, and delimits much of what it means to be human.<sup>11</sup>

**Liberative modes in the context of this project.** This project is distinctly liberative in a number of ways. First, in the context of hospital chaplaincy, one of the central connecting characteristics of this project's method and contribution is its concern with socio-historical locations and particular testimonies of individuals whose grief has been foreclosed for any number of reasons, perhaps due to the rhetoric of society, the biblical rhetoric of a punishing God, a lack of access to grief counseling, or a sense of hopelessness that one's memories of suffering will go unacknowledged and unredeemed.

Second, this project is distinctly liberative in its turn to an intercultural spiritual care-bereavement community and to the public arena and its religious practices as a potential site of human solidarity when lamenting traumatic grief. The turning to solidarity through communal practices of lament begins with listening to particular ways traumatic losses are lamented and understanding what cultural and social resources should and should not be brought to bear. This project acknowledges that grief is more than what is going on in an individual; it is also what is going on between an individual and his/her family, social system, culture, religion, etc. Thus, in the context of hospital chaplaincy, responsible ethical standards should be given great flexibility when it comes to acknowledging differences in personal, theological, and cultural communities.

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<sup>11</sup> As Friedrich Nietzsche realized, language conscripts and institutes world views that found metaphysics, political legitimacy, and religious belief. Nietzsche writes, "I am afraid we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar" (1889/ 1998, p. 19).

A third way this project seeks to be liberative is in its attention to language. This project “hears into speech”<sup>12</sup> expressions of lament as “particular accounts of the real” (Chopp, 2001, p. 67) and as valid sites of liberation from systemic cruelty and structural violence. From the standpoint of feminist theology, I turn to Chopp’s strategies for human flourishing and her aim for action through proclamation. She writes,

Until we change the values and hidden rules that run through present linguistic practices, social codes, and psychic ordering, women, persons of color, and other oppressed groups will be forced—by language, discourses, and practices available to them—into conforming to ongoing practices, to babbling nonsense, or to not speaking at all. (1989, pp. 6-7)

Proclamation, as a way to tell or witness a story, is rooted in Judeo-Christian communities,<sup>13</sup> but it is not only for the Christian community; it is found in other communities that revolutionize an oppressive system that religion has helped to create.

In Chopp’s (1989) *The Power to Speak*, proclamation refers to the potential for not only Judeo-Christian communities, but other oppressed groups to have their voices heard. Particular words make particular laments. Acts of paying attention to the particular language that individuals use in community become an agent for liberative, social change. On the one hand, to be human is to create language and to create worlds from language; on the other hand, there are experiences of horror and awe alike that leave

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<sup>12</sup> “Hearing to speech” is a principle first coined by feminist theologian Nelle Morton (1985) in *The Journey is Home* (pp. 127-128). While with a group of women telling their stories, Morton witnessed a depth hearing, a kind of hearing that engages the whole self and evokes “a new speech, a new creation” (p. 128). It enables one to be heard which then creates the potential for a new imagining that contributes to the mutual empowerment and transformation of both hearer and speaker.

<sup>13</sup> For example, see scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann’s (1989, 2001) description of what the prophets/poets did in the Hebrew Bible for their own cultural contexts. Brueggemann contends that the prophets’ ability to imagine that things could be otherwise is to move beyond/against the status quo of the ruling hierarchy.

us speechless and words can best approximate. W. David Shaw, professor emeritus of English at the University of Toronto, writes, “since death is not an experience inside life, but an event that takes place on its boundary, every elegy sooner or later reaches the limits of language” (1994, p. 5). Language is limited. William Watkin, professor of contemporary literature and philosophy at Brunel University, notes that “language works by trying to connect with things, feelings, states, ideas, other people, but it is always marked by the failure to do so in a fully satisfactory way” (2004, p. 121). I think words are always an approximation: they disclose and they hide all at the same time. But they are the avenue for connection, so we keep searching. A later chapter will discuss the significance of poetry’s formal elements as dimensions of language that can explode conventional, ideological, and theoretical formulations and as guides to revising interpretations of what counts and how we might articulate it. I will suggest that contemporary poems, through their forms, can expand and exceed the limits of conventional language. Specifically, certain poems about loss, elegies, attend to particular notions of mourning in ways that do not foreclose on human experience, but point to widened relational possibilities.

**Moving through a temporal point of methodological departure.** The community I am writing about and with (those who are grieving traumatic losses) is a different community from those out of which liberation theology is normally written such as the communities that Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Nancy Pineda-Madrid have written about. In Latin American liberation theology, womanist theology, queer theology, postcolonial feminist theology, and disability liberative theology, there is a clearly

demarcated community of solidarity to whom the theology considers itself accountable. At times, liberation theology is written at a distance from that community. Claims about the connections between the academic theologian and that particular community are sometimes disputed, but there has generally been a community or movement to which that liberation theology is related. This project differs in that I am naming the silent masses of individuals experiencing traumatic grief in foreclosed ways that have been structurally created. The communal movement of praxis by advocates and communities of solidarity out of which liberation theologies are generally born is missing here. There is not a community of solidarity or movement in quite the same way.

Still, I am claiming the liberative title. Many people experience chronic religious and spiritual struggles that they endure privately even though they would benefit by talking about these struggles (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014). Pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring (2015a), a contributor to the scholarly discourse on evidence-based intercultural spiritual care, uses “life-giving” and “life-limiting” language (pp. 132-135) to describe different ways of coping with traumatic events, which can be a way of talking about overcoming oppressive theologies and making the hidden traditions of mourners public. Through examining what is life-giving and what is life-limiting, chaplains and careseekers are creating and co-creating religious beliefs that will allow for diversity in new ways. The piercing isolation of ungrieved traumatic loss is one of the struggles that has interpersonal and thus, societal implications for possibilities toward liberative, social transformation.

In her book, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, philosopher Judith Butler (2004) connects mourning processes with social transformation. She sets for herself a task of “reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss” (p. 20). She does not assume universalist human condition, yet she wonders, “*What makes for a grievable life?*” (p. 20, emphasis Butler’s). Questions of what it means to mourn another human being, and of how grief (or its refusal) effects relations beyond itself, form perhaps the most vital and persuasive elements of Butler’s many-faceted critique of violence in our era. This project is interested in the question of what it means to mourn another human being. I am suggesting a mode of sustaining lamentation as an appeal for a liberative praxis that engages careseekers and caregivers through collaborative conversation to connect and validate our particular language of lament as a petition for becoming acutely aware of the mechanisms of power by which many are rendered invisible or denied legitimacy.

I locate this project somewhere between the full-on social revolutions of liberationist movements and individuals re-working his/her search for meaning and re-imagining compassionate intercultural spiritual care practices that pastoral theologians like Carrie Doehring and researchers like Crystal Park, Julie Exline, and Kenneth Pargament point to. This is the best way I know how to locate this project with its desires to bridge poetic studies with intercultural spiritual care, public theology, and psychological studies in the context of hospital chaplaincy.



**A revised version of Thomas Groome’s methodology.** The methodology I use to develop a liberative approach through my thesis is roughly based on practical theologian Thomas Groome’s (1999) “Shared Praxis Model” (pp. 146-149).

Within the field of practical theology, lies the danger of overemphasizing particular human beliefs, values, and practices over others. This critique has been brought to the fore in the postcolonial feminist practical theological conversation by Kwok Pui-Lan (2005) in her book *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. Pui-Lan moves to uncover the inextricable connections between Christianity, gender, racism, and European colonialism. She argues that postcolonial theory is concerned with “the relation between theology and empire building and having the commitment to subvert the use of sacred symbols to oppress people” (Pui-Lan, 2005, p. 148). She argues that Christianity’s continuing significance in politics and identity formation and the constitution of gendered subjectivity necessitates further analysis and critique. One approach of critique Pui-Lan suggests is not to start “from the established theological tradition, but from a feminist analysis of the postcolonial tradition, and then articulate theological issues and themes from such an analysis” (p. 147).

This approach is similar to Iliff School of Theology Professor Katherine Turpin’s re-imagining of Groome’s methodology model, an unrelentingly Christian model— inadequate to the intercultural setting of chaplaincy— because of its exclusively Christian language and because the social, ethnic, cultural, economic, and religious contexts of chaplaincy are ever shifting. Turpin’s intention for her revision of Groome’s model is for all people’s experience to provide the lens through which Groome’s methods are viewed.

Turpin has been experimenting with what it means to use such a model in a more plural context, by using more inclusive language for Groome's basic movements of research in practical theology as I will now describe.<sup>14</sup>

***Basic movements of research in practical theology.*** Briefly, the first step is to turn to lived experience, which generates a theological pondering or problem and to give an account for why this is a good idea. For example, in this project: the problem is that sustaining lamentation for foreclosed grief is not supported by current practices. Developed in the preface was the question: What can practical theologians learn about the field of the poetic elegy that could give mourners a fuller expression of their laments through language?

The second step explores current practices related to this question. The beginning of this chapter illustrated this second step when describing why hidden losses continue to haunt the citizenry and why sustaining lamentation is not in our current practice. The third step is related to the second step in that it engages in critical reflection including its contextual, "sociohistorical," and "ideolog[ical]" situations (Groome, 1999, p. 147). The fourth step is to introduce normative resources that might provide greater wisdom and "visions for flourishing" (Turpin, 2013) in helping us to understand how to sustain lamentation. The fifth step is to articulate a dialogue between the description of what is going on and the normative resources as mediated through on-the-ground examples. In

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<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Katherine Turpin (2013) for her "Practical Theological Method: Shared Praxis Model," class notes that redesign Groome's movements into a less confessional, more inclusive methodology. Specifically, by refashioning Groome's language, Turpin takes into account a diverse religiosity such as non-Christians and multiple religious belonging as she expands Groome's model of methodology.

this dissertation, I turn to poems about loss as normative sources for theology<sup>15</sup> to ask what else can chaplains learn about sustaining lamentation? The sixth step is to name recommendations for future practice.

**Normative sources for theology.** Practical theologian Richard Osmer (2008) develops a framework for a practical theological interpretation in the context of congregations by focusing on four key questions: “What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond?” (2008, p. 4). Osmer’s contribution is unique in its attention to interdisciplinary issues and the ways that theological reflection gets manifested. Osmer emphasizes, “the importance of the dialogue between theology and other fields, both other theological disciplines and the arts and sciences” (2008, p. 222). In other words, pertinent to this dissertation, no one discipline (neither theology nor psychology nor poetic studies) is prioritized to provide answers to questions raised by lived experience or other disciplines. Nor will poetry be reduced to a certain therapeutic or theological function. A dialogical method will allow for poetic studies to speak for itself, without its multilayered and ambiguous meanings being co-opted to support therapeutic functions or particular theological beliefs (for example, redemptive beliefs about traumatic suffering). Basically, most of the dissertation’s chapters draw on vignettes and existing normative practices, theories, and criticisms to understand and develop the contours of sustaining lamentation.

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<sup>15</sup> As an example of this move, the late womanist, ethicist, and theologian Katie Geneva Cannon (1988) made the argument for the use of literature by African-American women as a normative source for womanist theology.

As Turpin (2014) points out, the term “theology” is problematic for the way it evokes Christian normativity. This project lives into this tension by adapting its method to serve better in the plural contexts where Christianity does not have the cultural authority that Groome and Osmer assume.<sup>16</sup> The chapters of the dissertation follow the basic outline of Groome’s method, but adapted in language to be appropriate to a more intercultural and ever shifting chaplaincy environment such as can be found in a hospital or at public memorials. My dissertation articulates its thesis through Turpin’s (2013) re-articulation of Groome’s “Shared Praxis Model” as an effective research strategy because it allows for a less-confessional approach, that is, a rejection of the traditions of the Christian church as sole sources of authority in favor of wider experiences. The *method* reveals itself in each chapter in the following way:

*Preface:* This chapter articulates the lived experience that generated the theological question for this dissertation (Step 1).

*Chapter 1:* This chapter sets up the theological problem I am exploring and describes the current practice related to this problem (Step 2).

*Chapter 2:* This chapter describes existing normative practices of traumatic grief and engages in critical reflection on current practices. I use psychological studies and theories of intercultural spiritual care as normative sources to name what is going on in relation to the problem in current practice. I show that intercultural spiritual care points

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<sup>16</sup> Other theologians working from practical theology frameworks in religious pluralism include Kathleen Greider (2014) who refers to “institutional developments in Christian practical theology related to religious pluralism” (p. 455) and Elaine Graham (2013) who writes about doing public theology in a post-secular age. There are a range of students working within practical theological frameworks out of other religious traditions—at places like Claremont School of Theology and others in the UK—as documented in “Invitation to Research in Practical Theology” (Bennett, et. al, 2018). These are examples of hopeful moments of moving towards a practical theology working in non-Christian dominant contexts.

to the necessity for sustaining lamentation and why sustaining lamentation is an important intervention (Step 3).

*Chapter 3:* This chapter and Chapter 4 are educative chapters laying the theoretical groundwork for the discussion of contemporary poetic elegies. Specifically, Chapter 3 focuses on an introductory level discussion of poetry's formal elements and how poetry differs from prose.

*Chapter 4:* This chapter builds on Chapter 3 and focuses on an introduction to the field of the poetic elegy as a field of serious scholarship in possession of theory, criticism, and foundational works that acknowledge the complex dimensions of critical and theoretical discourse in the field of the poetic elegy.

*Chapter 5:* This chapter engages resources outside the field of practical theology. Illman and Smith (2013) speak of the arts as having a particular kind of wisdom, offering examples of communities' arts-based practices as key sites where practical theology is enacted. I am researching the elegy through thematic analysis to discover what we can learn from poets about how to attend to traumatic grief through the ongoing process of mourning (Step 4).

*Chapter 6:* This chapter looks at on-the-ground practices of engaging poetry in spiritual care in a hospital setting through a composite vignette. I am proposing reading contemporary, diverse poets with mourners and or their families in the context of chaplaincy healthcare as a site where practical theology is enacted. I describe a critical understanding of present practice and tradition in conversation with one another to see how they speak. I show what can be learned from reading the poetic form of the elegy as

a communal practice meant to sustain lamentation in the face of major loss. I draw on the grief-experience of first and second-generation immigrants. I conduct this feminist practical theological project from within and beyond a sacramental worldview, in which all lived experience is not only an important dialogue partner for theological investigation but central to an ability to access God. According to Turpin (2014), “Liberationist practical theologians draw on experiences of marginalized communities, not only as a contextualized problem for theological reflection but also as a source of theological reflection” (p. 158). In order to step out of a theological cycle of reinforcing a particular privileged worldview, this project turns to the bereaved voices and practices of Latinx mourners and holds them up as important sources of theological insight (Step 5).

*Chapter 7:* This chapter discusses the implications for sustaining lamentation as a method of intercultural bereavement care in future practices and in broader social contexts, such as reading poetry at public memorials. I introduce *theopoethics*, as a new term that re-envisioning how the field of poetic studies and its criticisms can be drawn upon in practical theology to contribute to future research and lived praxis (Step 6).

## **Two Tracks**

There are inherent contradictions in writing a dissertation about spiritual care and poetry. On the one hand, a dissertation’s form (known as academic discourse) encourages explanation, argument, categorical language, linear time, abstraction, summary, control, and didactics. On the other hand, poet John Ciardi’s (1975) insight that “a good poem will never wholly submit to explanation is not its deficiency but its very life” (pp. 118-119) emphasizes poetry as a process of discovery. Likewise, in

spiritual care conversations, we engage in relationships by how we relate rather than by how we talk about or seek to guide relational change.

For example, a spiritual caregiver would not go into a hospital room with an outline of what will happen. Along these lines, a poem conveying breakfast as a time of day has the possibility of showing us the early light slanting through layers of apricot jam, instead of saying it is six a.m.. Possibilities of encounter as approaches to discovery are likely to be at odds with reading a dissertation in which knowledge itself is behaving differently.

As much as possible, I would like this dissertation's methodology to perform the relationship between spiritual care and poetic studies as an unfolding dialogue of discovery. However, the form of the dissertation does not often align with this value and may seem at odds with it. Side by side, the chapters can create intellectual tension: at times converging collaboratively and at other times existing uncomfortably in their methodological divergence. An example will be found in Chapter 6 where it is a standard practice in the psychology of religion (APA style) to write a composite vignette in past tense with a predetermined end. What does this—not writing in the present tense—cost the reader? A sense of discovery and a sense of closeness, I think.

Spiritual care and creative writing often have a similar impulse toward sacred meanings, so one might feel strain and tension to write/read in a form that runs counter to this impulse. The 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2010) expresses this disjunction best:

Scientific prose and creative writing serve different purposes. Devices that are often found in creative writing—for example, setting up ambiguity; inserting the

unexpected; omitting the expected; and suddenly shifting the topic, tense, or person—can confuse or disturb readers of scientific prose. Therefore try to avoid these devices and aim for clear and logical communication . . . . (p. 65)

In this quote, the APA manual is getting at tensions relevant to the dissertation. One tension is the way in which “scientific prose” as the mode of the APA style, may create hegemonic biases that shape the way researchers operate in the world. Other tensions that APA style creates in this dissertation are tensions between: evidence-based and arts-based research, beauty and politics, art and justice, and poetry and social concern. The tensions feel like train tracks running side by side, never out of each other’s sight and never joining. From the above quote—“[s]cientific prose and creative writing serve different purposes”—the APA manual invites us to wonder not only about language, but about its form. Matters of power and justice start with what forms we consider our relationship to be to the world around us.

If we define poetry as an act of discovery then we charge ourselves with writing blind in a sense, allowing the language and the rhythms of the poem to carry us into the unknown. We don’t know what the poem will turn up, how or if it will find its closure. On one hand, we find out what we think or really care about as we write which might not be what we want to think or care about.

On the other hand, in the realm of evidence-based socio-psycho concern or political concern, the rhetoric is much more one of certainty. We are partisan. We are stirred to respond to injustice because we see it as injustice. If we are stirred we may have doubts, but we also have an amount of certainty. Again two tracks: parallel, not crossing.



## Key Terms or Three Cornerstones

**First cornerstone: The poetics of testimony.** Feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp defines *the poetics of testimony* as “a genre of literary theory . . . that expresses unique events or experiences outside the representation of modern rational discourses” (Chopp, 2001, p. 56). The poetics of testimony includes “the discursive practices and various voices that seek or describe or name that which rational discourse will not or cannot reveal” (Chopp, 2001, p. 56). Chopp attributes these voices to those people who are marginalized in contemporary society. She goes on to expand upon what she means by a poetics of testimony:

Though I introduce this trope as the “poetics” of testimony, I do not limit it to poetry proper. I prefer to speak of the poetics of testimony for those discourses—poetry, novels, theory, theology—that speak to the unspeakable and tell of the suffering and hope of particular communities who have not been authorized to speak. My use of “poetics” points toward a kind of writing that exists outside much of modern theory. Such discourse is an intervention, for it must create language, forms, images to speak of what, in some way, has been ruled unspeakable or at least not valid or credible to modern reason. (Chopp, 2001, p. 61)

In this project, I speak of contemporary poems about loss, elegies, as examples both of “the poetics of testimony,” and of language that lies outside the domain of “rational discourse.” Often, traumatic grief is marked by a loss of speech. My claim is not that poetry can make the unspeakable speakable, but that it offers alternative expressions of traumatic grief that help name the complexity of meanings, which may give relief to those struggling to keep a sense of connection to the world of the living.

Moreover, the poetics of testimony enacts a moral imperative through language that conjures up Levinas’s thinking on our obligation to the ‘Other.’ Chopp (2001)

writes, “The language of testimonies asks us to hear this other as the first and most indisputable claim of existence . . . Testimonies call us to an otherness, a reality greater than even the basic rules of individual and public life” (p. 62). Influenced by Chopp’s thinking, this project takes “the poetics of testimony” as the first cornerstone, explores what role poetics might play in re-imagining alternatives to the common conceptions of mourning and melancholia that Freud’s early work proposed, and critiques dominant narratives/practices that foreclose on individual and cultural grief.

**Second Cornerstone: The field of the poetic elegy, literary criticism, and theory.** Elegies are poems about loss. Poet Edward Hirsch writes:

The sense of a highly self-conscious dramatic performance, of a necessary and sometimes a reluctant reentry into language, continues to power the elegy in our century, but the traditional consolations and comforts of the elegy have often been called into question. (2014, p. 198)

Death and dying are social, relational, and “reluctant” linguistic experiences, as well as bodily and individual soul-challenges for the individual on the death-bed. W. David Shaw (1994) at the University of Toronto writes, “what we mourn in an elegy is never simply the other but the limits of our own understanding and a loss in ourselves” (p. 244). Elegies can make us aware that dying isn’t just the other to whom a poet is writing about, but it is about the writers and readers and the meaning, impact, and options that come into their lives too.

For example, poet Mary Jo Bang (2007) wrote a book of elegies over the course of a year following the death of her son by a prescription drug overdose. In her poem “You Were You Are Elegy,” the speaker deliberately interrogates the finality of death by seeking continuity in her relationship with her deceased son:

...I've been crying. I think you  
Have forgiven me. You keep  
Putting your hand on my shoulder  
When I'm crying.  
Thank you for that. And  
For the ineffable sense  
Of continuance. You were. You are  
The brightest thing in the shop window  
And the most beautiful seldom I ever saw. (p. 85)

In stark terms Bang puts the felt paradox of her experience of the collapsing of time while she mourns. Her statement, “You were. You are,” embraces an “ineffable sense / Of continuance” of temporality between these two states— you were (absent) and You are (present) —.<sup>17</sup> In a later poem, “The Visiting,” she writes:

The ordeal comes  
To its periodic end  
  
Which simply means  
The ahead is again (p. 89)

Bang shows us that that dying is about her son and it is about the meaning and impact that have come into her life. Bang underscores the endlessness of the movement from one state of grieving to the other. She wants to hold open the possible felt presence of her son in the lines: “You keep/ Putting your hand on my shoulder” in spite of the attempts of Freudian based “grief-work” (working through grief to catharsis) that some literary critics, such as Peter Sacks (1985), associate with the traditional elegy. In Chapter 5, the elegies I examine do not conform to Freud’s (1917/1957) early model for

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<sup>17</sup> The sense of a temporal problem is common to elegies. In “Theory of the Lyric,” Jonathan Culler writes, “In lyrics of this kind a temporal problem is posed: something once present has been lost or attenuated; this loss can be narrated but the temporal sequence is irreversible, like time itself. Apostrophes displace this irreversible structure by removing it from linear time and locating it in a discursive time” (2015, p. 227). Here Bang’s apostrophe (to whom the poem is addressed) is her dead son. She evokes an alteration of his presence and absence rather than a narrative sequence.

mourning. Instead, the poets seek relationships with their deceased loved ones in particular ways.

In this dissertation, the poetic elegy is an example of the poetics of testimony, which includes discourse that “points to a kind of writing that exists outside much of modern theory . . . and must create language, forms, images to speak of what, in some way, has been ruled unspeakable or at least not valid or credible to modern reason” (Chopp, 2001, p. 61). The above elegy can be thought of an alternate mode of time and temporality, and thus, a mode of lament “that seeks not so much to argue as to reconfigure, to reimagine, and to reshape the world, and reconfigure the real against the representations of dominant discourse” (Chopp, 2001, p. 61).

Though the contemporary elegies I take up in this dissertation are not explicitly religious, I will consider them as twenty-first-century versions of experiences that have a quality of “specialness” (Taves, 2009, pp. 26-55),<sup>18</sup> in which individual apprehensions of the unseen constitute valid “sacred” experience.

Since the twentieth century, Freudian thought continues to influence literary critics and theorists in the field of the poetic elegy (as will be detailed in Chapter 4). Peter M. Sacks (1985), in his landmark study *The English Elegy*, proposes that the elegy can be read in terms of Freud’s psychoanalytic account of the “work of mourning” or

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<sup>18</sup> In her book *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, Taves (2009), a scholar and professor of religious studies, builds upon “Durkheim’s concept that the ‘sacred’ and related beliefs and rites are separable from religions” (Knott, 2010, p. 305). Taves notes Durkheim’s use of “special” and writes that his “concept of ‘sacred things as things set apart and forbidden’ can be used to generate a generic second-order concept of ‘specialness’ if care is taken to avoid certain pitfalls” (Taves, 2009, p. 27). This conception gives us “a larger, more encompassing framework” (Taves, 2009, p. 29) of the search for meaning which can “incorporate those things, experiences, beliefs and values deemed by people to be religious, but also those deemed spiritual, magical, and indeed special in a wide variety of non-religious ways” (Knott, 2010, p. 305).

“grief-work” which involves severing bonds with the deceased person and then finding and attaching to a person as a substitute for the deceased person. For Sacks, the act of writing about loss in its aftermath is linked to the grieving process detailed in Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917/ 1957). One assumption at the crux of poetic elegy criticism that engages with Freud’s (1917) model is that a mourner pushes/works through grief, like a necessary fever, to the point of recovery.

In the literary critical context, Freud’s model is used to compare the mourning processes enacted in elegiac writing. Sacks suggests that figurative substitutions in elegies work in the same way as the act of finding a new beloved after the original has died. As an example, Sacks uses Ovid’s version of the Daphne and Apollo myth, wherein after Daphne is turned into a laurel tree, Apollo fails to embrace her in her new form and cannot be comforted. However, “when Apollo turns to the projected founding of a sign, the laurel wreath . . . he appear[s] to accept his loss, by having invented some consoling substitute for Daphne” (Sacks, 1985, p. 4). In this understanding of the elegy, Apollo performs the work of mourning.

In other examples, Sacks understands the poets’ acts of writing as a process of transferring emotions for the deceased onto the product being written until an acceptance of or solace in the new world without the deceased is wrought in the form of an elegy. Other critics such as Jahan Ramazani (1994) and Patricia Rae (2007) focus on deviations from this process in which the shock of loss is sustained, even amplified in the writing, thereby resisting closure and consolation.

As I will describe in Chapter 4, the vast majority of critical studies in the field of the poetic elegy—and as I will describe in Chapter 2, the vast majority of psychological bereavement studies—are explicitly in dialogue within or against the version of mourning and/or melancholia Freud forwards in his 1917 essay. But the elegies I examine in Chapter 5 neither adhere to nor react against Freud’s early model of mourning. As Chapter 4 will show, there has not been much room for understanding these poems against Freudian-based literary criticism in the field of the poetic elegy.

I argue that Freud’s (1917/ 1957) “Mourning and Melancholia” has become an entrenched part of the theological critical framework (alongside the often Freudian-based psychological studies) that forecloses on particular practices of public lamentation and therefore, hope. The everyday lives of underrepresented communities go unacknowledged. Hence the need to turn to poetic elegies as potentials to reconfigure social norms.

As a second cornerstone of this project, this dissertation uses literary critic R. Clifton Spargo’s (2004) notion of the poetic elegy as a mode for the reconfiguration of social norms (p. 5). R. Clifton Spargo (2004) concentrates his work in the field of the poetic elegy and shows how unresolved mourning<sup>19</sup> can function as an empowering act of honoring the truth of the mourner’s experience of loss. Spargo’s work highlights literary acts of mourning that oppose cultural norms, ones that help to define a society’s stance toward death and dying. According to Spargo, the mourners’ inclination to oppose the injustice

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<sup>19</sup> Spargo (2004) defines unresolved mourning as mourning that “resists cultural and psychological narratives of resolution” (p. 13).

done to the deceased other also opposes society's cultural norms and is the very act that calls forth an ethical crux to mourning.

**Third cornerstone: Sustaining lamentation.** “Sustain lamentation” are Larry Graham’s (2011, p. 8) words that he used in his research on families in the aftermath of war. Based upon interviews he conducted between March 2008 and October 2009 with families in the United States, Germany, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Vietnam, he came up with the phrase “the courage to sustain lamentation” (L. Graham, 2011, p.8) as a description of ongoing recovery for survivors who reclaim their lives from the impacts of war. He writes:

From my interviews I am convinced that families, individuals, and communities who have the best chance of reclaiming their lives from these losses and the ongoing gaps they create are those who are developing what I call ‘the courage to sustain lamentation’ . . . . (p. 9)

Significantly, L. Graham cautions that there are no permanent solutions to the traumatic effects of war and concludes that “grieving losses and learning to live with what is left over is sometimes the most we can embrace as a caregiving outcome” (2017, p. 53). In this dissertation I will develop sustaining lamentation as a mode of intercultural spiritual care.<sup>20</sup>

***History of Larry Graham’s tri-partite theory of lamentation.*** In L. Graham’s (2006) earlier research on catastrophic disasters such as the Columbine High School shooting and Hurricane Katrina, he discusses how a spiritual care provider can respond

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<sup>20</sup> Carrie Doehring (2015a) describes *intercultural spiritual care* as “a cocreative process of intermingling stories and lives. This generative process changes care seekers as well as caregivers, as well as their relationships, families, communities, cultures and even, as I believe, God . . . . The preposition “inter” in the term intercultural conveys the intermingling effects of change that move back and forth across relational webs, when caregivers respect care seekers and care seekers in turn trust caregivers” (p. xix).

pastorally and theologically. He proposes three responses: lamenting that which is lost or sharing anguish, interrogating the systems that allowed for the disaster to occur, and reclaiming life through various forms of assistance (p. 2).

About sharing anguish (the first reaction to catastrophic disaster) L. Graham writes, “The pastoral caregiver and theologian understand lament as mode of response by which the losses are truthfully and fully named and a means of expressing and legitimating their feelings of futility, pain and anger” (2006, p. 5). By offering a refuge to share anguish at the onset of disaster, people bond together in community while also perhaps feeling an intense individualization because our lives are in peril and something threatening has come upon us.

Catastrophic loss stirs theological questions. In L. Graham’s second response to disaster, lamentation involves interrogating systems and God. Who is to blame? What could have been done differently? Why did this happen? Where is God? Is the universe a moral place? In the context of spiritual and pastoral caregiving, questions such as these can help those suffering from a tragedy think carefully and critically about what has happened. According to L. Graham (2006), “One might wonder in light of these disasters whether God really is, or for that matter could be, in control. And if God is in control, is God really providential and benevolent?” (p. 9). In his later work, L. Graham (2014) develops the potential of interrogating causes as not only a way to question what happened, but also as a way to assess responsibility for what happened through angry and intense questioning. L. Graham (2014) notes that “interrogating causes and focusing complaint at undeserved disaster adds theological strength and moral force to the



lamentation and memorializing process” ( p. 479). At the very moment when disaster shatters our worlds, there is a sense of our being together with one another to protect life.

L. Graham’s third reaction to catastrophic disaster is reclaiming goodness (2006, p. 12). Goodness here is not some idealized perfection of the world around us, but instead is “a personal and communal spiritual practice characterized by generosity, search for inclusivity and justice, and a commitment to transform the conditions that force some persons into perpetual vulnerability” (L. Graham, 2006, p. 12). Some ideas that help foster this goodness includes human solidarity, drawing on anger, memorial processes, and relying on the idea of a compassionate God.

By 2015, L. Graham developed the above three responses into an operating framework of lamentation that describes how the spiritual and pastoral caregiver could participate in responses to catastrophic disaster. His framework consists of a “tri-partite process of sharing anguish, interrogating causes, and reinvesting in hope” (L. Graham, 2014, p. 471).

I choose Larry Graham’s work on lamentation as a third cornerstone for this project because his work does not build on Freudian approaches to mourning. Many contemporary western psychologists, literary critics, and theologians have invested their thought and rooted their grief research, at least in part, in Freud’s (1917/1957) work on mourning and melancholia. In each of these fields, there often exists a tendency to focus on an opposition between “mourning” (closure) and melancholia (resistance to closure). This is problematic for at least two reasons: 1) because this kind of framework presupposes that mourning will eventually transform into one of two outcomes and 2)

because melancholic mourning is often understood in terms of communal acts of political resistance to dominant versions of memory and not understood in terms of particular expressions of grieving.

However, L. Graham's tripartite framework of lamentation has been developed from his research conducted through collaborative conversations with people who have experienced disasters in different cultures. His model of lamentation does not recuperate a mode of mourning that ends or doesn't end but engages a contextually creative, collaborative process that in my view considers particular expressions of grieving. L. Graham's model of lamentation is fluid and moves between closure and openness; it is suggestive rather than prescriptive. At any point along the spectrum, healing is aimed for, not assumed.

Using three cornerstones—Chopp's poetics of testimony, Spargo's reconfiguration of social norms, and L. Graham's tripartite framework of lamentation—I begin to articulate a new mode of constructive critical theological reflection that contests the presumed opposition between mourning and melancholia. By dissertation's end I will bring together Spargo's elements, L. Graham's tripartite framework of lamentation, and Rebecca Chopp's poetics of testimony and suggest a new term, *theopoethics*, for future contours of praxis. In this dissertation I suggest sustaining lamentation as a practice of theopoethics. I define theopoethics as a mode of constructive theological reflection that engages contemporary poetics and its criticisms to help account for the mechanisms by which many are rendered invisible and/or denied legitimacy and to affirm humanity.

## Rationale

Many studies in clinically-based trauma research describe the ways traumatic events<sup>21</sup> create stressors that impact a person's ability to give an oral account of their traumatic experiences. For example, in her landmark book *Trauma and Recovery*, psychiatrist Judith Herman (1997) details the ways that acute stress can become posttraumatic stress over time. Symptoms, like invasive memories and avoidant behavior, she describes as “wordless and static” and “repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless” (p. 175). Herman (1997) argues that a person must first experience safety as “a context within which the particular meaning of the trauma can be understood” (pp. 175-176). The survivor then must reconstruct the traumatic story so that it can be “integrated into the survivor's life story” and thereby “provide a context within which the particular meaning of the trauma can be understood” (pp. 175-6).

However, while reconstruction and articulation may be desirable to alleviate the pain and proximity of memory, trauma itself is frequently marked by its silence and unconscious performances. Herman writes, “the narrative closes in on the most unbearable moments, [and] the patient finds it more and more difficult to use words” (p. 177). Herman calls this paradoxical coincidence of silence and a story to be told the “dialectic of trauma,” referring to the symptoms of trauma that “simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it” (p. 1).

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<sup>21</sup> Affiliated with the Keck School of Medicine at USC, psychiatrist John Briere and researcher Catherine Scott define a traumatic event as one that “is extremely upsetting and at least temporarily overwhelms the individual's internal resources” (Briere & Scott, 2006, p. 4).

A decade before Herman's landmark study, Elaine Scarry, professor of English and American Literature and Language at Harvard University, explained the importance as well as the difficulty of using language to express one's pain. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, she pointed toward the efforts of Amnesty International in confronting torture, stating that "embedded in Amnesty's work, as in medical work, is the assumption that the act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain" (1985, p. 9). Scarry noted the paradox associated with representations of pain in so far as every representation is inaccurate. Pain remains outside the boundaries of language, an ineffable experience that other people cannot share and often cannot understand.

Furthermore, Dr. Eva-Maria Simms, professor of psychology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, researches linguistic responses to trauma. In one study she concludes that "language is often insufficient to address the complexity of the affective domain, but play displays this complexity tangibly, over time, and in all its paradoxical features" (Simms, 2010, p. 321). Boston University theologian Professor Shelly Rambo echoes Simms when she describes trauma as "a rupture in a person's ability to access memories [that] reveal[s] the degree to which experiences could not be captured in language" (Rambo, 2016, p. 6). Why then write a dissertation underscoring language's power through poetry in the aftermath of trauma?

Within the last decade, in religious studies and practical theology, much of the work grounded in Chopp's (2001) "poetics of testimony," does not pay attention to the power of language, but "emphasizes the limits of language" and foregrounds "the somatic

dimensions of trauma” (Rambo, 2016, p. 6). Post-trauma scholarship in practical theology is emerging that engages new methods of “listening to what lies beyond language and cognition, paying attention to the somatic dimensions of experience” (Rambo, 2016, p. 18). Psychological and neuroscience research on the impact of trauma on the brain has helped initiate this shift, I think.

In the last decade, Stephen Porges (2011), research psychologist at University of North Carolina, has developed the Polyvagal Theory and psychologist Peter Levine (2010, 2015) has elaborated “Somatic Experiencing,” a modality of trauma therapy, that shows how trauma affects all systems of the body.<sup>22</sup> In light of this research, psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk (2014) has foregrounded the importance of bodily sensations to restore self-regulation.

In some arenas of practical theology, the sensory expression of traumatic grief is described as a turn to *material theopoetics*, or “poetic meaning making in material form” (Walsh, 2017, p. 100), in order to “open up that part of your brain that the trauma affected” (Walsh, 2017, p. 100). *Material theopoetics* (Walsh, 2016) focuses on non-discursive, visual responses to traumatic grief through “various artistic and material practices [that] mark an ongoing bond with the dead that is not only political but also living, moral, and sacred” (2017, p. 105).

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<sup>22</sup> Porges (2011) expanded the Polyvagal Theory by nuancing the role of vagus nerve in the parasympathetic control of the heart, face, viscera, and breath and in communicating with the brain. Porges gives us insights as to how the autonomic nervous system responds to threat and trauma, which impacts one’s experiences of safety, trust, and connection. Levine’s (2010, 2015) “somatic experiencing” is a therapy directing a client’s attention to internal sensations (visceral and skeletal) rather than primarily emotional or cognitive experiences. They discovered that fragmented life stories signal how the aftermath of trauma is marked in the brain by temporal incoherence, a troubled quest for meaning, and difficulty in perceiving or formulating one’s role or position in relation to traumatic losses.

Such art forms,<sup>23</sup> Walsh suggests, are dedicated to communal memory and mourning and perform lamentation as a dynamic mode of community building through engaging tactile, visual, and other sensory stimuli in particular ways that language does not. Does contemporary practical theology's turn toward a *theopoetics of material culture* leave language in the background? In light of these successful somatic interventions for traumatic grief what would poetry have to offer? This dissertation foregrounds language's power to articulate the ironies and discrepancies, tensions and silences, longings and questions of our humanity. In poetry, words can be cranked to their most vivid or stripped and balanced on the edge of silence. Through paying closer attention to form and content, this dissertation shows that poetry can begin to speak what we have no words for.

The field of contemporary poetic studies and its criticisms are absent in most discussions, books, and articles researching "somatic trauma studies," "clinical applications of the polyvagal theory," "theopoetics," "poetic meaning making," and "theopoetics of material culture." This dissertation does not disregard the somatic effectiveness of these new models of practice nor does it dismiss their significant contributions to theological understandings, nor does it deny the failure of words in the aftermath of widespread atrocity. Rather, this dissertation seeks to address the absence of poetic studies and its criticisms in contemporary "theopoetic" trends of lived religion.

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<sup>23</sup> Walsh (2017) gives examples of The Peace Institute's "The Travelling Button Memorial" and the "Public Artistic Memorial" that were created by a public charter school class "using shoes to represent people lost to homicide in the year 2005" (p. 106).

What could practical theology and non-black-bodied somatic trauma researchers learn from literary critics, for example, Hortense Spillers, about her distinction between the flesh and the body? In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Spillers (1987) argues that the captive flesh becomes a medium of exchange within the early United States, and the trace of that captivity remains etched on the surface of that flesh, associated with the flesh’s particular color for generations as economic and social institutions maintain and reproduce oppressive stereotypes about the black body. Viewing their work through Spillers’s lens, would non-black researchers think about reframing their projects on somatic trauma in a clearer light? Would non-black chaplains understand the potential complex nuances of what death from major surgery might mean for a black-bodied person’s family? If so, how would they co-construct a prayer of lament for this family? Poetry and its criticisms reach across disciplines. Poetry’s language and form foster transformation and disruption and widen possibilities of respectful and accountable connections.

### **Outline of Chapters**

An earlier outline described each step of practical theological method throughout the project’s chapters. This outline describes the content.

*Preface:* This chapter sets up the background of the problem. It shows how theological ponderings and questions arise through lived experience.

*Chapter 1: Introduction.* This chapter introduces the problem, defines key terms, and provides a rationale for the research. It includes glimpses of contributions for further research.

*Chapter 2: Sustaining lamentation as intercultural spiritual care to traumatic grief: Setting the context.* This chapter presents an historical understanding of grief and moves to a current review of the psychological literature on traumatic grief, coping, and religious / spiritual struggles. This chapter begins to develop an interdisciplinary understanding of the contextual, cultural dynamics and problems of grief. I draw attention to what is missing in the research and begin to articulate why a turn to the field of the poetic elegy is necessary for fuller expressions of mourning.

*Chapter 3: Introducing Poetry's Formal Features to Sustaining Lamentation.* This chapter introduces ways poetry differs from prose and discusses poetry's formal elements. I discuss some potentials of poetry to assist chaplains in co-creating spiritual care conversations.

*Chapter 4: Sustaining Lamentation through the Contemporary North American Poetic Elegy.* This chapter summarizes a brief history of the field of the poetic elegy. This chapter articulates and placement of my argument for contemporary elegies within (and against) the fields of poetics and poetry/literary criticism and theory. I consider foundational critical/theoretical works in the field of the poetic elegy by scholars such as: Jahan Ramazani, Peter Sacks, Melissa F. Zeiger, W. S. Howard, Sandra Gilbert, Patricia Rae, Juliana Schiesari, and W. David Shaw. I amplify four elements from R. Clifton Spargo's (2004) work to construct a later framework of an empowered spiritual care practice of sustaining lamentation as a potential resource for empowerment.

*Chapter 5: Sustaining Lamentation through Five Contemporary North American Poets.* I explore the themes of selected contemporary elegies to discover what we can



learn from poets about how poetry can help sustain lamentation for traumatic grief (the ongoing process of mourning). I connect my findings to the field of criticism/practice/scholarship/theory. I argue that the poetic elegies I examine neither conform to Freud's early model for mourning nor react directly against it; instead they seek spiritually impactful alternatives in dealing with loss.

*Chapter 6: A practical theology engagement with sustaining lamentation in the context of hospital chaplaincy.* Through personal experience (composite vignettes) as a hospital chaplain, this chapter reveals how the process of reading contemporary elegies in collaborative conversation challenges the notion that traumatic grief is pathological (or that traumatic grief has an endpoint). I emphasize practical applications of close readings and methods of contemporary elegies as poetics of testimonies. I argue that grief cannot become liberative when it is foreclosed. Sustaining lamentation until lamentation becomes liberative could be a form of intercultural spiritual care that supports flourishing.

*Chapter 7: Sustaining lamentation as hope toward the future.* This chapter concludes with implications of sustaining lamentation for broader social contexts, such as reading poetry at public memorials and teaching poetry in the seminary classroom. This chapter answers the question "What now?" After describing the limitations of my project, I propose ways that poetic studies could broaden theory and practice in the field of practical theology. I argue that public practical theologians need to resignify and redo lament, moving from a Christocentric position to a global approach that foregrounds the

complexity of multiple co-existing asymmetrical power dynamics. I close with final reflections and potential for the project.

## Chapter 2

### Sustaining Lamentation as Intercultural Spiritual Care of Traumatic Grief:

#### Setting the Context

*Everything began all over again immediately: arrival of manuscripts, requests, people's stories, each person mercilessly pushing ahead his own little demand (for love, for gratitude): No sooner has she departed than the world deafens me with its continuance.*

Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, 2010, p. 146

#### Introduction

In the above quote, French literary theorist Roland Barthes communicates his sense of overwhelm and isolation as he tries to come to terms with the death of his mother. A psychologist might say that the Barthes quote is an appraisal of the stressfulness of his situation. The process of coming to terms with trauma, tragedy, death, and other critical life events is known as coping, and an entire subsection within the social sciences has been dedicated to the types of coping that concern religious and spiritual themes.

This chapter gives an overview on the current theories and practices of coping, religious/spiritual struggles, and spiritual orienting systems. In terms of practical theological method, this chapter presents the third step of Thomas Groome's model revised by Katherine Turpin. The third step in this model is to engage in critical reflection on current practice, including its historical, contextual and ideological situation (Turpin, 2013). To make a strong case for why sustaining lament in the aftermath of traumatic

loss is a needed mode of intercultural bereavement care, I begin with an historical overview of research on traumatic grief and show the limitations of stage theories of mourning based on common interpretations of Freud's influential essay, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917/1957), whereby Freud's conceptualization of ongoing mourning (melancholia) has been often interpreted as pathology within psychological and psychiatric fields, which in turn has influenced pastoral theology and care.

Despite Freud's (1923) revision of his earlier notion of mourning as the complete renunciation of the deceased, "Mourning and Melancholia" remains foundational not only in psychological studies, but also in literary criticism in the field of the poetic elegy. As I will describe in Chapter 4, many literary scholars critique elegiac writing as a performance of variously "successful" or "unsuccessful" processes of mourning in the early Freudian sense of the term. How and why, after a century since Freud's speculative essay and in spite of Freud's own later revision of the model of mourning it proposes, does his 1917 landmark theory remain so important to literary criticism and psychological studies in response to grief? What are the impacts of his original theory on the North American culture's public modes of mourning and on the ways religious leaders speak about God?

This chapter situates these questions in the field of psychological studies with an eye on Leeat Granek's (2010) work that traces the evolution of Freud's "grief-work" throughout psychological studies. Leeat Granek, a research psychologist and associate professor at York University in Toronto Canada, focuses her work on the history and theory of psychological diagnoses and practices. She argues that "grief-work" in

“Mourning and Melancholia” was “originally conceived by Freud within a psychoanalytic and *nonpathological* framework,” even though many current conceptualizations of grief have been made “within *the disease model*” (Granek, 2010, p. 46, emphasis added).

Building a strong case for why sustaining lament in the aftermath of traumatic loss is needed, I challenge lament practices that historically have privileged the white Eurocentric tradition through the critical review of contemporary evidence-based psychological literature regarding spiritual orienting systems, religious/spiritual coping, religious/spiritual struggles, and the transactional model of coping. In this arena, I will outline some of the major relevant studies of psychologist of religion Kenneth Pargament and his colleagues.

After elaborating the context of this chapter (the development of psychological interpretations of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” and its impact on contemporary bereavement), I then step into a particular milieu—the lived experience of a hospital chaplain responding to traumatic loss—to demonstrate the limitations of stage theory in practice and therefore, the need for chaplains to engage mourners with an intercultural care that does not privilege lament via the white Eurocentric tradition, but sustains lamentation for the performances of memory of the exiled, the immigrant, and their traumatic experiences of immigration and assimilation.

### **Traumatic Grief in Psychological Studies: History, Influences, and Coping**

**History.** Practical theology is inherently contextual, beginning with lived experience, rather than theory or doctrine. Therefore, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*,

edited by Ernst Freud (1975) provides us with an opportunity to encounter S. Freud's lived experience with traumatic losses and the subsequent persistence of his grief. Through the insightful Freud scholars—John Archer, professor of psychology at the University of Central Lancashire and Tammy Clewell, professor of English at Kent State University—a discussion regarding the evolution of Freud's theory of mourning can be retrospectively traced. I compare Freud's letters with his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" to examine what led Freud to revise his model of mourning. According to Clewell (2009), Freud "removes his mourning theory from the strictures of consolatory closure" to a later revision wherein he attests to an interactive relationship between mourning and melancholia (p. 12). Freud's lived experience led him to revise his foundational theory, yet widespread psychological interpretations of his foundational essay on grief, "Mourning and Melancholia"<sup>24</sup> persist in the US culture today.

***Sigmund Freud: "Mourning and Melancholia."*** In his essay, Freud makes a distinction between normative and nonnormative responses to grief. Accordingly, "mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on"<sup>25</sup> (Freud, 1917/1957, p. 243). The German term Freud uses to describe the objective of the mourning process is "Trauersarbeit" (*grief work*). In this process,

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<sup>24</sup> Freud was not the first person to put mourning in relationship with melancholy, rather he has been said to be the first to conceive a way of investigating mourning and applying his theories to his praxis. See, for example, Yale psychiatrist's Stanley Jackson's (1986) discussion on the history of depression.

<sup>25</sup> The idea—that this definition of loss can also be applied to losses other than that of a person—is hardly novel in Freud's time of modernity. As early as 1621 authors such as Burton in "The Anatomy of Melancholy" listed the causes of melancholy as: "loss of temporal goods and fortunes . . . loss of time, loss of honor, office, of good name, of labor . . ." (p. 220).

Freud's "conjecture" is that "the ego . . . is persuaded by the sum of the narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished" (1917/1957, p. 253). This process occurs "bit by bit" (p. 245) over a long period of time. Freud (1917/1957) writes, "It never occurs to us to regard (mourning) as a pathological condition and refer to medical treatment . . . . We rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time, and we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful" (p. 252). Furthermore, in Freud's concept of grief work, "each one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it" (p. 245). Freud continues, "When the work of mourning is completed, the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (p. 245). In other words, to refuse or to be unable to detach from the lost object and, instead develop an ongoing identification with the lost object, is to grieve pathologically, to be stricken with melancholia.

Freud describes the "mental features" of melancholia as:

profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment . . . (1917/1957, p. 244)

He goes on to say that the same above traits are also found in mourning, with one exception: "The disturbance of self-regard is absent in mourning" (1917/1957, p. 255).

Freud understood the melancholic to be affected by "the internal work which is consuming his ego—work which is unknown to us but which is comparable to the work of mourning" (1917/1957, p. 246). The melancholic's "free libido was not displaced onto another object; it was withdrawn into the ego" (1917/1957, p. 249). Freud reaches into

the unconscious meaning of a melancholic's experience when he describes what is problematic for the melancholic, "even if the patient is aware of the loss that has given rise to his melancholy . . . (it's) only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him(self)" (1917/1957, p. 254). Melancholics suffer from their inability to detach their libido and its emotional energy from the deceased to other areas of his or her life. Freud sums, "it is the world which has become poor and empty; whereas in melancholia, it is the ego itself" (1917/1957, p. 254).

As psychologist John Archer (1999) points out, "Freud derived his theoretical account of grief before the time he experienced a number of personal losses" (p. 20). After Freud wrote "Mourning and Melancholia" in 1917, he lost his 26-year-old pregnant daughter in 1920, his four-year-old grandson in 1923, and he left Nazi occupied Austria for London a year before his own death in 1939. He wrote about his lived experiences with traumatic loss to his colleagues and loved ones. Freud's book of letters provides us with an unadorned presentation of the words written as he grieved and conversed about themes of momentous import. In an introduction to Freud's letters, literary critic Steven Marcus (1975) notes that they present "a unique kind of nakedness which, even at this late date, remains moving and sometimes even frightening" (p. vii). Freud's letters describe both the immediacy of his experience and his need to understand these traumatic losses with trusted others familiar with an in-depth psychoanalytic method of self-understanding for exploring mourning. To spend time with Freud's letters and his particular words, I argue, would demonstrate how his lived experience with mourning changed him. His later work written in 1923 reflects his revision of his earlier theory.



Australian psychoanalyst Janet Chauvel (2005) suggests “the seeds of “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) can be found in the emotional uprooting that Freud experienced in the death of his father” (p. 5). At age 40, in his 1896 letter to Dr. Wilhelm Fliess, Freud writes:

By one of those obscure paths behind official consciousness the death of the old man has affected me profoundly. I valued him highly, understood him very well, and with that combination of deep wisdom and romantic lightheartedness peculiar to him he had meant a great deal to me. His life had been over a long time before he died, but his death seems to have aroused in me memories of all the early days. I now feel quite uprooted. (1975, p. 232)

In a compelling article, Chavel (2005) suggests Freud’s experience of being uprooted from the “loss and trauma” of his father’s death prompted Freud’s “motive for the identification process in melancholia: rather than lose the object, the melancholic holds it captive by identifying with it” (p. 5). From the letter, Freud seems to have had time to accept his father’s death. “His life had been over a long time before he died . . .” Freud feels “uprooted,” yet his controlled tone seems distant and removed.

Twenty-four years later, after the devastation of World War I, Freud’s letters show us the persistence of his own grief. Nine years after losing his 26-year-old pregnant daughter, Sophie Halberstadt, to complications from the 1920 Spanish Flu Epidemic, Freud (age 64) wrote a letter to his friend Ludwig Binswanger who also had lost a child:

We know that the acute sorrow we feel after such a loss will run its course, but also that we will remain inconsolable, and will never find a substitute. No matter what may come to take its place, even should it fill that place completely, it remains something else. And that is how it should be. (1975, p. 386)

This letter opens with the sad observation that Freud’s daughter Sophie would have been thirty-six years old on the day of his writing. His words “we will remain inconsolable”

contradicts his description of mourning as a “detachment of the libido” (1917/1957, p. 245). He realizes nothing can take the place of the deceased and “that is how it should be.”

In June 1923, Heinele, Freud’s four-year-old grandson (the late Sophie’s son), died. Freud (age 67) wrote his Hungarian friends, Kata and Lajos Levy: “I find this loss very hard to bear. I don’t think I have ever experienced such grief; perhaps my own sickness contributes to the shock. I work out of sheer necessity; fundamentally everything has lost its meaning for me” (1975, p. 344).

In another letter, this time to his friend Oscar Rie, Freud describes the death of his grandson in terms of Freud’s experience with time: “He meant the future to me and thus has taken the future away with him” (p. 422). Freud’s expressions of bereavement, written within a decade of his “Mourning and Melancholia,” show that Freud became painfully aware of his grief not being “overcome after a certain lapse of time” (1917/1957, p. 244).<sup>26</sup> In his letters, Freud does not describe or diagnose his experience with melancholia; rather, he encounters the impossibility of “detachment of the libido” (Freud, 1917/1957, p. 245).

If one were to construct a case study on the experience of grief from only Freud’s letters, it would contradict the subsequent and often widely accepted interpretations of his essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) such as notions that ascribe stages to

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<sup>26</sup> See Dennis Klass and Phyllis R. Silverman’s “Introduction: What’s the Problem?” in *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (Klass et al., 1996) for further discussion of Freud’s letters as they pertain to how his lived experience ignited a shift in his thinking about “the method he had chosen, the analysis of the psyche of autonomous individuals, only led to further isolation, not to the sense of bonding with others or to membership in a community” (Klass et al., 1996, p. 7).

mourning as a process of recovering from grief by “detachment of the libido” (p. 245) after a “certain lapse in time” (p. 244). Written after his own profound experiences of traumatic losses at age 64 and 67 his later understandings of grief suggest further that he frames mourning as “inconsolable” (Freud, 1975, p. 386). As his letter after Sophie’s (his daughter’s) death states, “no matter what may come to take its place, even should it fill that place completely, it remains something else” (1975, p. 386). Death is not necessarily an end of a relationship to those who have died; yet death does require a different relationship because “it remains something else.” His words “something else” suggest an ongoingness that may or may not lessen a mourner’s pain and difficulty. The poignant impossibility—of both being with an absence and not having the person—prompts me to share a quote of a mother of a daughter killed by alcohol. In the hospital conference room, the mother told the treatment team: “Her absence is always with me.”

Freud’s method of starting with the lived experiences of his patients and his own lived experiences of grief and psychoanalytically seeing what emerged from entering into these experiences mean that his own understanding of grief was constantly evolving and changing, as his letters attest. Literary critic Kathleen Woodward (1993) clarifies Freud’s evolving theory of mourning further by discussing his letters and proposing that “Freud’s own confessed experience and commentary confirm that mourning and our thoughts about it are subtly differentiated over the life course” (p. 96). Furthermore, Chauvel (2005) attests to the impact of Freud’s lived experiences with trauma and loss on his subsequent theories when she writes, “personal losses were a significant part of what informed the reformulation in Freud’s thinking in these later years” (p. 8). As Clewell

(2009) points out, Freud revised his theory of successful mourning in his *The Ego and the Id* (1923/ 1962). She claims,

Freud removes his mourning theory from the strictures of consolatory closure . . . . Mourning no longer entails detaching from the object and installing a consoling substitute, as it had in *Mourning and Melancholia* . . . . Mourning, as *The Ego and the Id* lays out, depends on creating a figure for the lost object and taking this figure into the structure of one's own identity in ways that constitute, decenter, and transform the psyche. Freud's revised mourning theory jettisons the logic of consolatory substitution. By emphasizing the dynamics of internalization and the fundamental irreplaceability of the lost object, it also redefines mourning as an interminable labor, a process of sustaining and continuously refiguring our attachments to loss. (pp. 12-13)

Other theorists such as Judith Butler (1997) write about Freud's late mourning theory and insist that Freud's later theories claim that completed mourning is not possible (p. 196). These scholars' interpretations direct their focus on the character of Freud and present a portrait of a person in the persistence of his own grief through the lens of his *evolving* theory of mourning.

Yet, many early practitioners from psychoanalytic, psychiatric, and psychological fields based their models on Freud's earlier (1917) psychoanalytical theoretical concepts in "Mourning and Melancholia," whereby mourning is described as "being overcome after a certain lapse of time" (Freud, 1917/1957, p. 244). These early practitioners did not base their models on Freud's contemporaries who were also developing other theories about mourning. John Archer's (1999) analysis of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" notes that Freud's work on grief overshadowed other work undertaken by his contemporaries such as those of British writer, barrister, and founding member of the British Psychological Society, Alexander Faulkner Shand. Learning about at least one other grief theorist who was Freud's contemporary, readers would gain a fuller

understanding of the nearly complete influence Freud had on the early field of psychology.

*Alexander Faulkner Shand: Freud's contemporary.* Shand's main interest in psychology was studying the emotions and instincts involved with grief. Shand's account is remarkable because he used the work of the great dramatic poets to describe emotions of ongoing grief with an acknowledgment of grief's individual variations changing over time. In his book, *The Foundations of Character: Being a Study of the Tendencies of the Emotion and Sentiments*, Shand (1920) referred to grief in terms of the laws of sorrow. "In the absence of empirical research," Archer (1999) writes, "these 'laws' were illustrated by works of poetry and literature" (pp. 18-19). Shand's conceptualization of grieving differed from Freud's in that Shand wrote about approaching aspects of grief as a shared communal event rather than an individual pathology to be overcome. He detailed the importance of social support and remarked on the additional distress caused by sudden death. Archer (1999) writes that Shand "described many of the features of grief that are now familiar from modern research" (pp. 18-19). Yet, "Shand was cited far fewer times than was Freud, who had long since become the dominant influence on grief research and theory" (Archer, 1999, p. 20). Why? Surely, Shand's and other theorists' limited influence on research has been a detriment to an early potential of a broader, more holistic understanding of grief.

Freud's (1917/1957) "Mourning and Melancholia" overshadowed his colleagues' research on grief and his lived experience, as manifested through his letters, helped him revise his grief theory in "Mourning and Melancholia." Now, we have the proper

background for the task at hand: a more in-depth inquiry as to why interpretations of Freud's early theories in *Mourning and Melancholia* have taken on a life throughout twentieth and twenty-first North America, in stage theories of grief, in literary criticism, and in the rhetoric of public religious leaders.

*Leeat Granek: Tracing the evolution of grief theory in psychology.*<sup>27</sup> On this score, Leeat Granek's (2010) analysis of the psychoanalytic tradition is helpful. Granek, a feminist psychologist and researcher based in Toronto, Canada, considers the current concepts of grief existing within what she calls the "disease model" (Granek, 2010, p. 46). In her article, "Grief as Pathology: The Evolution of Grief Theory in Psychology from Freud to the Present," she describes the evolution of grief theory within the field of psychology where grief has become "an object worthy of scientific study within the discipline, and subsequently a pathology to be privatized, specialized, and treated by mental health professionals" (Granek, 2010, p. 46). Granek points to Freud's (1917/1957) landmark essay on grief, "Mourning and Melancholia," as the origin of her analysis. She writes:

Freud's essay has often been interpreted to mean that those who failed to do their 'grief work,' a term that has evolved into an ingrained Western psychological concept, could end up with a psychiatric illness that resulted from their pathological grieving. Emerging from this view are several Western assumptions that have remained central to psychological research on grief, including the idea that grief is an active process that involves an intense struggle to give up the emotional attachment to the person who has been lost, and that this struggle is a process that involves time and energy on the part of those mourning. (Granek, 2010, p. 51)

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<sup>27</sup> This section partly emerged out of notes taken during conversations I had with Jamie Beachy when I was a master's student. I am grateful for her thoughts on, interpretations of, and introduction to the work of Leeat Granek.

Granek argues that throughout the twentieth century, researchers misinterpreted Freud's 1917 descriptions of mourning and melancholia. Even though Freud himself did not understand normal grief (mourning) to be a pathology to be resolved, researchers interpreted and assessed it to be a pathology when mourners did not give up their emotional attachments to the deceased other. Further twentieth century studies on grief explicated Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917/1957) and expanded its meaning to focus on mourning as a process that requires decathexis in a stage like progression.

Describing Freud's influence on others in his field, Granek points to the work of psychoanalyst Karl Abraham (1924/1927). He explained that "in order to heal from the loss" one must incorporate the deceased other into oneself (Granek, 2010, p. 53).

Abraham's interpretations of Freud's early work helped to establish parts of the grieving process as a pathology. Eventually, based on Abraham's work, the notion of 'successful' grieving became a stage process of detaching from the deceased and 'accepting' death.

Tracing the history of the development of grief as a psychological construct, Granek describes the mid-twentieth century atmosphere—that Helene Deutsch (1937) and Melanie Klein (1940/1965) were writing in—as one where grief was commonly referenced as a disease. According to Granek, Deutsch (1937) contributed two ideas from her essay "The Absence of Grief" that played a crucial role in establishing "the process of grief as a psychological kind" (Granek, 2010, p. 54). First, her idea that "unmanifested grief is as pathological as chronic grief" (Granek, 2010, p. 54) and second, unmanifested grief "will resurface in other ways if not brought into consciousness and treated" (Granek, 2010, p. 54). Melanie Klein's (1940/1965) view of "adult mourning

and grief was a replay of earlier losses in childhood where the infant went through a transitory depressive phase in coping with losses associated with the mother” (Granek, 2010, p. 55). For both theorists there was still a difference between grief as normal (mourning) and grief as pathology (melancholia). Granek (2010) argues that with the contributions of psychiatry, grief shifted from a psychoanalytic to a psychiatric construct. She writes, “The essence of the change was the shift from thinking of pathology on a continuum to differentiating distinct diseases by looking at their outcomes in psychiatric patients and creating a system in which psychiatrists could reliably diagnose pathology” (p. 55). According to Granek, classifications of illnesses then required a diagnostic manual that described diseases and their etiologies within a range of predictable symptoms and treatments.

The development of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) from 1918 to the most recent 2013 version shows theories of grief being increasingly conceptualized as pathological constructs. Granek contends that the greatest shift toward pathologizing grief in the discipline of psychology happened in the context of a US post-WWII culture recovering from the mental and physical traumas of war. The publication of psychiatrist Erich Lindemann’s paper “Symptomatology and the Management of Acute Grief” (1944) presented the first empirical study of bereaved individuals.<sup>28</sup> According to Granek, Lindemann’s (1944) work is the origin of several assumptions about the grieving process that still hold today. She writes:

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<sup>28</sup> During World War II Lindemann (1944) observed that wives of soldiers at war often rejected their husbands upon coming home. Accounting for this rejection, Lindemann thought that by the time their deployed husbands came home, wives had already worked through, experienced, and anticipated what living without their husbands would be and thus to re-establish the living bond with them would be too



First, he [Lindemann] established that grief was a medical disease (or in contemporary terms, a psychiatric/psychological disorder) that fell into the purview of psychiatry (and subsequently modern clinical psychology). . . . The second significant point is the development of a list of normal and abnormal grief symptoms in a systematic way . . . . [Third], psychiatrists could, and should, be involved in the management of grief since they were experts in the field and knew the right techniques to help the patient with their grief work. (p. 58)

Furthermore, Lindemann contends that the traditional sources for support of grieving—ministers and religious institutions—do not provide adequate help in the patient’s grief work (Granek, 2010, p. 58). Granek relates that in the context of post-WWII culture, an impact of the popularization of Lindemann’s work “set up a paradigm of success or failure for the mourner” and the necessity of the role of the psychiatrist as expert (not the social worker or minister or family member) in *resolving* experiences of normal grieving (Granek, 2010, p. 59).

Over the next fifty years, Lindemann’s work influenced the scientific study of grief. With further developments in empirical psychology, in diagnostic tools to manage and measure bereavement, and in statistical standardization, grief theory became de-contextualized from lived experience and “psychologized completely” (Granek, 2010, p. 64). Granek includes research and clinical writing about “grief as trauma” (p. 65) as part of the growing trend of seeing grief as a disease.<sup>29</sup>

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troublesome. According to hospice researcher Paul J. Moon, Lindemann’s interpretation relies on his own understanding that “the aim of grief process was to emancipate (sever) the relational bond to the dead person. This is what has traditionally been called *grief work*, a Freudian notion” (Moon, 2016, p. 417).

<sup>29</sup> Evidence of Granek’s assertion that psychoanalytical/psychological interpretations of traumatic grief as a diagnosable pathology could be met by the following established criteria of traumatic grief: 1) that the individual has experienced the death of a loved one; 2) the individual may experience intrusive thoughts about the deceased; yearning for the deceased; searching for the deceased; and loneliness as a result of the death. 3) the individual may experience: purposelessness about the future, a sense of a sense of numbness, detachment or absence of emotional responsiveness, disbelief about the death, feeling that life is meaningless, feeling that part of the self has died, shattered view of the world, assuming symptoms or

Furthermore, Granek highlights the work of researchers Stroebe, Stroebe, and Hanssen (1988) to claim that the prevailing discourse within modern psychology emphasizes their four concluding points. Granek writes:

The last point the authors emphasize, and which lies at the foundation of the psychological imperative to study grief, is the conclusion that (a) grief may be a pathology; (b) that it needs the help of the experts to solve the problem; (c) that grief should be studied by the experts, using expert methods that are based on an empirically sound foundation; and, (d) that psychologists will be doing a great service to their clients by helping them with their grief work. (2010, p. 65)

These four points furnish us with an idea that theorists in the field of psychology provide a conceptual framework based on helping people resolve their grief, before it becomes a pathology. According to Granek (2010), “the stage model of grieving, the idea that grieving progresses in a set of orderly stages, examines the sequence in which people move through the mourning process” (p. 65). From this framework, the stage model of grieving has developed and continues to influence bereavement care.

***The stage model of grieving.*** The stage model of grieving took a stronghold in many mid-twentieth century western clinical models aimed at helping the bereaved and those that counsel them. I think this is partly because the stage model fits well with interpretations of Freud’s early theory of mourning. As Granek (2010) notes, “the belief that grief is intrinsically traumatic and causally pathogenic is generally accepted among psychologists who study grief today” (p. 66). Stage theorists have proposed mourning as a process of moving through stages in order to relinquish attachment to the deceased. In

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harmful behaviors of, or related to, the deceased, and excessive irritability related to the death. Moreover, such symptoms should be present for at least two months and cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001; Prigerson, Shear, Jacobs, Reynolds, & Maciejewski, 1999).

Chapter 4, I will discuss the influence of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” on literary critics and their thoughts on the act of elegiac writing. With some exceptions, the majority of critical studies of literary responses to grief are also explicitly in dialogue with the version of mourning Freud forwards in his 1917 essay. Subsequently, important to this dissertation is the readers’ cognizance of how such notions of mourning have become deeply embedded in Western cultural understandings of what it means to mourn.

The stage model of grieving has been extracted from psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s (1969) proposed five stages of dying in her book *On Death and Dying*. Kübler-Ross developed this model to explain how dying persons respond to their own anticipated death. She posits that people go through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and lastly, acceptance. Even though the conflation of the dying process with the grieving process is “distorting and misleading” (Switzer, 1990, p. 473), her discussion of the stages of grief—beginning with denial and ending with acceptance—dominates literature on death and dying (Attig, 2011, p. 42-43) and has been applied clinically to mourners’ experiences of grieving.

Examples of other stage models of grief include: the four phases for adult grief from “shock and numbness to reorganization and recovery,” described by attachment theorist John Bowlby in collaboration with British psychiatrist Colin Murray Parkes (Bowlby & Parkes, 1970); psychologist Therese A. Rando’s (1991), “Six R’s,” in which mourning begins with “recognizing the loss,” and ends with “reinvesting;” psychiatrist Mardi Horowitz’s (2010) “stages of loss,” in which mourning begins with, “outcry” and ends with “completion;” grief counselor Wolfelt’s “Six Needs of Mourning” (2016) to be

thought of as a “to-do list” or “steps along the way that we all must encounter” in order to “move toward a life of meaning.” In nearly all the above accounts, the “grief work” process is the proposed means in confronting the reality of a loss, and the tasks are used to specify the end-points of grief.

The concept of stage theory has come under scrutiny by the University of Memphis psychologist Robert A. Neimeyer (2010) who found no clearly defined stages among grievers. He writes, “At the most obvious level, scientific studies have failed to support any discernible sequence of emotional phases of adaptation to loss or to identify any clear end point to grieving that would designate a state of ‘recovery’” (2010, p. 3).

Other critiques of stage theory in the field of psychology include researchers Camille Wortman and Roxanne Silver. In their study, when critiquing the assumption that the final stage of grief is adaptation to loss or recovery from grief, they remark, “individuals continue to exhibit distress for a much longer period of time than would commonly be assumed” (Wortman & Silver, 1989, p. 353). Not everyone’s grief moves through a pattern of distinct stages.

Associate Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at Boston College Melissa Kelley argues that humans experience aspects of grief in particular ways. She writes, “Stages of grieving suggest an invariant universality of human experience that neglects individual, familial, religious, societal, cultural, and other contextual factors” (Kelley, 2010, p. 47). Furthermore, other theologians Kathleen Billman and Daniel Migliore (2006) critique the stage theory model of grief. They write, “‘stage’ theories of grief do not account for the particularity of their grief or the enduring quality of grief and lead

would-be comforters to generalize and categorize their experience in ways that seem dismissive or overly clinical” (p. 83).

*Vignette illustrating limitations of stage theory approaches.* This brief composite vignette is geared toward chaplains who provide care in a hospital setting, where people often witness sudden, tragic, traumatic and violent losses of their loved ones or are themselves in the process of surviving a traumatic event. Especially when a patient is admitted to the ICU, more than one chaplain could care for one patient over time. Usually the chaplain that meets the family first is the main chaplain. Other chaplains can be called in when the main chaplain is not available.

A 64-year-old Latino man, Mr. A., suffered an aneurysmal bleed in his brain for which he was admitted to the Emergency Room, had surgery, was intubated, and later admitted to the ICU and has been seen by the main chaplain. Four nights later, Mr. and Mrs. A’s son, J., arrived from out of state to visit his father in the ICU. A nurse called Chaplain L. into the hospital because J. became distraught after seeing his father Mr. A., who was unresponsive, intubated, and hooked up to monitors. Furthermore, after hearing the doctor’s news that Mr. A is in critical condition with abnormal vital signs, J was visibly shaken.

Based upon what the nurse has told Chaplain L, before entering the room, Chaplain L assumes that J will be in a stage of shock.

Chaplain L knocks on the open door, introduces herself, and J invites her to enter. J’s shoulders are slumped and shaking. Chaplain L pulls up a chair and asks for some details about what had happened.

“I can’t wrap my mind around this,” J says, “this can’t be happening to my dad.” In shock, J keeps going over the details over the last couple of days, crying, “Dad, if only I had talked to you more. Why didn’t I come here sooner? I don’t believe this happened. Dad! Dad! you have to wake up! When you wake up I will take good care of you no matter how much care you need.”

Because Chaplain L hears J speak aloud to God, praying for a miracle, she notes in her mind that J might want to hear more religious language and she will offer a prayer later, when J has moved through his shock and this stage of denial.

Chaplain L said, “It’s a shock that your Dad is in this condition. He’s been a strong man in your life. It’s understandable you would be so upset.”

Chaplain L thought that J would need more time to absorb the shock. She sat with him in his state of shock and prayed with him before she left.

Chaplain L charted the visit and explained to the nurse that J and his family were in the denial stage of grief, because the family was hoping for a miracle. Later that afternoon, during a medical team meeting the medical teams’ prognosis for Mr. A was very poor and their recommendation was to remove Mr. A from life support so that he could die. The doctors concurred in the belief that Mr. A would die within minutes. Near the end of the meeting, the nurse passed along the information she heard from Chaplain L that after Mr. A died, it would help the family to accept the reality of his death if the family could be together to view his body. The neurologist recommended that the medical team work with the family and guide them toward accepting Mr. A’s

death. There was no palliative care team available because there wasn't one at the hospital, which chose not to invest the necessary resources in palliative care.

Initially, the pursuit of acceptance as a goal of bereavement did not go well. Instead of using a collaborative method of discovery by exploring more about what the A family's particular reality of loss was in terms of: 1) What their relationship to God and/or the sacred was; 2) What it meant to be Latinx in their everyday lives as an underrepresented community in the hospital and in the U.S.; and 3) What might be helpful for them. Well-intentioned Chaplain L used a stage model of grief to prescriptively interpret what the A family needed in order move toward "acceptance."

Theologian Richard Coble (2018) writes,

While the goal of acceptance and fulfillment is a worthy end of the dying process, employing it as the sole function of death care casts this moral vision over death, making care pursue an ideal rather than reckoning with the reality of loss in death. . . . Medicine rolls the dying process up into a series of discourses that replace the loss of death, thus reshaping the actual experience and obscuring other realities of death such as loss. (p. 127)

On the one hand, perhaps the knowledge of the "stages of grief model" could be useful to the A family as a descriptive framework for understanding difficult and volatile emotions and could provide them with a glimpse of hope that in time there might be at least some relief for painful emotions.

On the other hand, as Kelley notes: "anyone whose experience does not follow the stages precisely or completely risks being labeled unhealthy, avoidant, abnormal, or otherwise pathological" (2010, p. 47). The notion of a "right" way to mourn is not helpful. Furthermore, the stage theory model could encourage anyone in the A family to compartmentalize their grief if they were to move from one stage to the next too soon.

They would not get a sense of connection to the emotional meaning of Mr. A and they likely would not get to see the fuller capacities of their natures. Said another way, they may end up with both a limited relationality to the cherished Mr. A and to their own rich selfhood. In Chapter 6, I will return to this composite vignette with an intercultural spiritual care model of sustaining lamentation.

Until now, this chapter has been concerned with the history and evolution of Freud's theory of mourning and how his concept of "grief work" has led to many other theories in the field of psychology and models of bereavement, such as stage theory. Yet little attention has been drawn to the particularities of coping with grieving that neither "grief work" nor the stage theory model caters to.

In the field of psychology, little attention has been drawn to the relation between traumatic grief and racism, sexism, homophobia, and one's concept of God. Because modes of lamentation would be affected by the ongoing intrusiveness of traumatic memory, it is important for hospital chaplains and public religious leaders to understand the differing recurring cultural motifs that may haunt certain cultural origins.

For example, many African Americans' familial origins into this country are "a bill of sale," as James Baldwin (1955/ 2012) points out in his essay "Stranger in the Village" from his book, *Notes of a Native Son*. He writes, "any American Negro wishing to go back so far will find his journey through time abruptly arrested by the signature on the bill of sale which served as the entrance paper for his ancestor" (p. 173). What are the complex origins of other people such as immigrants? Read through a Freudian lens,



what is the “lost object”? In the aftermath of devastating loss, how should public religious leaders speak about wholeness? Or becoming whole?

**Influences of psychoanalytic therapy on pastoral theology and care.** Since the mid-twentieth century in the Western context of spiritual caregiving, counseling psychology has been widely embraced because “psychology offered creative new ways of exploring what had traditionally been theological and philosophical questions” and there was an effort to “plumb this new psychology for its benefits to religion” (Couture & Hester, 1995, p. 45). In their working relationships, pastoral care providers were influenced by psychological discourse and therapeutic techniques.

Referring to *The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Hunter, 1990), Brite Divinity School Emerita Professor of Pastoral Theology and Care Nancy Ramsay (2004) describes the clinical pastoral theological paradigm and its reliance on psychological models of grief. She writes:

When the Dictionary was published pastoral theology was described as including several functions: interrelating normative vision, engaging the particularity of human beings and behavior, and practical wisdom about care (Hunter, 1990)...there was little if any critique of a grand narrative in which dominant values and norms operated uncritically.... In fact the therapeutic relationship was central so that persons were often understood apart from their social location and from the institutions and systems that impinged on their lives... Pastoral theology was largely in the service of pastoral care and counseling at this time, and it reflected a more narrow focus on the well-being of individuals that included increasing their capacities for autonomous actions. (p. 159)

The privileging of psychological context—individual wholeness, well-being, and self-realization—meant that other perspectives of living and sources of knowledge were not given as much significance in the understanding of human problems. For example, in a healthcare setting, the patient’s individual autonomy is often prioritized over their social

location in the decision-making process. The principles of autonomy stemming from the clinical pastoral paradigm have since been challenged by at least two emerging paradigms within the field of pastoral theology—the communal contextual paradigm and the intercultural paradigm.

As a response to “the psychological context being recognized as normative” (Patton, 1993, p. 39-40), the communal contextual paradigm became predominant in theological education and emphasized the social, cultural, political, and economic networks impacting peoples’ difficulties and thus generating the need for pastoral theology to take multiple contexts into account. Pastoral theologians developed theories, practices, and educational resources to interpret and restructure the power dynamics in relation to race, gender, sexual orientation and various forms of violence by which persons were driven.

The de-centering of the individual is reflected in a recognition of the dynamics of social privilege and social identity, a critique of enlightenment epistemological understandings, and a greater awareness of dynamics of power (Ramsay, 2004, p. 160). Focused on the complex interplay among the individual psyche and the various worlds of the person, such that care of persons is care of world (L. Graham, 1992), the communal contextual paradigm seeks to engage public theology and integrate communal /systemic interventions into the work of pastoral/spiritual care and counseling. The communal contextual paradigm can be used to explore lived experiences of pastoral care within particular religious traditions and communities, often using postmodern and narrative approaches to care. For example, Karen Scheib’s (2016) book, *Pastoral Care: Telling*

*the Stories of Our Lives*, focuses on listening and “restorying” practices happening in religious communities.

Critiques of the therapeutic tradition in the clinical paradigm of pastoral theology continue to emerge. More recently, the intercultural paradigm<sup>30</sup> within pastoral theology recognizes that humans are always other to one another while inextricably connected. Ghanaian theologian Emmanuel Lartey attests that intercultural approaches pay particular attention to the power dynamics that occur in multi-cultural interactions and attempt to understand problems within socio-cultural worldviews (Lartey, 2003, p. 173). He writes, that the intercultural model “extends the communal-contextual into a global justice and asks questions concerning issues of global justice specifically including matters of race, gender, class, sexuality and economics” (Lartey, 2006, p. 124).

Intercultural theologians place a high value on diversity and seek to articulate the ways that culture influences the helping relationship (Lartey, 2000, 2003, 2006; Doehring, 2015a). The intercultural paradigm includes recognition of the historical processes of colonialism and their social, cultural, and economic oppression. For example, responding to the complexities of the contemporary context of Black women in America, womanist theologians reach into their tradition of resistance, survival, narrative, and community. Womanist theologian A. Elaine Crawford serves as adjunct faculty at the Interdenominational Theological Center and Candler School of Theology in Georgia.

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<sup>30</sup> First applied by Ghanaian-born pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey to an emerging paradigm within the field of pastoral theology and care, the term “intercultural” was Lartey’s attempt “to capture the complex nature of the interaction between people who have been influenced by different cultures, social contexts and origins, and who themselves are enigmatic composites of various strands of ethnicity, race, geography, culture and socio-economic setting” (2003, p. 13). Pastoral theologians Carrie Doehring (2015a, 2018), Melinda McGarrah-Sharp (2013), Carol Watkins-Ali, (1999) have developed the intercultural paradigm in their own unique work.

Her book, *Hope in the Holler: A Womanist Theology*, outlines three distinct eras—slavery, emancipation, and the civil rights—in Black history and shows how Black women conceptualized hope (2002, p. 89). Each era brought with it a different type of oppression and lamentation. Therefore, hope also had to take different forms to remain significant and applicable. She writes, “Hope for slave women was a quest for full humanity and physical freedom. During emancipation, hope empowered black women to seize public voice against the external inequities of life in America” (2002, p. 89).

Elaine Crawford goes on to connect Black women’s hope throughout history to the practice of “the Holler.” The Holler is a primal, ancestral cry to God which vocalizes the pain experienced by the Black community and refuses to be forgotten. According to Crawford, “The holler is the primal cry of pain, abuse, violence, separation. It is a soul-piercing shrill of the African ancestors that demands the recognition and appreciation of their humanity” (2002, p. xii). Crawford understands Black women’s hope to be shaped by and located within the practice of the Holler which is always in opposition to oppression. A hope informed by the context of slavery is particular to black culture and will be different from other laments arising under different cultural traumatic circumstances such as immigration, border-crossings, Native American genocide, etc.

Significant to this discussion on intercultural care, womanist theology’s engagement with lamentation helps to illuminate the nature of lament as a contextual response to the particular reality faced by Black women, which in the United States has been shaped by the legacy of slavery, systems of oppression, racism, and sexism. As a response to lament, hope appears in the works of many womanist theologians as an

attitude and practice that directly resists, protests, and points beyond the lived experience of oppression for Black women.

Both the communal contextual paradigm and the intercultural paradigm move away from a clinical/psychological focus on private pathology and stage models of grieving to emphasize social, cultural, and economic networks that impact pastoral theology and care. The turn toward more contextualized theological discourses and socially engaged practices participates in “liberating and transforming the pervasive structures of intersecting oppressions of gender, sexual orientation, race, and class” (L. Graham, 2017, p. 10). Since the 2000’s a public pastoral theology has been developing in response to terrorist acts, natural disaster, school shootings, and police disruption to address the needs for corporate care and renewal.

Yet, the problem is that public theologies that are theorized into practice are those that often operate by using insights and developments from clinical studies rooted in Freudian frameworks of mourning and whose subjects are mostly white.

L. Graham describes the clinical paradigm as one that “is still the default paradigm organizing pastoral theology and care” (2015, p. 174). L. Graham’s declaration, which I emphatically agree with, asserts that the clinical paradigm, ordered by therapeutic practices and psychological theories is still prevalent not only in public religious discourses in our communities, but also, I think, in the dominant culture’s expectations of being consoled (and not to hear words about the insidious violence of racism, sexism, and homophobia) during a minister’s public eulogy. This dissertation argues that sustaining lamentation for traumatic grief when approached as a shared

communal event rather than a stage to get through or a pathology to be overcome, invites greater ethical responsibility both for the mourner and for those engaging the vulnerability and truth of the mourner's experience. A rethinking of sustaining lamentation for traumatic grief has potential to contribute to emerging paradigms of care that allow for more ethically engaged and contextualized theory and practice within the field of pastoral /spiritual care.

**Coping.** Intercultural approaches to spiritual care are relevant for hospital chaplains who work in religiously diverse contexts and respond to spiritually and culturally fluid realities in people's daily lives. In healthcare settings, chaplains need to be competent in both intercultural and evidence-based spiritual care by drawing upon research when assessing spiritual needs and knowing how aspects of spirituality and religion can be helpful or harmful (Fitchett, 2018; Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013).

***Spiritual orienting systems.*** Ken Pargament, a contemporary scholar of psychology and religion provides us with a helpful concept of the way people view and cope with the world. "An orienting system" is "comprised of values, beliefs, practices, emotions, and relationships that offer direction and stability in the search for significance" (Pargament, Wong, & Exline, 2016, p. 379). Furthermore, "Spirituality is one aspect of the general orienting system. The spiritual orienting system contributes to the individual's framework for understanding and dealing with the world" (Pargament, Desai, & McConnell, 2006/ 2014, p. 130). Orienting systems offer ways to cope in immediate aftermath with the shock of traumatic loss and in the long-term meaning

making. Drawing upon Pargament's research, Doebling (2019) enumerates these criteria for "life-giving" spiritual orienting systems:

1. an embodied, relational, and transcendent experience of benevolence in the form of compassion and self-compassion
2. flexibility in coping
3. a search for meanings that is grounded in life-giving spiritual practices and in conversations with trusted others, especially about one's religious and spiritual struggles
4. an ongoing search for integration and spiritual wholeness that aligns spiritual practices, intentional values, beliefs, and coping . . . (p. 245)

***Transactional model of stress and coping.*** Pargament's orienting systems were developed out of the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), a conceptual framework that evaluates the process of adapting to severe stressors. In this model, stress experiences are considered to be a transactional phenomenon dependent on the judgment of the significance of the stressor on the perceiver (a primary appraisal) and an evaluation of the controllability of the stressor and a person's coping resources (a secondary appraisal). Stress responses can appear in many different circumstances and in a variety of forms since people have a wide variation of "appraisals" of the stressfulness of a given situation. According to the transactional model of coping, the interpretations one makes of stressful events play a key role in how one copes in positive or negative ways.

Crystal Park (2013), an authority on religious coping in the aftermath of traumatic events, evaluates individuals' appraisals of stressful events and links them to meaning making, defined as "attempts to restore a sense that the world is comprehensible and that their own lives are worthwhile" (Park, 2013, p. 360). A religious aspect is involved in

many of these meaning-making efforts and “much of religious coping comprises efforts to make meaning from the stressful situation” (Park, 2013, p. 369).

***Religious/spiritual coping and religious/spiritual struggles.*** Religion and spirituality can assist with coping, the process of coming to terms with tragic and/or traumatic life events. By 1997, Pargament had written *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, a foundational book that set the model for the tremendous amount of future empirical research and the applicability of the model in clinical encounters and human experience. Most pertinent to this discussion would be his collaboration with psychologist Julie Exline (2013) to explore religious/spiritual struggles as:

a form of distress or conflict in the religious or spiritual realm . . . that has been conceptualized and operationalized as a specific, negative form of religious coping elicited by life stressors . . . [and] can be clearly traced to specific psychological disorders. (p. 460)

Religious/spiritual struggles result in a conflict when elements of one’s belief, values, or ways of coping become a center focus of unhealthy thoughts or emotional distress (Exline, 2013). Pargament and his colleagues developed two instruments: 1) RCOPE that measures types of religious/spiritual coping (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000); and 2) the Religious and Spiritual Struggle (RSS) Scale (Exline et al., 2014).

Briefly, the RCOPE helps to identify when religious/spiritual coping is helpful or harmful, described as “positive” or “negative.” A strength of this method is that religious coping is impartially viewed, which gives a deeper insight into the theory of religious coping by illuminating ways that religion impacts concrete circumstances in dissonant ways. According to Pargament, Feuille, & Burdzy (2011):



Positive religious coping methods reflect a secure relationship with a transcendent force, a sense of spiritual connectedness with others, and a benevolent world view. Negative religious coping methods reflect underlying spiritual tensions and struggles within oneself, with others, and with the divine. (p. 51)

Many people will experience “wholeness” (Pargament, Wong, & Exline, 2016) when religious coping methods are correlated with or predictive of positive psychological outcomes for those in theistic traditions (e.g., reductions in anxiety and depression). For example, for those in theistic traditions, positive religious coping includes “(1) believing in and experiencing God as benevolent, (2) collaborating with God in problem solving rather than deferring to God or being self-directing, and (3) seeking spiritual support in their communities of faith” (Doehring, 2015b, p. 153).

Positive religious coping includes intentionally engaging in spiritual practices that foster compassion-based values and goodness. By contrast, negative or unhelpful religious/ spiritual coping methods for those in theistic traditions include: 1) interpreting a traumatic event as a punishment given by God or that one has been abandoned by God; 2) questioning God’s love; and 3) being discontented / disconnected with their religious communities (Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, Murray & Ano, 2005).<sup>31</sup> As Pargament, Falb, Ano, & Wachholtz (2013) point out, negative religious coping methods “reflect a struggle within oneself, with others, or with God around sacred matters” (p. 563). As Doehring (2015b) notes, some people “will experience a transitory or chronic sense of *spiritual violation* and *deseccration* of that which is sacred (e.g., one’s body), which can threaten [one’s] spiritual well-being” (p. 153).

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<sup>31</sup> For a more comprehensive list of items categorized as positive or negative religious coping see Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez, 1998, p. 718.

Ongoing struggles and negative coping are associated with increased psychological and spiritual distress. Thus, these negative religious approaches to coping are more likely to have life-limiting effects on one's orienting system because they mirror "underlying spiritual tensions and struggles within oneself, with others, and with the divine" (Pargament et al., 2011, p. 51).

The Religious/Spiritual Struggle scale (RSS) builds on the concept of sacred struggles by examining six types of religious/spiritual struggles:

First, *divine struggles* involve conflict with or around the concept of a deity (e.g., anger at God). *Demonic struggles* involve perceived conflict with evil supernatural forces (e.g., feeling attacked or deceived by demons or evil spirits). *Interpersonal struggles* involve conflict with other people in a r/s [religious/spiritual] context (e.g., feeling misunderstood by r/s people or being angry at organized religion). *Moral struggles* involve internal conflict about inconsistencies between one's actions and spiritual values (e.g., guilt or shame over a committed transgression). *Struggles of ultimate meaning* involve questioning life's deeper purpose (e.g., wondering whether one's life will make any difference in the world). Finally, *doubt-related struggles* involve distress around r/s doubts or questions (e.g., feeling upset or disturbed by religious doubt). (Grubbs, Wilt, Stauner, Exline, & Pargament, 2016, pp. 144-145, italics in original)

A last remark about psychological concepts—most recently Pargament and his colleagues have explored how positive and negative religious/spiritual coping impact an individual's spiritual orienting system by using the conceptualization of wholeness / brokenness. They write:

Wholeness is marked by a deep sense of purpose and direction in life . . . . In this discussion of wholeness we will use terms such as breadth, depth, connectedness, cohesiveness, balance, and harmony . . . . Brokenness calls for its own language as well, including terms such as shallowness, narrowness, disconnection, fragmentation, imbalance, and discord. (Pargament et al., 2016, pp. 379, 382)

Wholeness and brokenness are interrelated and “each of us is in part whole and in part broken” (Pargament et al., 2016, p. 382).

Pargament and his colleagues’ landmark studies provide in-depth, empirically grounded, evidence-based research studying religion from a coping perspective, which can shed light on “how particular people use religion concretely in specific life situations and contexts” (Pargament & Ano, 2004, p. 119). Another strength of their work is that religious coping is examined elaborately in actual coping contexts in lieu of simple surveys that measure, for example, the frequency of participation in church activities. Pargament examines nuances and dynamics of religious coping which has the potential to engage its deeper meanings.

However, while a number of Pargament’s studies look at spiritual struggles in relation to basic measures of distress such as depression and anxiety, there are only a handful studies (Neimeyer & Burke, 2011) in the field of the psychology that focus on religious/spiritual struggles in relation to traumatic grief and unresolved mourning, defined as mourning for which there is no possibility of resolution or consolation. To document this category, I will turn briefly to educator and researcher Dr. Pauline Boss’s (1999, 2004a, 2004b, & 2010) important work on “ambiguous loss” and Professor of Gerontology at the Graduate School of the College of New Rochelle, Kenneth Doka’s (1989, 2002) work on “disenfranchised grief.”

### **Ambiguous Loss and Disenfranchised Grief**

**Ambiguous loss.** This category of grieving is inherently open ended “with no official verification of death, no possibility of closure, and no rituals for support, there is

no resolution of grief” (Boss, 2010, p. 137). With ambiguous loss, the inability to find closure is expected because the external circumstances will not allow loss to be resolved. In other words, the information needed to process the reality of the death is permanently unavailable. Ambiguous loss “results from various situations of not knowing if a person is dead or alive, absent or present, permanently lost or coming back” (Boss, 2004a, p. 237). For example, a person lost at sea with no body to bury.

As a spiritual caregiver, it is harmful to try to resolve these situations or to regard people as flawed when they don’t. In my experience, ambiguous loss often starts some deep and serious conversations about memory, guilt, and issues of responsibility, including God’s involvement. Ambiguous loss includes many losses that “must be endured without community validation or official verification” (Boss, 2004a, p. 237). Another type of ambiguous loss is when a person is be physically present, but psychologically absent. For example a loved one who has dementia or “other cognitive or emotional impairments” (Boss & Carnes, 2012, p. 456).

**Disenfranchised Grief.** Ambiguous losses also can evoke disenfranchised grief, defined as “the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (Doka, 1989, p.4). The individual grieves, but others do not acknowledge that the individual has the right to grieve. Disenfranchised grief “stems from the often unspoken ‘grieving rules’ which a society holds” (Helsel, 2008, p. 337). Persons “feel that [mourners] have no right to grieve, that their grief isn’t valid” (Doka, 2002. p. 160). The mourner “does not have a ‘right’ to grieve that loss since no one else recognizes a legitimate cause of grief” (Doka,

2002, p. 160). Examples of losses not defined as socially significant include: miscarriages, stillbirths, abortions, and non-death losses—those institutionalized, comatose, with mental illness, infertility, loss of job, loss of dreams. There are circumstances surrounding death which either constrain the solicitation of the bereaved for support or limit the support extended by others. Examples include: death by suicide, AIDS, deaths that provoke anxiety or embarrassment or in which the deceased is devalued such as death of a child, homicide, mutilating loss, death by execution, death of an alcoholic.

Pauline Boss and Kenneth Doka show us examples of loss for which there is little to no possibility of resolution or consolation. These researchers have given spiritual caregivers many apt tools to help clarify appropriate responses to acknowledge the potential of inconsolable mourning to contribute to empowerment and healing for the mourner. They show us how death calls lives into question and how death also calls the lives of those around us and our relationships with one another into question and asks us to be more aware and responsible for the quality of our living. They have shown us that death also illuminates struggles where we feel we have failed or been wounded by the failures of others.

From their work, I hypothesize that grief is the process of bringing the blessings and the banes of our relationships into some kind of positive balance. Forgiveness is a matter of releasing from the past in a manner that frees us to live positively in the present and toward the future. Boss and Doka show that forgiveness is not always possible (sometimes not desirable) and is always partial and complicated. In the case of

ambiguous loss it, like grief, is never resolved or finished; it is just lived with in more or less positive ways.

An important point I want to raise is that historically marginalized people may be dealing with a particular kind of grief and particular religious and spiritual struggles that these extensive research studies geared toward white people's experience of traumatic loss seldom mention, such as socially unacknowledged historical grief, a factor that has contributed to the lack of underrepresented people's social legitimacy in the dominant culture. As a white spiritual caregiver, I dare not flinch in the face of that truth. With little evidence-based research at the intersection of marginality, religious coping, and ambiguous loss, how then do I proceed? As African American trauma entails the ambiguous loss of history, the loss of a "name" or a record, social injustices, and invisibility, it has generated particular archives as well, including music, performance, varied commemorative objects, and cultural ephemera. To proceed, I might then turn to the library's archives and/or African-American literature about loss to begin to see ways in which a grief experience is particular to those outside of the dominant norm.

### **Evidence-Based Intercultural Spiritual Care**

Most circumstances in chaplaincy present spiritual care providers with the complexities of human tragedies in a space where chaplaincy exists in the culture of evidence-based healthcare. Thomas St. James O' Connor, now retired from being the director of Pastoral Care and Counseling at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, argues for the importance of evidence-based research in the context of chaplaincy. He argues for "the use of scientific evidence on spirituality to inform the decisions and interventions in the

spiritual care of persons” (2002, p. 254). Being literate in evidence-based spiritual care is essential for chaplains in healthcare places such as hospices and hospitals because “evidence-based language and concepts are the dominant narrative” (T. S. O’Connor, 2012, p. 187).

Furthermore, being literate in research means that chaplains emphasize both the process of their care—how they are present and interact with people—and also focus on the outcomes associated with their care (Peery, 2012). As M. L. Morin—faculty member of Theology, Ethics, and Philosophy Department at the University of Sherbrooke—writes, “when attending someone with depressive symptoms, for example, [chaplains] need to be aware of psychological research results that point the way toward helpful [as opposed to harmful] interventions” (Morin, 2002, p. 173). George Fitchett of the Department of Religion, Health, and Human Values at Rush University Medical Center Chicago echoes Morin. He argues for evidence-based spiritual care because it “helps us know if the care we are providing is having the effects we hope it will have” (Fitchett, 2018, p. 12). What aspects of coping are associated with spiritual wholeness and what aspects of coping are associated with spiritual brokenness?

As a chaplain, knowing about the elements that distinguish greater wholeness from greater brokenness<sup>32</sup> would generate more complex ways of discussing which certain and unique aspects of an individual’s religion and spirituality would be helpful

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<sup>32</sup> According to Pargament and his colleagues (2016), the five distinguishing elements are 1. purposive versus aimless; 2. broad and deep vs. narrow and shallow; 3. flexible and enduring vs. rigid and stable; 4. balanced, cohesive and discerning vs. unbalanced, incohesive, and non-reflective; and 5. benevolent and life-affirming vs. non-benevolent and life-limiting (pp. 382-387).

and/or harmful in a process of adapting to living with traumatic loss. Doehring (2018) writes:

Familiarity with research on religious and spiritual struggles (Pargament et al. 2016) and the ways that religious traditions grapple with questions of suffering helps theologically educated caregivers begin to imagine the kinds of theological or spiritual orienting systems arising from the stress-based emotions of a careseeker. (p. 465)

Spiritual caregivers listen for whether there might be religious, spiritual, or moral struggles which will often exacerbate stress, because research shows stress-associated emotions like shame, guilt, and/or fear of causing harm, etc., make people withdraw from support (including divine support if they experience divine religious struggles). What evidence-based modalities would we use to practice intercultural spiritual care in the aftermath of trauma? Doehring (2015b) suggests an interdisciplinary approach that includes spiritual practices in the context of care with traumatized individuals. Based on research, her stepwise model is the following:

*Building a relationship* of trust through intercultural compassion and respect for the individual nature of religious beliefs and spiritual practices, and how they shape and are shaped by trauma and trauma-related moral distress and spiritual struggles (Drescher et al., 2011; Kinghorn, 2012; Litz et al., 2009; Murray-Swank & Waelde, 2013; Pargament, 2007).

*Enhancing life-giving coping* with trauma-related symptoms by exploring and intentionally using religious and spiritual practices that help clients experience safety and self-compassion when traumatic memories are triggered so that they can stay relationally engaged with goodness—their own goodness and the goodness of others and life in general. Using these coping strategies consistently will able clients to explore traumatic memories in terms of values and beliefs called into question by the threat and violation of trauma.

*Assessing trauma-related symptoms* in terms of intensity, duration, and impact on the client's physical, emotional, relational, spiritual and behavioral well-being.

*Fostering spiritual integration* by identifying life-giving beliefs and values about suffering associated with spiritual practices of compassion, which can be used to counteract the automatic beliefs and values generated by trauma-related emotions like fear and shame. (p. 151, italics in original)



For example, a chaplain who uses an evidence-based intercultural approach with Mr. A.'s son, J, would attend to J's particular ways of coping that have given him a sense of safety and goodness. Unlike the stage theory model, an intercultural understanding of how orienting systems function in coping can help chaplains learn how each person and their own unique orienting system shape the ways they interact with a traumatic stressor. Instead of focusing on questions that would have to do with the stages of grief, a chaplain might ask, "How would you say your traumatic experiences have made you stronger or resilient?" or "Tell me about a time when you felt connected to the goodness of life."

A background of understanding evidence-based research can enhance a chaplain's ability to engage in a conversational arc towards clarity of what a grieving individual could be experiencing. In this way, evidence-based research has the potential to enrich a chaplain's tasks of listening to, collaborating with, and guiding people.

**Limitations.** While the importance of evidence-based intercultural spiritual care has been well established, the pluralistic comparative approach to research on religion and spirituality must be tempered by an intercultural approach that pays attention to the *particular* ways that individuals draw upon aspects of their religion and spirituality in the midst of crisis.

In this chapter, I have presented a complex and sometimes overwhelming array of resources and "multidimensional constructs" (Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013, p. 5) of religion and spirituality that guide evidence-based research. Theories carry with them certain evidence-based conceptual frameworks to the caregiving task such as: religious/spiritual struggles, spiritual orienting systems, religious

coping, and transactional model of stress and coping and wholeness / brokenness. But, how do conceptual apparatuses pertain to diversity and alterity? Do they unwittingly function to put the experience of the other into a preconceived conceptualization about the other?

The evidence-based, quantitative-research approach seeks objectivity, facts, and statistically significant correlations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012), and generally assumes “one true approximal reality” (Ponterotto, 2013, p. 20) that can be empirically apprehended given the right tools. In this view, the most valid forms of knowledge are evidence-based.

However, in the context of the caregiving relationship, a mourner’s process and circumstance help to compose the frame or scaffold for dialogue. Conceptual knowledge is helpful, but only in proportional relation to trust, compassion, and humility. I argue that the loss of this reality in favor of standardized practices and measurements potentially destroys whatever deeper healing may be possible and/or keeps one from being what one organically and collaboratively would discover. As US Army Chaplain James M. Lewis writes, “the practice of ministry is relational and not scientific in nature” (Lewis, 2002, p. 5) and further that “interrogating the patient with a battery of . . . unnecessary questions may in fact disrupt the interpersonal process that is the essence of pastoral ministry” (Lewis, 2002, p. 6). In deploying only an evidence-based approach to the caregiving task, would a caregiver be distracted with trying to wrestle all the information into the caregiver’s frame of reference? Pargament’s research on spiritual struggles has provided insights into how evidence-based intercultural care discloses,

protects, and honors the alterity of the careseeker. Where does it foreclose on that alterity? Could poetry help to disclose, protect, and honor the careseeker's particularities, ambiguities, and complexities of grieving in fuller ways that evidence-based spiritual care does not?

This brings us back to the role of the intercultural spiritual caregiver with the bereaved in a community of faith as a model of being more than an open, non-judgmental, practical presence, but also one that fashions new and sensitive modes of discourse, practice, engagement from arts-based research methods. Intercultural spiritual caregivers collaborate with careseekers in finding ways to bridge disparate cultures and to enrich and humanize lamentation so that together our resources are employed positively rather than dissipated wastefully.

In the act of employing evidence-based spiritual care, would a Latinx family—such as the A. family—consider they have a role in this collaborative process, or would the history of structural racism, classism, and sexism, including the lack of in-depth evidence based research whose subjects are Latinos/as, simply rule out this possibility for some time to come? As end-of-life researchers Barbara Monroe, David Oliviere, and Sheila Payne (2011) write, “Advances in palliative care treatments and symptom control run the risk of prompting the development of ever more standardized models of service delivery designed to fit the needs of a norm based on our largely unchallenged assumptions” (p. 5). In other words, an emphasis on providing end-of-life care to white-bodied people protects those people's high standard of medical care at the expense of needed change for lower-income people of color. Without extensive research (either

evidence-based or arts-based) combined with an awareness of our assumptions and biases of how we think people grieve, advances in end-of-life bereavement care will continue to benefit the dominant norm. The ways people-of-color patients have been systemically disadvantaged by poorer hospitals and different social capital is obscured by an assumption that grief moves toward one particular end. Within this assumption lies a hidden notion that those who are grieving successfully simply deserve better end-of-life bereavement care because their individual efforts to strive have been rewarded in terms of social/cultural/economic capital.

Furthermore, what is offered in the practice of grief-work (as stages of accomplishment) is rooted in the values and aspirations of those who created and promoted the narrative in the first place. Even as social change has removed some of the barriers of access to more adequate and affordable end-of-life care for marginalized groups, end-of-life bereavement care has not changed as much as it has simply subsumed others into it. People of color and lower-class backgrounds do have more access to end-of-life bereavement care than they once did, but only within the parameters and criteria already set by those who were never at risk of losing their privilege.

### **Last Words**

There are two major points to take away from these discussions of grief that will be relevant to my arguments about sustaining lamentation. Firstly, through Leeat Granek's work, I discussed Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" and reviewed the conceptualization of grief as a pathology within the field of psychology. The point is that Freud's early theory of grief still influences the rhetoric and practices of mourning today.

Instead of viewing mourning in Freudian terms—either the seeking of or resistance to consolation—this dissertation shows that mourning can be a healthy and necessary human experience with potential to evoke ethical responsibility for both the mourner and the community of care.

Secondly, I discussed the importance and limitations of evidence-based intercultural spiritual care. Pargament and his colleagues have brought several conceptual frameworks to the caregiving task. Would a caregiver be distracted with trying to wrestle all the information into the caregiver’s frame of reference? Does some of the research function to put the experience of the careseeker into preconceived conceptualizations? The second point is that evidence-based spiritual care can foreclose on alterity when not used within an intercultural approach that pays attention to the particularities of persons and families. This dissertation argues that arts-based methods such as including poetry from a person’s culture in spiritual practices of lament has the potential to encompass and sustain deeper laments that are culturally diverse.

Pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring (2019) is doing unique work on the role of spiritual practices in the aftermath of traumatic grief. She describes the need

for spiritual practices that help people experience compassion in the midst of grief involving the death of a loved one due to a traumatic event . . . . Research on religious coping and trauma emphasizes the role of meaning-making . . . but the role of spiritual practices in searching for meanings is not elaborated. (p. 241)

An act of reading diverse poetry in a bereaved faith community might offer a safe place to express particular ways people lament and elaborate their search for meaning without foreclosing on their alterity. Could poetry invite new spiritual practices of connecting with God or the sacred through expressing laments “that foster goodness and

compassion with *beliefs* and *values* complex enough to account for suffering—one’s own and the world’s” (Doehring, 2015a, p. 18)? What might this look like? In a multi-faith bereavement group or in a difficult situation in the ICU would reading poetry in addition to using religiously/spiritually specific language enrich our grief expressions after becoming spiritually distressed, bereft, and enraged?

The next chapters focus on poetic inquiry, a valid method of arts-based research. In the *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*, Carl Leggo (2008) from the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia writes, “Poetry offers significant ways for learning and practicing our living in the world” (p. 171). From the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University, Montreal, Professor Lynn Butler-Kisber (2017) says that art in research “allows for ambiguity . . . which can help with resonance with the audience (p. 2).” Poetry stirs up a sense of deliberation. The experience involves a method of discovery.<sup>33</sup> This means we readers see something new. We notice something we hadn’t seen or imagined before. It makes us reconsider our assumptions. What else might we have missed or been mistaken about? What would help us to live in the world with a sense of strength, realism, confidence, and openness to whatever happens?

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<sup>33</sup> An example of a method of discovery is found in author, educator, and activist Parker J. Palmer’s (2004) book *A Hidden Wholeness*. He writes about using poetry as a group practice that can create “a circle of trust” (pp. 91-94). His phrase “a third thing” refers to “a poem, a story, a piece of music, or a work of art” that embodies a topic metaphorically (p. 92) and evokes “whatever the soul wants us to attend to” (p. 93).

## Chapter 3

### Introducing Poetry's Formal Features to Sustaining Lamentation

*The meaning of a poem is in the cadences and the shape of the lines and the pulse of the thought which is given by those lines.*

George Oppen, 1969, p. 167

*Every reader of poetry knows that poetry is different and that in this difference lies the source of its power.*

Veronica Forrest-Thomson, 1978/2016, p. 33

#### Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore a proposition that intercultural bereavement spiritual care, focused on bringing resolution to the experience of grief, fails to acknowledge the potential of inconsolable mourning as an empowered response to loss. I claim that contemporary elegies, as forms of the poetics of testimony, bear witness to the complex dimensions of traumatic grief in ways that do not foreclose on an other's alterity, but sustain lamentation in intercultural spiritual care of persons and communities.

Chapter 1 described the problem, explained its importance, and pinpointed the central question to be investigated. Chapter 2 began with the Freud's psychoanalytic model of mourning as the historical cornerstone of the contemporary understanding of Western bereavement. Through Leatt Granek's (2010) theoretical framework I offered a critique of the evolution of grief theory within the field of psychology. Granek's work on the history of the pathologizing of grief in psychoanalytic practice parallels the movement within the disciplines of pastoral care and counseling in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Traditional models of bereavement, such as stage theory, have not always adequately responded to grieving persons and/or communities. A critical need may be to hear discourse about a God who would be “a partner in the struggle for a more just world with less pain and more possibilities for all” (L. Graham, 2017, p. 51) rather than hearing discourse about a God being the cause of good and evil in the world and the routinization of responses to loss. In Chapter 2, I noted bereavement-studies clinicians Boss (2010) and Doka (2002), whose work employs a standpoint that grieving traumatic losses is often without closure, rather than being a stage oriented, “working through” of grief towards the catharsis that Freud suggests in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917/ 1957).

Chapter 2 went on to describe evidence-based spiritual care as a basis for best practices and healthcare reform in the context of chaplaincy. For example, aspects of valid research on religious coping (or not coping) can be measured scientifically, such as the quality, nature, and degree of spiritual distress one might feel in the aftermath of trauma. Research in the psychology of religion by renowned researcher Kenneth Pargament and his colleagues’ well-designed research and well-executed scholarship contribute useful criteria for intercultural spiritual care practices in healthcare settings.

This dissertation supports the idea that evidenced-based research is significant, but not exhaustive in terms of contributing to the tasks of the caregiver in healthcare chaplaincy. Relationships, connections, and interactions are more than what can be effectively measured, justified, or explained. In the field of practical theology, British theologian Heather Walton (2018) refers to arts-based approaches as ones that “employ a whole range of creative techniques in order to generate knowledge” (p. 28). Along these



lines, an arts-based approach privileges subjectivity, storytelling, poetic imagination, and in line with qualitative research, considers “multiple, equally valid, and socially co-constructed realities” (Ponterotto, 2013, p. 20). Thus, the practice of intercultural spiritual care is driven not only by evidence-based research on religious/spiritual coping, but also by values that are elusive and impenetrable to scientific scrutiny. Poetry may be the one artform with the most precise written language we have for talking about the world and may be able to create a bridge between the medical realms of abstract discourse and expanding relational connections in human lives.

At best this chapter is an introduction to some basic ideas about the formal elements of poetry and what makes poetry different than prose. I argue for why/how this difference makes poetry particularly apt for putting people in touch with what is most real to them about illness, death, grief and suffering in a spiritual healthcare context. In terms of practical theological method, both this chapter and the next are restful chapters in that they retreat from practical theology’s methodology-steps. Both chapters 3 and 4 are educative tools and lay the groundwork for the next methodological step found in Chapter 5.

Specifically, this chapter introduces language and terms of the formal elements of poetry. The next chapter builds on the introductory poetic elements described in this chapter and considers foundational, critical, and theoretical works in the field of the poetic elegy. Both chapters offer introductory literary concepts and theoretical grounding needed for the critical reflection on the elegies discussed in chapter 5. In this dissertation the elegies I examine neither support Freud’s early model for mourning nor react directly

against it. The elegies I study employ experimental methods and offer alternatives to current American public rhetoric and thinking about death and mourning.

### **Energy at the Edge**

Contemporary poetry often meets with a certain resistance, particularly among academic circles in religious/theological studies and in the fast-paced medical environments of hospital chaplaincy, the audiences I have in mind while writing this dissertation. I believe it is well worth our time to work through whatever our difficulties and resistances to poetry may be, because poetry exists on cultural edges crucial to contemporary discourses on meaning (or non-meaning) when responding to tragedy in an intercultural spiritual care context. Making sense with poetry—the ability to take off and land with the leaps of a particular poem—requires making some effort and building a capacity for poetry’s motions of resonance and for language as a heard music. This chapter is just that effort—to give a basic, working understanding and vocabulary of the how of a poem, that is, the how-does-meaning-happen of a poem. In a poem, the what (content/meaning) and the how (form/structure) are particularly inseparable, making it a uniquely complex, layered, interdisciplinary genre distinct from prose.

What is it about a poem that evokes or draws upon the edge of language, knowledge, human experience, and our habits of perception? The Bay Area poet J. Ruth Gendler (1991) writes:

In our time we commonly view poetry as a rarified form that doesn’t have much to do with our lives. Many of us stay away, afraid it will either be too abstract and inaccessible or sentimental and precious. Yet, poetry may be the more precise language we have for talking about the world. Poets who give language to states where the soul meets the world, the inner and outer intersect, are charged and changed by the energy at the edge. (p. xxi)

Certainly, poetry is not the only written form vested with articulating our habits of perception or where “where the soul meets the world.” There are many memorable prose passages from memoirs<sup>34</sup> that illustrate various groups and/or persons struggling to witness and give an account of what their experiences are when in many cases those experiences would seem too horrific for words. Many novels’ literary characters—to name just a handful—such as Anil (Ondaatje, 2000), Esch, (Ward, 2011), Pecola (Morrison, 1970), Stephen (Joyce, 1922) or Kai (Forna, 2011)—bear witness to seemingly unrepresentable traumatic events in profound and compelling ways. What is it about a poem that evokes, draws upon, is changed by and itself changes “the energy at the edge” of language and human experience? What makes poetry particularly apt in and for the future of intercultural spiritual care?

In this chapter I address these questions by bringing together a constellation of insights from Veronica Forrest-Thomson (1978/2016), John Ciardi (1975), James Longenbach (2004), Allen Grossman (1992), and Jorge Luis Borges (2000) in order to explore how poetry is distinct from prose—such as the inseparability of the “what” and the “how” of poetry—and the significance of imagination as another way of connecting with and responding to one’s way of knowing about poetry. Lastly, I discuss poet-critic Allen Grossman’s (1992) concept of the common place and the potential for poetry to help chaplains engage in collaborative conversations.

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<sup>34</sup> For example, Elizabeth Alexander’s (2016) *The Light of the World: A Memoir*, Sonali Deraniyagala’s (2013) *Wave*, Joan Didion’s (2007) *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Meghan O’Rourke’s (2012) *The Long Goodbye: A Memoir*, and Jesmyn Ward’s (2014) *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*.

## Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice*

The poet-critic Forrest-Thomson is an important figure in the development of critical theory and its articulation in poetic language. Professor of English Alison Mark (1999) locates Forrest-Thomson's work "at the confluence of two major strands of poetry—the canonical and the 'avant-garde, which gives her work a unique position in the development of poetry and criticism in English" (p. 655). When distinguishing what makes poetry different from prose, Forrest-Thomson's (1978/2016) best-known critical work *Poetic Artifice* would be a helpful introduction to the significance of poetry's form because her book warns of a too quick pursuit of finding meaning, which would diminish poetry's complexity and ambiguity. Forrest-Thomson (1978/2016) describes her project as:

an effort to talk about those aspects of poetry which are most difficult to articulate and which most clearly mark it as poetry. It is an attempt to talk about what is generally taken for granted because people can find no way of speaking of it except as the inexplicable. The enterprise, therefore, is fraught with peril for both author and reader, but the rewards of success may be correspondingly great. (p. 41)

Forrest-Thomson discusses the concept of artifice as the difference between poetic and other forms of language. She recommends a reading in which the reader resists the impulse to merely analyze the words of a poem and their meaning. Poet and Professor of Poetics at the University of Sussex Keston Sutherland (2008) describes Forrest-Thomson's theory of reading. He writes:

Bad reading leads, typically and disastrously, not just to a stupid paraphrase or misinterpretation, but to the specific occlusion of poetic artifice. Bad reading is a deeply objectionable and not merely an irrelevant thing to do, because it is pre-eminently through the study and enjoyment of *poetic artifice* and by keeping in the primary context of stressed and recollected knowledge that a reader may 'free

himself from the fixed forms of thought which ordinary language imposes on our minds.’ (para. 3, italics added)

Forrest-Thomson’s primary attention is given to the devices of poetic artifice, to what she calls the “non-meaningful levels of poetic language, such as phonetic and prosodic patterns and spatial organization rather than set them aside in an attempt to produce a statement about the world” (p. 36). Simply put, for Forrest-Thomson, “phonetic and prosodic patterns and spatial organization” is a way to describe poetry’s formal complexities, which ought to be valued as integral parts of the poem’s total effect before resorting to reductive conclusions about the meaning of the poem.

As an illustration of poetry’s formal complexities, Forrest-Thomson (1978/2016) uses four lines from Tennyson’s “In Memoriam”:

Dark house, by which once more I stand  
Here in the long unlovely street,  
Doors, where my heart was used to beat  
So quickly, waiting for a hand (as qtd. p. 37)

She paraphrases the four lines:

House, so dark, in front of which I am standing again  
Here in the long gloomy street,  
Doors, where my heart used to pound in anticipation  
As I waited for him to emerge. (p. 37)

In the above two stanzas, the content is basically the same. What exactly does this stanza mean? That may be a less than helpful question with which to approach a poem. Because a poem is not “about” definitional, categorical language, but about the motion of meaning. The question one might prefer to ask of a poem, is the inquiry with which some decades ago, John Ciardi (1975) entitled his book: *How Does A Poem Mean?* A contemporary of Ciardi’s, Forrest-Thomson’s book (1978/2016) could be thought of as a

response to this question. She writes, “to be able to explain why the first stanza is more effective and intense than the second” (p. 38) we have to focus on any “formal features we can identify” (p. 38). Poetry’s affective, imaginative, musical, and category-breaking dimensions can extend, expand, and complexify expressions of categorical, definitional language because of its form. Robert Hass (1978/2007) defines the form of a poem as “the shape of its understanding” (p. 153). Poet Stephen Dunn (2013) writes, “form’s job is to help reveal content. It’s in the business of heightening, subordinating, arranging. It controls rates of disclosure, degrees of importance. It guides the eye” (p. 295). I now turn to some of poetry’s formal features to give a basic, working understanding of the how poetry differs from prose.

### **Some of Poetry’s Formal Features**

**Sentence and syntax.** In the Oxford English Dictionary the word “sentence,” takes one back to Middle English and the idea of an opinion, judgment, thought. Then further back to the Latin word *sentire*, to feel, and even further back into Indo-European roots, meaning to head for, to cause to go, to send. It’s lovely to think of a sentence as a journey, as heading out, and because its destination is not part of the definition, we have to discover that along the way. Or maybe the discovery happens as one sentence leads to another, feeling, sensing as they go, and arriving at some kind of order. Order because as the Greek root of the word *syntax* implies, a sentence puts things together, arranges things in an order.

One way poetry is different from prose is because of its syntax. Because English lost its inflection centuries ago, our parts of speech need to be in a specific order to make

sense. It's one thing to say, "the girl threw a fast ball." Another to say, "a fast ball threw the girl" and still another to say, "a ball threw the girl fast." All might be true, but they don't mean the same thing.

Following poet-critic Veronica Forrest-Thomson's four-line re-write of Tennyson's "In Memorium," I will re-write five lines of Frost's "The Road Not Taken" to show how syntax impacts the emotional meaning of this poem. I turn to the beginning of Frost's well-known poem, "The Road Not Taken:"

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth; . . . (1979, p. 105)

These five lines are part of a twelve-line complex sentence, whose sound is of a mind thinking. We are grounded in the immediate situation, "Two roads diverged" where the choice has no clear, determining factors. The sound of hesitation interjects through a sense of desire and regret: "And sorry I could not travel both / And be one traveler. . ."

The sentence is carefully measured and complicated despite Frost's characteristic, seemingly casual voice. He ends the stanza on that long gaze down the road leading our eye toward perspective's end where the road disappears in undergrowth. Think of how else he could have done it:

Looking down as far as I could  
To where two divergent roads  
Bent in the undergrowth,  
I was sorry since I could not travel both  
And be one traveler.

That is a more familiar syntax, actually, than what Frost uses, but something is lost besides the rhyme: the syntax of desire and/or lament. In Frost's version, the decision is being held off by an awareness of some regret, lament even, and some desire not to choose or not to need to choose. We stay in the moment before choice, which creates an emotional experience while simultaneously reflecting on it. In the last re-write, that "since" is more conclusive and causal. It shuts the reader out of the speaker's emotional context. Things feel more off-hand. The speaker knows he has to choose and is going to. It's all about cause, not desire and regret. Thus, just one word: "since" considerably simplifies the emotional context. The poem goes on with its weighing of options, its back and forth.

Within Frost's first twelve-line sentence, there are several clauses which could have been punctuated differently as sentences of their own, but it seems Frost wanted to keep both the wondering and the act of choosing as one long process of deliberation. The effect is one of immediacy, I think, and not letting a reflection lead to a conclusion.<sup>35</sup> The above examples of reordering syntax illustrate how a poet's choice of syntax can either awaken discomfort and unease or not.

**Rhythm and sound.** The way to become aware of the possibilities of syntax according to poet Robert Frost is to hear the rhythm and sound in the language around us. "The ear does it," he says in a letter to John Bartlett dated 22 February, 1914. Frost continues:

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<sup>35</sup> For different types of sentences, see Stanley Fish's (2012) discussion where he describes sentences that don't specify connections between things, but leaves them for us readers to find. Associative thought often works this way in poetry. Fish claims the effect of this style is "not of planning, order, and control, but of spontaneity, haphazardness, and chance" (p. 61).



The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader. . . . The sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung. You may string words together without a sentence sound to string them on just as you may tie clothes together by the sleeves and stretch them without a clothes line between two trees, but it is bad for the clothes. (1914/ 1964, pp. 110-114)

These sounds are definite entities, he continues, that “are gathered by the ear from the vernacular and brought into books . . . . Writers don’t invent them so as much as hear or catch them from talk for they grow spontaneously” (1914/ 1964, p. 114). As literary scholar and poet Charles Bernstein (2016) writes, “sound is grace. We don’t earn it, but it is always there for us, in its plentitude, as the social-material dimension of human language” (p. 33). I’m not sure these sounds come only from talk, but many writers speak of hearing an inner sound, a rhythm, a cadence, a sentence sound before they have words as if that sound precedes writing.

In an essay, poet and University of Denver professor Graham Foust (2018) compares the affinities between the poems written by Louise Glück and George Oppen. Commenting on Oppen’s revision process, Foust highlights Oppen’s question of “who is there?” to tell a poet what is right or what to do. Oppen’s question implies the poet is listening, perhaps for an inner sound. Foust (2018) writes, “Language sounded out, ecstatically, in shatteredness; some firm conviction, even in a question; the hole in—which may be the whole of—whatever watches over us in poetry’s imaginary gardens, a place ‘[m]ore formal / Than a field would be’” (p. 52).

Other poets write of language as a heard music. Ezra Pound (1918) writes, “I believe in an ‘absolute rhythm,’ a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed” (p. 103). The writing comes on the

flow of hearing those rhythms. Robert Hass (1978) writes, “. . . rhythm is an idiom of the unconscious . . . New rhythms are new perceptions” (p. 98). In an interview with Chris Busa, poet Stanley Kunitz (1977) suggests a writer hears a rhythm that belongs to both a subject matter and the writer’s interior world. “You can ride on that rhythm,” Kunitz says, “it will carry you somewhere strange” (para. 69). Every once in a while in my experience, a spontaneous, spoken prayer—given as a responsive expression of someone’s sorrow, dilemma, or anguish—has a rhythm that both captures and doesn’t capture the experience of the painful moment. Its effect is ephemeral and consequential at the same time, the hearing of an inner sound.

After the full import of Soviet rule was making itself known in what he calls “the Soviet night” (1974, p. 31), the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam writes about words being sounds. In Clarence Brown’s and W.S Merwin’s translation of poem “118,” Mandelstam (1974) writes:

we shall meet again in Petersburg  
as though we had buried the sun there  
and then we shall pronounce for the first time  
the blessed word with no meaning (p. 31)

The word for Mandelstam is first of all sound, a physical presence, an experience, something in its own right, not just a shorthand symbol for an abstract concept. Perhaps the word is both meaningless and blessed because it is beyond all propagandistic uses or because it is like those great Russian monastic bells, which do not play melodies but instead sound out tones like an aural icon.

**Lines.** Most of us come to poetry expecting language to behave differently and one reason for this expectation is that poems usually appear visually different than prose

on the page. Unlike prose, poetry has an option of meeting the right-hand margin of the page. Usually it does not. By typographical convention, white margins surround the poem and help make poetry different from prose. In other words, the white page exposes lines particular of a certain poem.

In a conversation with the poet Mark Halliday, the late poet-critic Allen Grossman (1992) says, “The specific mark which differentiates . . . poetic utterance from . . . ordinary language is that abstract principle we call the line” (p. 84). Grossman (1992) associates poetic lines with the formation of the distinguishing features (lineaments) of the human face. “Reading,” he writes, “is the interference of countenance from text, and the conservation of the text is the keeping of the lineament of the countenance” (p. 368). We recognize a poem (as we might perceive facial features) without knowing the content of the poem. Text . . . “is countenance as speech alone” (Grossman, 1992, p. 368). Poetic lines can be thought of as “versions of the countenance under the conditions required for poetic utterance” (Grossman, 1992, p. 368).

Lines that are characteristic of most poems seem to force a reader to pay more attention to each word on a line. The line breaks put visual pressure on each word, and thus on sounds within those words. Literary scholar Frederick Morgan (1947) writes, “The break at the end of the line supplies by visual means an extra punctuation of the rhythm that prevents it from falling into shapelessness” (p. 680). This pressure has a particularly powerful effect on a poem’s sounds and images<sup>36</sup> because they are naturally

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<sup>36</sup> The poet Ezra Pound (1918) stresses the importance of both the psychological and structural features of an image when he defines it as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (p. 96).

isolated just by being on a line. For example, in Nicole Cooley's (2010) book, *Breach*, the elegy "I'm Starting to Speak the Language" uses a fragmented structure for the topic of the devastation wrought on Highway 90 by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

Cooley (2010) writes:

. . . All that's left of an address he calls *the new lexicon*,  
the spray-painted X, the house marked O,  
*Dog Found*. Stone foundation threaded with weeds  
that are no language. Still, you can tell  
where a house once stood, he says, by the clearing.  
A front gate is *For Sale by Owner*. All that's left  
of an address. Missing a whole story. (p. 61)

"The break at the end of the line," literary scholar Frederick Morgan (1947) writes, "supplies by visual means an extra punctuation of the rhythm that prevents it from falling into shapelessness; it is useful in isolating individual images or in contrasting one image to another" (p. 680). Cooley's cumulative images: "an address," "spray-painted X," "house marked O," "Stone foundation threaded with weeds," "house once stood," "the clearing" "front gate" are intensified because the line breaks isolate them. Thus, new associations and connections may develop between them. Cooley's images likely have been selected from other possibilities, and so their possibilities as things<sup>37</sup> become both magnified and simplified. We readers feel that Cooley has selected relevant details of her neighborhood as they are being observed in a particular moment in time. The linebreaks seem to outline an absence—like a negative of a photo, the space where, as the

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<sup>37</sup> The concept of possibilities as things is a take on the poet William Carlos Williams's (1946/1963) recurring phrase in *Paterson*, "no ideas but in things." Many of W. C. Williams's poems focus on specific things themselves and their details rather than on abstract concepts or indefinite aspects of a thing. We readers interact with a poem's specific things by conjuring up what we have seen, could see, or want to see.

images suggest, a loved place/a loved one is not. The poem says visibly, without words, what is not there.<sup>38</sup>

Another way I think linebreaks amplify the poem's content is found in the italicized words. In the poem the "he" searches for words to describe the ruin and starkness of a neighborhood left after Katrina. The words (in italics) found on signs are the "new lexicon" that describes what has been left of an address. Those italicized words—*Dog Found, For Sale by Owner*—are separate by occupying space on two lines. Because of the line breaks, one has the sense of reading the signs as if one is travelling down the street and looking right and then left. The devastation is everywhere.

Even without reading all the other lines in Cooley's poem and without knowing them in the context of her other poems, one would still hear the sounds of words and their rhythm, which I would characterize as regularly measured until the last line, "of an address. Missing a whole story." The fragment "missing a whole story" seems to disrupt the continuity of the poem's rhythm as though we just pedaled a bike over a pot-hole. We get a sense of something falling down or breaking apart.

This particular poem's form, as poet Brad Richard (2010) writes, "reinforces the process of layering and sifting" (p. 179) through an unconventional use of punctuation, grammar, and sound. The broken lines and fragments enact "a layering and sifting" of the ground "where a house once stood." The interrelation of the linebreaks (how) and the

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<sup>38</sup> Biblical scholar Kathleen O'Connor (2011) touches on the "search for language" (p. 33) in her book *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise*. O'Connor details the ways in which the writing—the seeking of "words for festering wounds for which there are no words" (p. 6)—in the biblical book of Jeremiah performs to transform (for better and worse) an ancient community shattered by ecological disaster and traumatic violence.

text's content (what) allow for an expanded understanding of how representations of trauma and memory are experienced by the speaker.

The what and the how of a poem can be thought of as poetry's dual task. Ciardi (1975) writes that a poem inseparably links "what it means" and "how it means" (Ciardi, p. 4). The aptness of poetry for this dual task involves its ability to simultaneously explicate ideas (and their relations/meanings) and to create or perform what it claims. In a poem, the "what" and the "how" are particularly inseparable, making Cooley's poem a uniquely complex, layered resource for bringing to light the complexities of how to begin to talk about "All that's left of an address /... where a house once stood."

In this section, I introduced a few of poetry's formal elements to show some basic ideas of how poetry differs from prose. I want to give readers in the field of practical theology a working vocabulary of formal elements and an appreciation for how a simple statement in everyday conversation gains significance in a poem because of "the exploitation of non-meaningful levels of language" (Forrest-Thomson, 1978/2016, p. 40). I discussed poet-critic John Ciardi (1975), who writes that a poem inseparably links "what it means" and "how it means" (p. 4), offering a concrete glimpse of how meaning performs itself in/through language. Ciardi's (1975) characterization of the poem's ability to simultaneously explore meanings and to create itself foregrounds a poem as a potentially expansive and clarifying method for the practical and critical work of pastoral theology and intercultural spiritual care as I will demonstrate in Chapter 6. A poem's form can expand and complexify the emotional world generated by traumatic loss. Now,

I want to introduce understanding with imagination as another way how a poem can be much more than the sum of its words.

### **Understanding with Imagination**

The Argentinian poet Jorge Luis Borges (2000) shows how a poem can be much more than the sum of its words through a notion of beauty that exists in poetry, “a beauty far beyond the mere fact of how it is interpreted” (Borges, 2000, p. 85). He speaks of understanding not with reason but with a deeper imagination and of how the words themselves “stand as a thing of beauty” and are “inexhaustible” (Borges, 2000, p. 86). Certainly, there is something “inexhaustible” in the poems we love most deeply. There may be passages we don’t understand with reason, but explore with imagination. As an example of lines that “stand as a thing of beauty,” Borges (2000) uses four lines in Spanish from the Bolivian poet Ricardo Jaimes Freire (p. 86). To expand on Borges’ example, I would like to discuss the following lines translated by Stephen Spender and J. L. Gili from the second stanza of Lorca’s (1943) “Somnambule Ballad:”

Green, how much I want you green.  
Great stars of white frost  
come with the fish of darkness  
that opens the road of dawn.  
The fig-tree rubs the wind  
with the sand-paper of its branches,  
and the mountain, a filching cat,  
bristles its bitter aloes. (p. 22)

Several lines are difficult to understand: “The mountain, a filching cat, / bristles its bitter aloes.” “Great stars of white frost / come with the fish of darkness.” “Green, how much I want you green.” Yet, the language has a rhythm that makes music.

I think an alternate version of the same stanza in “Sleepwalker’s Ballad,” translated by John Frederick Nims (2019) is harder to accept:

Green it’s your green I love.  
The stars are frost, enormous;  
a tuna cloud floats over  
nosing off to the dawn.  
The fig tree catches a wind  
to grate in its emery branches;  
the mountain’s a wildcat, sly,  
bristling its arid cactus. (<http://www.poesi.as/index203cuk.htm>)

The point I’m making is not about whether the translation is precise, but about which version is more compelling. Certainly, the second one is clearer; its metaphors are direct: the stars *are* white frost. A fish (a tuna (!) at that), really is a cloud. But the more deeply embedded long vowel sounds and the repetitious “of” and the “gr” sounds in the first version make it more spellbinding with its trance-like rhythm.<sup>39</sup> As we know from Veronica Forrest-Thomson, the act of reading a poem is not merely to discover the sum of its meanings, but to explore its formal elements, ones that resist a facile interpretation.

In “Somnambule Ballad,” Lorca gives us readers a melodic sense of a ballad with formal elements that do not deliver information purposively. Christopher Maurer, professor of Spanish and chair of Romance Studies at Boston University, speaks of the aesthetic qualities Lorca had hoped to apprehend in his own work. According to Maurer (2002), “foremost among [the aesthetic qualities] is a sense of mystery: the feeling of a story half told and half understood. The narrative poetry that ‘lives in variants’ . . . is like any other message transmitted orally, subject to transformation” (p. xlix). Being handed

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<sup>39</sup> I am grateful to the poet Betsy Sholl for opening the door to this conversation about the two different versions of Lorca’s poem.



down through generations and across borders, poetic tales handed down orally lose some of their narration and reach us full of gaps. Lorca writes, “Songs are like people. They live, they grow perfect, and some grow degenerate and come undone, until we are left with palimpsests, full of lacunae and senseless things” (as qtd. in Maurer, 2002, p. xlix). In “Somnambule Ballad,” Lorca leaves the lacunae in place and does not try to explain them. He recreates not just an experience of absence but also a different kind of presence. There’s the absence of narration, the missing facts, but there is also the presence of time, the almost dizzying sense of a life that is beyond the reach of our rational wits. I don’t think we readers can be sure of what happens in “Somnambule Ballad” or who is being addressed and yet how intriguing and compelling as a piece of language it still is. A theological point here is that we speak from a standpoint in history and cannot presume that what we say transcends that standpoint or speaks for everything real. Hence mystery and exploring with imagination.

An act of a reading with imagination can lead to a (new) experience in itself. Along these lines, John Ciardi (1975) writes, “the concern is not to arrive at a definition and to close the book, but to arrive at an experience . . . and even then there is always some part of every good work of art that can never be fully explained or categorized” (p. 2). Just as a work of art such as a poem can never be fully explained or categorized, there exist aspects of a spiritual care conversation that elude evidence-based research and practice. A practical/pastoral theologian might speak of fears, compassion, and care for those facing atrocity as one of life’s strongest loci of mystery, hence tentative and respectful attitudes of sacred wonder seem more indicated than judgment, rejection, and

abandonment. If nothing can separate the cosmos from the love of God, then we look for the love hidden in what appears to us as ruins (I think). Humans seem to be looking or seeing, listening or hearing, etc., though we might not consider ourselves to be seeking any kind of information.

The late poet Donald Hall (2004) speaks of this notion in an essay, “The Unsayable Said” when he writes that “poetry produces a response *in excess* of the discernible stimulus” (p. 3, emphasis added). In an analogy, he imagines this response as a “secret room.”

Peeling off some wallpaper [friends of ours] found a door that pried open to reveal a tiny room, sealed off and hidden, goodness knows why: They found no corpses nor stolen goods. The unsayable builds a secret room, in the best poems, which shows in the *excess* of feeling over paraphrase. This room is not a Hidden Meaning, to be paraphrased by the intellect; it conceals itself from reasonable explanation. The secret room is something to acknowledge, accept, and honor in a silence of assent; the secret room is where the unsayable gathers, and it is poetry’s uniqueness. (p. 3)

One could define the sacred as unsayable in part because as poet-critic Charles Bernstein (2001) says “the sacred is that which if it is portrayed dies” (para. 2). In an intercultural spiritual care conversation, we engage collaborative conversation in difficult topics such as suicide or the death of a child as one of life’s strongest loci of mystery. A reverence for mystery can be a way of reverencing others while remaining open to suffering.

In his essay, “The Music of Poetry,” T.S. Eliot (1943/2009), writing in England during World War II, suggests that

only part of the meaning of a poem can be paraphrased, because the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist . . . such that the poem means more, not less, than ordinary speech can communicate. (pp. 22-23)

Poems may enable a mourner to talk honestly about difficult topics. To explore a range of values, experiences, cares, and fears is part of the human story of preparing to embrace life and to assist one another when life becomes out of reach. The bottom line is (I think) that there is always room for love and love can never fail us humans, even though we don't always know how best to articulate and embody this love. Yet, in conversations like these we can deepen our understanding, revise our approaches, and hope for the best in the future through understanding with imagination. Poetry has a potential to create a common place where difficult topics can expand and reveal themselves and their depths.

### **A Common Place: Sustaining Lamentation through the Poetics of Testimony**

In his essay "Pastoral Theology and Catastrophic Disaster" (2006), Larry K. Graham writes that lamentation "becomes possible after initial shock and numbness wears off and when a basic safety net has been established" (p. 5). The act of establishing safety and building trust does not always guarantee people will talk about their religious/spiritual struggles even though it is beneficial. In Chapter 2, Exline et al., (2014) indicated that many people endure religious struggles privately. Pastoral theologians Kathleen Billman and Daniel Migliore (2006) describe other factors from being in intense pain that make it difficult to express with words what is happening.

They write:

The sufferer may feel ashamed of her brokenness and helplessness and may consider herself unworthy of the attention of others. Acute suffering attacks a person's self-respect. Moreover, the sufferer may feel profoundly isolated because both friends and strangers are made uncomfortable by her cries and may subtly signal that their desire is that she suffer in silence. (p. 106)

Other psychological researchers write that “healing power doesn’t come from simply expressing feelings, but from relieving the pressure to hide or inhibit expression of feelings” (Sandler & Ayers, 2002, p. 942).

A promising direction in which to continue an exploration of establishing trust for those who feel inhibited is the question, how might dialogues about poetry become “discursive practices and various voices that seek to describe or name that which rational discourse will not or cannot reveal” (Chopp, 2001, p. 56). The immediacy of reading or listening to poetry, that is, the connection of metaphor, the way the words first strike the ear, and the turn of rhythm may give us new or challenging insights. What could poetry, especially the elegy, offer to those grieving? Could reading elegies in trusted relationships and community invite a safe place to try to speak—aloud in community and/or inwardly in silence—about what has been unsaid?

In a conversation between poet Mark Halliday and poet-critic Allen Grossman (1992), Grossman addresses how poetry can facilitate conditions for relationships between people. He says, “In fact, poetry is merely the provision of the sufficient conditions for an “I” and a “you” to come together . . .” (p. 84). Might not the communal discourse of elegies offer a common place that establishes trust?

In the context of a faith community, theologians Kathleen Billman and Daniel Migliore (2006) point out that one of the ways lamentation “can help to support the life of faith” (p. 104) is to provide “an irreplaceable language of pain” (p. 106). When poems are discussed among trusted relationships and in community, they could create a common place to begin to address emotions of traumatic grief, including negative

religious/spiritual coping methods which “reflect a struggle within oneself, with others, or with God around sacred matters,” (p. 563) as Pargament et al., (2013) pointed out in Chapter 2. Poetry has “the function of making persons present to one another in that special sense in which they are acknowledgeable and therefore capable of love and mutual interest in one another’s safety” (Grossman,1992, p. 9).

When reading and discussing a poem about a tragic event, we direct our attention away from speculating whether the poet is or is not the speaker. Again, poet-critic Allen Grossman (1992) is useful with regard to thinking of the speaker as separate from the poet. He writes:

the name of the speaker in the poem is not the same as the artist [poet] in history. . . . The meaning of speaking . . . is secured as a consequence of the willingness of the hearer to construct, and assent to, the non-present personhood of the speaker. In speaking we are in one another’s hands . . . . (p. 259, p. 340)

The poem’s speaker depends on the hearer. There is no “right” way to read a poem. And yet there are “wrong” ways to do so. This paradox becomes useful when we try to understand our responses as discoveries of our biases and assumptions that disconnect from or block our deepest clarity. T.S. Eliot comments on poetry’s aptness for bringing us closer to a deeper reality. According to Eliot (1933/1964), “Poetry may make us . . . a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves” (p. 155).

By expressing experiences (ones that cannot be measured in evidence-based representations of grief), elegies as the poetics of testimony (Chopp, 2001, p. 61) could provide a *common place* for a deeper understanding of lament in intercultural spiritual

care. A common place is significant because “without the capacity to lament and the caregiver’s capacity to facilitate lamentation, life is further diminished and persons become frozen in time and space” (L. Graham, 2006, p. 6). Elegies could offer an apt modality for evoking layered and complex meanings of traumatic grief in a spiritual care context. The “I” of the poetic speaker and the “You” of the poetic hearer come together and might in fact encourage or facilitate a kind of trust in “a *common place* upon which both can stand” (Grossman, 1992, p. 84, emphasis added).

Poetry’s impulse is often to remain within the unsayable and the unpredictable which emphasizes the readers’ role to wrestle with language, thought, and complex emotions. The scholar-critic, James Longenbach (2004) suggests that poems convey their complex workings in forms that continually “resist” their being facile vehicles for conveying efficient messages. He writes, “a poem’s power inheres less in its conclusions than in its propensity to resist them . . .” (p. 10). In other words, poetry resists grabbing the quick booty of a lesson and running. Poetry resists returning to ego, reasserting the self in the role of soothsayer, and keeping things under control.<sup>40</sup> Longenbach (2004) reveals his affinities with reader-response critics when, in his concluding chapter, he claims that “the wonder of language depends less on meaning than on the ways in which it means, the shape of the temporal process we negotiate in the act of reading or writing a poem” (p. 100).

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<sup>40</sup> Remarking on poetry’s resistance to closure is poet Lyn Hejinian’s (2000), who writes, “The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything, would in fact be a closed text. It would be insufferable” (p. 56). Furthermore, the poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1991-2013) illustrates a resistance to closure through her major work, *Drafts*, an ongoing, long poem spanning several volumes.

Poetry can break open the mis-guided narratives that we have been telling ourselves. “Language returns our attention not to confirm what we know but to suggest that we might be different from ourselves” (Longenbach, 2004, p. 11). Along these lines, theologian Ashley Theuring writes, “The turn to the poetic can help us, across religious traditions, to hold our doubts and hopes in tension in the presence of suffering, as a testimony to both realities” (2014, p. 549). In a spiritual care context, poetry has the potential to offer a *common place*, in Grossman’s (1992) sense, for the particular way people experience grief and confront change. Poetry could connect mourners to each other, hold them in shared lament, and would not foreclose on their alterity. Now that we have established the aptness for poetry in a spiritual care context, the next section discusses collaborative conversation as an operating framework of how this might happen.

### **Poetics of Dialogue: Potentials for Poetry to Help Chaplains Co-create Conversations**

In the preface, I noted that both Osip Mandelstam and Paul Celan were poets who maintained a very clear aesthetic commitment no matter what was going on in their lives. I described how in Celan’s (1958/ 2001) “Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen,” known commonly as the “Bremen Address,” Celan borrowed Mandelstam’s concept of “message in a bottle” and asserted that a poem is “essentially dialogue” as a result of a poem’s manner of manifestation, that is, made up of words, written in language. For Celan, language itself is already dialogic.

In Celan's (1958/ 2001) "Bremen Address," the image of "the message in a bottle" draws attention away from the poet's language and toward the poem's receiver, toward the one who stands on the shore and picks up the bottle. This scene is more fully described in Mandelstam's (1979) "On the Addressee":

At a critical moment, a seafarer tosses a sealed bottle into the ocean waves, containing his name and a message detailing his fate. Wandering along the dunes many years later, I happen upon it in the sand. I read the message, note the date, the last will and testament of one who has passed on. I have the right to do so. I have not opened someone else's mail. The message in the bottle was addressed to its finder. I found it. That means, I have become its secret addressee. (p. 68)

In establishing the poem as seeking its other, Celan, later in his speech *The Meridian*, will turn this "right" into an obligation; this move, too, follows Mandelstam's: "I speak: that means, someone listens to me, not for nothing and not as a favor but under an obligation" (Glazova, 2008, p. 1109). The speaking I (the poet) speaks always and only in the present. The "someone" refers, of course, to the reader.

Here, we begin to see a relation to the ethical encounter as described by Levinas, where every speaking is a speaking to, a speaking in the direction of someone who hears, some other human being.<sup>41</sup> Mandelstam here articulates a Levinasian position occupied by the reader, one who listens neither to engage in diversion nor to satisfy a desire for more information. In other words, Mandelstam's reader does not seek mere entertainment; to seek that end would preclude any form of ethical listening. Rather, Mandelstam's reader (or listener) listens because he or she is obligated to do so. That is,

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<sup>41</sup> For more information on Levinas and the act of speaking see: Jovanovic & Wood, 2004, pp. 317-334.



we, as readers, are obligated to become the secret addressee. Every reader is this intended Other, this secret addressee.<sup>42</sup>

What does it mean to claim that a poem is essentially dialogue? Whose voices speak in this dialogue? The most accessible answer would be: the poet, and the reader. Of course, this answer is too facile, for, as we have already seen, the poet speaks in and for many voices. In Celan's "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen," known commonly as the "Bremen Address," he explains what he means by "dialogue" by clarifying poetry's destination: "Toward what? Toward something standing open, occupiable, perhaps toward an addressable Thou, toward an addressable reality" (Celan, 1958/2001, p. 396). Celan utilizes Martin Buber's category here, indicating not only that his poetry is in route toward a human being (and thus seeks a reader), but also, and this I think is the more important indication, that any human being must be conceived through Buber's I-Thou (and not I-it) relation.<sup>43</sup> In a similar move poet Charles Olson (1950/ 2004) in "Projective Verse" writes that poetry is "a high energy construct" moving from wherever "the poet got it . . . all the way over to the reader" (p. 174). However and wherever the poem begins, its journey is toward the reader.

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<sup>42</sup> Levinasian ethics rests upon responsibility as both obligation and as capacity to respond—this ability to respond mirrors the responsibility of the poem in addressing its reader.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Buber (1996) situates human beings in dialogic relations with other human beings and ultimately with God. In his *I and Thou*, he wrote about the fundamental nature of human life being characterized by I-Thou rather than I-it relationships. For life to be enriched and fulfilled we respect and value a person as a Thou. A dialogue between humankind and God combines with an inner dialogue of the self and gives rise to the crystallization of a common discourse, which in turn is essential for social cohesiveness. Buber called this transcendent dialogue an 'encounter' between consciousnesses (Buber, 1996, p. 77).

Thinking of poetry as dialogue, we could understand that a poem exists for its reader. This existence thus shifts the meaning of poetry away from an expression of subjectivity for the sake of the self. The main take away point is that for Celan, any poem's status as a potential for encounter would be due largely to its potential to engender connection, even while documenting radical disconnection.

What could be a theological significance of a poetics of encounter? One answer is: If writers define poetry as an act of discovery then they would charge themselves with writing blind in a sense, allowing the language and the rhythms of the poem to carry them into the unknown, into some mixture of heart, art, earth. They wouldn't know what the poem would turn up, how or if it would find its encounter. Yet, they might find out what they think or really care about as they write which might not be what they want to think or care about.

I suggest that the relationship between poetry and pastoral/spiritual care is one of dialogic encounter. For Martin Buber (1996), the co-creating aspect in the human relationship can lead to a communication with the eternal love of God. The application of both Buber's and Celan's 'encounter' to intercultural spiritual care is obvious. It says nothing new about the idea that when careseeker and caregiver meet in a place characterized by an I-Thou relationship, the act of connecting through listening opens up possibilities for care to be deepened, authentic, trusted, and graced. The connections, gaps, conversations, and monitoring are in a state of vitality and flux. Furthermore, intercultural spiritual care, like most of the poetry mentioned in this dissertation, documents, portrays, and helps us bear the disconnections as well as the potentials for

living. Intercultural spiritual caregiving is not a matter of two known entities disclosing what is known to the other, but two in-process entities discovering and becoming who they are in the conversation itself. Through the practice of listening, a chaplain aims to encounter another through the lens of relational engagement rather than relational distance. In the context of developing skilled engagement in ministry, Larry Graham (2017) developed a model for caregivers be in relationship with careseekers based on *collaborative conversation* (pp. 33-35). The theory is useful to this discussion because it is a helpful framework that applies aptly to both listening in spiritual care conversations and to reading poetry.

Collaborative conversation is Harlene Anderson's (2007) theory of constructing knowledge and creating reality. Building on Harlene Anderson's work, L. Graham (2017) suggests that collaborative conversation requires three disciplined habits of mind:

1) a disciplined habit of attuning to what is curious, exciting, interesting, and challenging to me as I receive new information and knowledge; 2) the disciplined habit of sharing openly without judgment and problem-solving agendas what was salient (curious, exciting, interesting, and challenging) to me in what I just experienced; and 3) [a disciplined habit of] ongoing attunement to the new meanings, thoughts, ideas, skills, and feelings that take their rise in the 'in-between' space that is created by sharing knowledge and one's enlivened inner dialogue about it. (p. 33)

In the above model, Graham's three points of collaborative conversation center around a give-and-take of agential and receptive power (L. Graham, 1992, p. 63-64) between two people in conversation. In this model, listening, self-reflection, and being able to draw upon new meanings of past experiences are potential empathic resources in caring for another. Similar *habits of mind* can be applied to the process of reading poetry. In *Summa Lyrica: A Primer of the Commonplaces in Speculative Poetics*, poet-critic

Allen Grossman (1992) builds on Mandelstam's and Celan's thought about an encounter when Grossman writes, "The reader is the destiny of the poem" (p. 213). He discusses reading poetry as

the process of creation of human presence . . . and is not an act but a process in the sense that it is always ongoing. The process of creation of human presence through acknowledgement moves through persons across time and is completed neither in the writer nor the reader but in *the mutually honorable reciprocity of both*. (pp. 213-214)

According to L. Graham, one of the hallmarks of collaborative conversation is not to be the expert, but to let others tell you about their experience as experts of it. In the spiritual care context, the careseeker is the author of the narrative. Good listening creates the time/space continuum whereby the narrative can take shape. Grossman (1992) writes, "At any moment of reading the reader is the author of the poem, and the poem is the author of the reader" (p. 214). With an ear on conversation, both poets and chaplains are perhaps like safecrackers turning the dial, listening for the clicks, trying to hear the resonance (or dissonance) in words (and rhythms). Just as we might follow a metaphor or image in a poem, we could follow a repeated metaphor or image in a careseeker's story, and may be led to the careseeker's spiritual distress. Perhaps, the power of God's compassion can be unleashed because it is what makes the I-Thou meeting possible to bring greater healing and justice to a broken self and a broken world.

### **Last Words**

Following feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp's (2001) concept of the potential of theology as "continually engag[ing] in creating spaces, building bridges, and forming new discourses as practices of emancipatory transformation" (p. 67), the core of this

chapter is an introduction of poetry as a vital discourse to practical theology. Poetry's formal features such as lines, sentence and syntax, rhythm and sound, and meter<sup>44</sup> help to distinguish the difference between poetry and prose. Together, both fields (practical theology and poetic studies) have the potential for bringing into existence fuller, richer liberating ways of sustaining lament in the aftermath of traumatic loss.

From Chapter 2, one knows that trauma is typically distinguished from other crises as violent events that can overwhelm one's beliefs, values, and ways of coping concerning self, others, and God. A poem's form might articulate trauma in ways prose cannot. In Cooley's poem mentioned at the chapter's beginning, we noticed the line breaks generating a dissonance linked to the speaker's experience of witnessing what remains through the destruction in the aftermath of Katrina.

A poem's form asks us to be in relation with its disruptive (or not) rhythms generating a certain musicality. The mind makes different and new associations and gives us another way of making language in the face of tragedy.<sup>45</sup> For example, we see this actually happening in a poem by Walt Whitman (1865/2015). In the poem, "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown" (p. 55), the details of the march

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<sup>44</sup> Literary critic and scholar Paul Fussell (1979) writes that talk about poetic meter is "is a way of describing our awareness of those rhythmical patterns in poetic language which can be measured and formulated . . . . Meter is what results when the natural rhythmical movements of colloquial speech are heightened, organized, and regulated so that pattern—which means repetition—emerges from the relative phonetic haphazard of ordinary utterance. Because it inhabits the physical form of the words themselves, meter is the most fundamental technique of order available to the poet" (pp. 4-5).

<sup>45</sup> Some people's minds respond to trauma by fragmenting, shattering into disjunctive shards of meaning. Recent neuroscience research (Wassiliwizky et al., 2017) has measured neurological responses and physiological markers when participants read poetry. Such markers are unique to poetry and **not** other forms of art such as music. Their neuroimaging results suggest that the act of reading poetry effects the human brain and body and serves as a means of activating neural circuitry, potentially creating new connective synapses.

through the ranks are not ones that Whitman experienced first-hand, but rather ones he heard second-hand from a soldier Whitman had visited in a hospital. He experienced this material first as an audience hearing it before he was an artist shaping it. Whitman seems to assume that the material will work on others as it did on him. The experience he heard as another man described it becomes internalized (and thus his own) and transforms into that eerie, cinematic, empathic vision Whitman is known for. When attuned to the soldiers' nuances of language and metaphor expressing spiritual experiences and their meanings, Whitman enters conversations that are difficult to have. Hospital chaplains can learn a deeper attentiveness from Whitman's approach.

As we will see in the Chapter 6, in a faith community dealing with tragic loss, the act of reading elegies shapes the community as it develops language together, improvising in the moment, deepening anguish, and thus making it possible to endure pain by witnessing and sharing it with others, instead of foreclosing on their laments. Thus, close readings of elegies are examples of poetics of testimony, which can bring together communities of support.

Now that one is familiar with some basic, formal elements of poetry and poetry's aptness for spiritual care conversations, one can proceed to the specialized field of contemporary elegies within/against its literary criticism and theory. The next chapter will attend to this task by first relaying the brief history of the elegy, then locating poet and critic R. Clifton Spargo in and against the field of the poetic elegy, and then moving on in Chapter 6 to the central research question: What can practical theologians learn from reading contemporary elegies?

## Chapter 4

### Sustaining Lamentation through the Contemporary North American Poetic Elegy

*The modern elegy at its best is not a timeless sanctuary, immune to historical change; rather its rough and ravaged contours indicate the social realities it must withstand.*

Jahan Ramazani, 1994, p. 14

#### Introduction

What can intercultural spiritual caregivers learn from the contemporary elegy that would teach us how to sustain lamentation (attend to traumatic grief without foreclosing on ongoing mourning)? This chapter presents findings concerning the themes of the contemporary elegy that would be suited to respond to traumatic grief in more particularist ways than the psychological research discussed in Chapter 2 indicates. As the psychologist and researcher John Archer claims, “poetry is perhaps the ideal medium for expressing the emotions of grief [in that] it ‘opens a window into our emotions and struggles’ and enables the deepest, most painful experiences to find expression” (Archer, 1999, p. 36). Chapter 3 paid attention to some basic, formal features of poems in order to have a working knowledge of how poems differ from prose. I showed the potential for poetry to help chaplains engage in collaborative conversations and suggested that close readings of poems could be a practice for radical, ethical listening.

In the context of hospital chaplaincy, the discussing of poems in a collaborative conversation invites a *common place* (Grossman, 1992, p. 84) to mourn and develops

cultural sensitivity to larger scenes of traumatic losses, persecution, and oppression that shape social, political, and theological identities. Drawing upon John Ciardi's (1975) work, I showed that precisely because of the inseparability of what a poem is and how a poem is, poetry is uniquely poised to both reflect on experience and simultaneously to perform an experience.

At this juncture, the reader has both a basic vocabulary for naming some of the formal features of poetry and a working knowledge of what makes poetry distinct from prose. In terms of practical theological method, this chapter builds on that knowledge and establishes a more critical context within which I will place my argument about contemporary elegies as a way of setting up the close readings that will follow. I argue that contemporary elegies, as examples of the "poetics of testimony" (Chopp, 2001, p. 61) engage bear witness to the complex dimensions of traumatic grief in liberative ways that do not foreclose on real difference, but sustain lamentation in intercultural spiritual care of persons and communities.

This chapter begins with establishing a basic descriptive history of the western elegy. Then I will introduce literary critic R. Clifton Spargo (2004) and four key elements from his work while locating him in the field of scholarship, criticism, and theory concerning the poetic elegy in which his work participates. In the final chapter I amplify one of Spargo's four key elements—the reconfiguration of social norms—as a cornerstone of the project's contribution: constructing sustaining lamentation as a method of intercultural bereavement care and as a practice of theopoethics. This chapter sets the groundwork for the following chapter where I investigate themes and insights from



elegiac poetry and discuss Akilah Oliver's (2009) *A Toast in the House of Friends*; Rebecca Lindenberg's (2012) *Love, an Index*, David Ferry's (2012); *Bewilderment*, Anne Carson's (2010) *Nox*; and Benjamin Alire Sáenz's (2010) *The Book of What Remains*.

One of my top priorities in this body of work is to introduce contemporary elegies to the fields of hospital chaplaincy, practical theology, and the psychology of religion. I want practical theologians to experience poetry within its field of poetic studies, a field which has received plenty of critical scholarship and theoretical discussion over the centuries. Following the heart (Chapters 3, 4, and 5) of the dissertation, Chapter 6 will demonstrate a composite vignette from my work in 2016 as a hospital chaplain and illustrate how poetry sustains lamentation without foreclosing on mourners' grief. The act of reading poetry attunes spiritual caregivers to listen more closely in collaborative conversations in hospital settings where chaplains can get "caught in the biopolitical trajectory of modern healthcare that relies on narratives of progress, commodification, and treatment to the omission of the experience of loss and death" (Coble, 2018, p. 13). I turn now to introduce a brief history of the poetic elegy as a field in possession of serious scholarship.

### **A Brief History of the Poetic Elegy**

From the OED, we learn that the word "elegy" comes to us from the Greek language from the word *elegos*: "a plaintive melody accompanied by a flute." It is still debated today how this word evolved to become a reflection on death. In the strict sense, *elegos* was not an elegy, but merely a form of presentation. In the Western tradition, the recognizable written elegy dates back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Our Greek fathers,

Archilochus, Tyrtaeus, and Mimnermus used the form often. To understand the rise and quick dissemination of the elegiac form, it has to be understood that in Greek and Roman poetry, the elegy had a strict basis in metrics. Meter,<sup>46</sup> as briefly mentioned in Chapter 3, is a rhythmical pattern in language, based on varying stressed and unstressed syllables. Simply, elegiac verse was written in couplets (two lines) consisting of a hexameter line (a pattern of six long and short syllables), followed by a pentameter line (a pattern of five long and short syllables).

The first elegiac verses were usually based in the confines of war. But unlike the epic poem recounting of the acts of war, elegiac verse took upon itself the contemplative aspects of war, the reasons behind war, and the results of war. These early poems took as their subject the loss of the great men of war. In Western literature the elegy became the mother of the lyric poem. It is within its lines that poetry began to express the spirit, the human condition, seen not through the recounting of exploits in warfare (common in epic poetry) but in the arena of meditation.<sup>47</sup>

By the arrival of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the elegy—having been adopted by the Greek and Romans—was written primarily by the English and was eventually “passed on via Spenser and Milton to the English-speaking whites of subsequent periods” (Ramazani, 1994, p. 135). Peter Sacks’s (1985) landmark work, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, identifies the elegy’s conventions as:

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<sup>46</sup> For further discussion of the history of meter and its relationship to meaning, see poet Annie Finch’s (2000) chapter “Meter, Meaning, and the Metrical Code” in *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse*, pp. 3-12.

<sup>47</sup> For further discussion of the history of the Greek and Roman origins of elegy and the historical absence of women in elegies, see the *Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* (Weisman, 2010, pp. 13-135 and 433-496).

traditional pastoral contextualization, the myth of the vegetation deity, the use of repetition and refrains, the use of reiterated questions, the outbreak of vengeful anger or cursing, the procession of mourners, the movement from grief to consolation, and the traditional images of resurrection (p. 2).

The elegy began evolving into a reflective poem of lamentation or regret with no metrical construct whatsoever. The strict alternating pattern of the hexameter line with the pentameter line was gone. The elegy proper had by then become a vehicle for a melancholy tone often used to express death and the incomprehensible nature of loss. As professor and scholar in the field of the elegy, W. Scott Howard (2017) writes: “Elegiac texts conventionally ground the telos of consolation on a sacred locus of transcendent signification beyond the representational limits of literary art” (Howard, 2017, p. 316). Indeed, the traditional funeral elegy, Lorna Clymer, professor of English at California State University, writes, “held fast to three concerns: lament, praise, and consolation.” (Clymer, 2010, p. 170). Furthermore, just as the Greeks wrote poems commemorating their heroes, “authors supportive of a Calvinist-Protestantism may have been additionally eager to include in a funeral elegy the dynamics of a deathbed experience as evidence for the deceased’s likely election as a saint” (2010, p.173).

As a result of changes in beliefs and practices in Christian traditions, by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century fewer poets were choosing the traditional funeral elegy’s three-part structure to explore mourning and its resolution. In her book, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy*, feminist critic Melissa F. Zeiger (1997) describes the elegy’s turn from religion. “The modernist crisis in poetry,” she writes, “is particularly strongly marked in elegy through the failure of religious belief and consolation, hence of redemptive elegiac narrative and poetic closure” (p. 14). Building

on Zeiger's work, W. Scott Howard (2006a) insists that "the poetic elegy becomes particularly attuned to emerging, secular, and individualized notions about and experiences of temporality" (p. 1139). Howard (2017) points out:

While elegiac resistance (since the works of Bion and Moschus, Theocritus and Virgil) has always been integral to the genre's rhetorical structure, the increasingly linguistic and temporal nature of that resistance engaged as an intertextual, antithetical form of solace occurs as a direct consequence of *secularizing forces* in early modern culture. (p. 317, emphasis added)

By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the elegy had already established itself as the primary means a poet mourns one absent person or humanity in general. We encounter Percy Shelly's "Adonias" and Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed," a poem not surprisingly based in politics and the lingering impacts of war. Also, of note: Matthew Arnold's "Thyrsis." Although the elegy as a form had already become the standard bearer of sorrow, remorse, and a desire to memorialize someone, the one memorialized is almost always a man of stature. Shelly elegizes John Keats, Whitman elegizes Abraham Lincoln, Arnold elegizes Arthur Hugh Clough, a fellow 19<sup>th</sup> century poet.

In many ways the one recognizable theme linking the English elegies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the elegies of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE is the need to memorialize a great man. Whereas the common Anglo person's difficulties were the subject of conversations and journal entries. With few exceptions, they were not deemed in any sense of the word important or great enough to be printed.

If there has been a democratization of the elegy in terms of subject matter relating to common people, certainly there has also been a very marked shift in terms of gender

seen most clearly in the late twentieth-century elegy. Poet-critic Alicia S. Ostriker's (1986) book, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, spends a great deal of time detailing the evolution of women's poetry from Anne Bradstreet to poets Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath. The early parts of the book discuss the facts that even in the seventeenth century, most women and their concerns were considered too commonplace, too much in opposition to the world of letters.<sup>48</sup> Ostriker's work serves well in helping to understand the reasons behind the lack of women portrayed in elegies prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As the late poet Carolyn Kizer (2002) writes, women "are the custodians of the world's best-kept secret: / Merely the private lives of one-half of humanity" (p. 116). Ostriker's work shapes the hermeneutics for Melissa F. Zeiger's (1997) work that reads with a feminist consciousness on the elegy. As the elegy became not just a construct in which to mourn great men, but one in which one could mourn humanity and its losses, gradually have white women become subjects of the elegy.

Juliana Schiesari's work examines the relationship between melancholia and artistic brilliance as a privileged male domain. Schiesari (1992) argues that alongside the elevation of the male melancholic artist exists the devaluation of the traditionally feminine collective practices of mourning.<sup>49</sup> Here, I would be remiss not to mention

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<sup>48</sup> For exceptions see University of Denver professor of English W. Scott Howard's (2014, 2017), work on Katherine Philips, a 17<sup>th</sup> century woman elegist and his work on An Collins, also a 17<sup>th</sup> century woman elegist.

<sup>49</sup> In ancient Greek culture (ca. 800-200 BCE), laments were part of elaborate rituals for the dead and usually performed by women. As in ancient Greek culture, mourning in the Hebrew Bible was a communal activity led by wailing women. For example, in the Book of Jeremiah, wailing women are called to lead the people in expression of grief in response to the destruction of Zion. Associate Professor of Old

Associate professor at Wilfrid Laurier University, Tanis MacDonald (2012) whose work establishes the feminist elegy as a “designed artifact of mourning” rather than “a container for the spontaneous outpouring of female grief” (p. 12). The elegy can seek a form of commemoration that does not relegate a woman to silence, madness, or sentimentality but grants her subjectivity beyond patriarchy.

**Glimpses of another history: Origins of the English language elegy.**

*This tale is true, and mine. It tells  
How the sea took me, swept me back  
And forth in sorrow and fear and pain,  
Showed me suffering in a hundred ships,  
In a thousand ports, and in me. It tells  
Of smashing surf when I sweated in the cold  
Of an anxious watch, perched in the bow  
As it dashed under cliffs . . .*

—“The Seafarer,” trans. Burton Raffel (1998), p. 10-11

Within the English tradition some of the earliest elegies are found in one of four preserved texts of Anglo-Saxon Literature, *The Exeter Book*, originally written in Old English, coming to us from more than a thousand years ago. *The Exeter Book* is a compendium of anonymous poetry (including eight elegies), and riddles compiled or possibly composed around the tenth century and given to the Exeter Cathedral in the eleventh century.

Reading American poet Burton Raffel’s (1998) translations of these poems into modern English, we may feel as though we are glimpsing another history. The survival

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Testament at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, L. Juliana M. Claassens (2012), writes: “The role of the wailing woman constituted a professional trade that required training. . . . On the appropriate occasion (a funeral or a national tragedy like the one that form the backdrop of Jeremiah 9), wailing women not only had to be able to draw on the reservoir of laments handed down through the generations, but they also had to adapt these laments to suit the particular needs of the current situation” (p. 27).

of human beings and their human thought in the English language is a knowledge and wisdom we can learn from. Referring to the Anglo-Saxon elegies, poet Edward Hirsch (2014) writes:

The definition of the elegy as a serious reflection on a serious subject applies to the so-called Anglo-Saxon elegies, some of the earliest poems in the English tradition, such as “The Wanderer” (tenth century) and “The Seafarer” (tenth century), which are poems of great personal deprivation shading off into meditations on mutability and petitions for guidance and consolation. (p. 198)

More than a petition for guidance and consolation, I find these elegies to contain a mixture of darkness and wonder, an awareness of life’s fragility, and a sense of acute observation in the world. When read in the context of the other poems and riddles in the book, the elegies express the reflection that everything human is susceptible to destruction, but also there exists a kind of wit that mitigates the hardships.

“The Seafarer” (the first eight lines mentioned above) is one of eight elegies in *The Exeter Book*. Even in Raffel’s translation one can sense its four-beat line, (typical of Anglo-saxon poetry), the physicality of the consonants, and the stark compact lines—all of which give the poem its form. The poem begins with “This story is true and mine.” It is a declaration found in several other of the eight elegies and sets an elegiac tone where authority is earned by experience and witness. The lonely voice sets its own suffering in a larger world of communal grief. It’s as if the speaker’s exile could only exist in contrast to remembered kinship and safety. The story “Showed me suffering on a hundred ships / In a thousand ports and in me,” the poet writes. The somber lines amplify the lonely voice. The poem’s form echoes the speaker’s wretchedness of exile. It’s hard not to shudder.

There exist too few Anglo-Saxon written elegies to have significantly influenced the history and substance of the English elegy. Instead, as I have indicated in this chapter, the abundant literature of Greece and Rome has been the major influence on the English elegy as it entered our cultural imagination and the ways we lament.

In this dissertation, I point out the Anglo-Saxon elegies because it's important to know the origin of the earliest elegies, the first ones written in the English language and how people survived. In Chapter 5, I discuss the significance of literary origins (or the lack of them) on culture. For a brief example, many African-Americans cannot trace their own origins or literary origins beyond a few generations. African American elegiac writing holds its origins in the tradition of slave autobiographies.

Of the slave-narrative authors, Toni Morrison (2008) observes that “there was no mention of their interior life” because the authors veiled their experiences in fear of offending the white audience with “proceedings too terrible to relate” (p. 70). As a writer, Morrison’s task becomes “moving that veil aside” (2008, p. 71). Describing this dreadful history’s impact on herself as a writer, she continues, “we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic. . . . Memories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me” (pp. 70-71).

The point here is that the origins of the poetic elegy (whether Anglo-, African-, Native-, Asian-American, etc.) make claims on the practice of intercultural spiritual care because the origins of the poetic elegy testify to people’s particular lived experience of



loss and suffering, which shapes how they lament. As Professor of English at Emory University, Walter Kalaidjian (2009) writes:

What is properly an unspeakable or ‘buried’ trauma in the ancestor, no matter how distant, appears like a ghost haunting the symptomatic actions, phobias . . . of the decedent . . . . In the poetry of witness we encounter the phantom as the emanation of an *impossible mourning* where the traumatic loss of others cannot be assimilated or worked through in sanctioned rites of social commemoration. (p. 396, emphasis added)

The dominant culture, being able to trace their literary traditions of mourning back thousands of years, would then complicate underrepresented cultural memory and identity because the dominant culture often dismisses “impossible mourning” as being irrelevant. I argue that the dominant culture needs to sustain lamentation for “impossible mourning.” In a later chapter I will show that contemporary elegies can address “impossible mourning” when used in public memorials.

As this brief history of the elegy has shown, the literature of Greece and Rome and their myths, epics, tragedies, histories, and treatises have become part of the dominant narrative and consciousness, shaping our minds, anchoring our thoughts about grief and loss. Scholars have attempted to define the elegy’s original Greco-Roman conventions so that we can better understand how elegies conform to, dismiss, or borrow in part from the tradition’s standards, but I argue it is also crucial to consider the origins of the English poetic elegy, because the words of sorrow rooted in the Anglo-Saxon language influence the way the dominant culture thinks and mourns.

It is out of this dissertation’s scope to continue exploring the influences of Anglo-Saxon words of sorrow on contemporary mourning practices, but the acknowledgment is one of significance to this dissertation. Against such an historical backdrop it would help

to situate the complex socio-political dimensions of critical and theoretical discourse of the field of the poetic elegy in/against its wider concerns and ethical potentials by acknowledging one critic in particular within and against the complex dimensions of critical and theoretical discourse in this field of study. In particular, one thinker, R. Clifton Spargo (2004), offers a conceptual schema that illuminates the elegy's shift from a psychological modality toward ethical responsibility in an especially credible way that is most relevant to this dissertation.

### **R. Clifton Spargo and Other Critical Theorists in the Field of the Poetic Elegy**

In this section, I argue that contemporary elegies attend to the mechanisms of power by which mourners are rendered invisible or denied legitimacy and provide the potential to contribute to the empowerment and healing for the mourner. I mention the work of R. Clifton Spargo (2004) to establish more of a critical context within which I will place my argument about contemporary elegies as a way of setting up the close readings of the poems that follow in Chapter 5. I acknowledge the complex dimensions of critical and theoretical discourse in the field of the poetic elegy by placing Spargo's work within and against the field of other critical theorists in order *not* to give Spargo too much authority to dominate the dissertation's narrative. Like a number of other critics and scholars of the genre of the poetic elegy whom I will engage shortly, Spargo challenges understandings of elegiac writing as ways toward resolution of grief and the memorializing of the dead.

Certainly, I am not the first person to write about contemporary elegies bearing witness to the complex dimensions of grief in ways that do not foreclose on another's

alterity. Literary critic and former Pearl Resnick Fellow at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, R. Clifton Spargo (2004) examines literary elegiac concepts and figures in his book *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature*. He explicates unresolved mourning through literary figures such as Antigone and Hamlet and in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Thomas Hardy, Randall Jarrell, and Sylvia Plath among others. He suggests that through unresolved mourning, cultural modes of memory would preserve the alterity of the other and offer a way to take responsibility in the presence of the other's suffering.

**Four key elements from Spargo's work on unresolved mourning.** To frame the crux of the dissertation's argument and from Spargo's work on unresolved mourning, I will amplify the following four key elements: 1) An end to consolation or resistance to closure; 2) An ethical crux to mourning; 3) Reconfiguration of social norms; and 4) Temporality of mourning. In this section, I will set these four elements in the field of scholarship concerning the poetic elegy.

*An end to consolation or resistance to closure.* In Chapter 2, I discussed the Freudian concept of grief, as it has evolved over time. From Freud's early viewpoint, severing oneself from a lost object and then reattaching oneself to a new object outweighs the potential good of prolonged attachment to the deceased. Furthermore, when grief is "extended beyond a certain culturally determined timeframe," the expression of mourning is viewed as pathological and in need of therapeutic intervention (Spargo, 2004, p. 20).

In placing mourners on a therapeutic track toward the resolution of grief, well-meaning therapists and spiritual care providers may mask the reality of the mourner's experience of loss and conceal the injustice done to the deceased other. In other words, in the efforts to follow the Freudian model of mourning toward the resolution of grief, the self has no implication in the death of the other and is recused from its responsibility toward the living.

In deconstructing a Freudian view of mourning, Spargo (2004) asks a significant question of psychoanalysis: "How are we to know when the acceptance of death, which necessarily means relinquishing the other to death, might also mean tolerating unjust deaths and those who perpetrate them?" (p. 20). The impact, according to Spargo, conspires with "a cultural ideology that increases the practice and use of death as a weapon . . ." (p. 20) and makes prevalent "our larger cultural preference for utilitarian relationship" (p. 21). The act of disconnecting oneself from the dead seems to bankrupt human responsibility for the living.

Spargo's deconstruction of a Freudian view of mourning—that is, rejecting received paradigms of mourning as a process of relinquishing one's attachment to the deceased—is not new to the field of the poetic elegy. Many other scholars in the field also point to the resistance to consolation by naming it as "a refusal to grieve" (Eng, 2000) or "anti-elegy" (Spargo, 2010) or "resistance to closure" (Hejinian, 2000) all of which reject Freud's concept of mourning as being "work [that] has been accomplished [when] the ego will have succeeded in freeing its libido from the lost object" (Freud,

1917/1957, p. 252). Before the twenty-first century, most critics shared this basic expectation set out by Freud in his famous 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.”

Scholars such as Peter Sacks (1985) expected the elegy, to console or cure the mourner of “pathological mourning” (Freud, 1917/1957, p. 250) from melancholia produced by grief. In Sacks’s (1985) work, the act of writing after loss is inextricably linked to Freud’s (1917/1957) grieving process described in “Mourning and Melancholia.” Sacks (1985) opens his foundational study, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, with a definition of elegy as “work . . . in the . . . dynamic sense of the *working through* of an impulse or experience—the sense that underlies Freud’s phrase ‘*the work of mourning*’” (p. 1, emphasis added). W. David Shaw (1994), professor emeritus of English at the University of Toronto, grounds his work in Sacks’s notion that “many elegies perform a psychological function—what Freud calls ‘the work of mourning’” (p. 181). Like many scholars of the poetic genre of the elegy before him, Jahan Ramazani (1994) derives his understanding of what the “work of mourning” is from Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia.”<sup>50</sup>

However, Ramazani’s (1994) landmark work, *In Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, suggests that the powerful emotions evoked in the elegy should not be quickly overcome with consolation and acceptance. Ramazani contributes to the field of the poetic elegy by contextualizing the modern elegy in the cataclysmic world events marking the last decades of the nineteenth and the turn to the

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<sup>50</sup> Even though Ramazani (1994) frames the modern elegy in terms of resistance to consolation at the end of Freud’s mourning, an argument could be made that Ramazani himself assumes that normative mourning is mourning that yields to the complete consolation Freud proposes.

twentieth, especially World War I. He argues that resisting consolation is a fundamental aspect of the twentieth century elegy because the modern world of “genocide and technological war, ecocide and mass starvation . . . have helped to make poetic salves for even personal loss seem easy, suspect, sometimes dishonest” (p. 226). Ramazani (1994) concludes that Sacks’s (1985) model is not adequate for understanding the catastrophes and unimaginable loss of life—both global and personal—of the modern world. Ramazani suggests that poetic responses to death “cannot afford to be simply compensatory, lest the elegy become ideological pap—a repository of sentimental palliatives” (p. 226). Therefore, the modern elegy disowns the “propensity of the [elegiac] genre to translate grief into consolation” (Ramazani, p. 3).

Along the lines of contextualizing the elegy in historical events, feminist literary critic and poet Sandra Gilbert (1999) remarks on T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” as a poem that permanently subverts the traditional consolations of pastoral elegy. Referring to World War I, she writes, “The war tore such a gaping hole in history that the generic form as well as the consolatory function of pastoral elegy was permanently contaminated for combatants and non-combatants alike” (p. 184). Another scholar in the field of the poetic elegy, Patricia Rae (2003) writes, “The recurrence of war has made a mockery of familiar consolations, destroying the very resources for which it has also produced” (p. 262). Four years later, Rae (2007) introduces *Modernism and Mourning* with an expansion within and against Ramazani’s reading of Freud alongside her term “resistant mourning,” that is, the rejection of “narratives and tropes that would bring grief through to catharsis” (Rae, 2007, p. 22).

Building on Ramazani's (2004), Rae's (2003), and S. Gilbert's (1999) work, among others' projects,<sup>51</sup> Spargo (2004) defines his concept of unresolved mourning as mourning that "resists cultural and psychological narratives of resolution" (p. 13). For Spargo, unresolved mourning, that is mourners' refusal to relent their grief, would signify a movement toward ethics and ethical responsibility. Spargo (2004) continues: "Embedded in mourning is a requirement to interrogate our cultural expressions of grief and to be on guard against the movement toward consolation—as a matter not just of time, but of ethical disposition" (p. 37). Spargo's discussion of an ethics of mourning supports a critique of spiritual care practices and psychotherapeutic theories which hold unresolved mourning as a pathology.

*An ethical crux to mourning.* The second element I amplify from Spargo's (2004) work comes out of his deconstruction of elegiac literature drawn from the work of Immanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, and Bernard Williams. Spargo argues "there is an ethical crux to all mourning, according to which the injustice potentially perpetrated by the mourner against the dead as a failure of memory stands for the injustice that may be done to the living at any given moment" (2004, p. 4).

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<sup>51</sup> For example, William Watkin's (2004) "post-elegy theory of literature" is rooted in post-humanist theorists' work by Julia Kristeva, Melanie Klein and John Bowlby. His theory asks one to imagine loss both as a "dialectic scene between subject and object" (p. 177), as Freud does, and also as a change in an entire environment: it is something that "happens dynamically between subjects, other subjects, lost object and present objects in a living, metonymic environment of proximity and distance" (p. 177). Reconceiving loss enables us to understand the mourner as one with relationships to his or her whole environment. This is very similar to pastoral theologian Larry K. Graham's (1992) concept of psychosystems in his book, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds: A Psychosystems view of Pastoral Care*. He defines a psychosystemic matrix as the "totality of the network of actual entities, persons, families, societies, cultures, nature, and God as these are contextually organized consciously and unconsciously by contending values, bi-polar power arrangements, reciprocal transactions, and creative potentialities" (p. 262).

Other critics of the poetic elegy bring to the task their own ethics of loss. For example, William Watkin (2004), a contemporary of Spargo, also argues for the mourner to begin “to take full responsibility for the other person before s/he considers them in relation to her/himself” (p. 19). “Ethics” recognizes injustice and remembers the dead adequately as Watkin argues in his readings of contemporary poets such as Rachel Blau duPlessis and the late John Ashbery. Unlike Watkin, Spargo critiques moralistic understandings of ethical responsibility and instead emphasizes ethics in a relational framework, that is, in terms of the self’s encounter with the other. In defining ethics, Spargo (2004) asserts:

Most basically, I use *ethics* to denote the primordial facticity of the other. This is to invert our ordinary expectation about ethics as a language of obligation (the realm of *ought*) into a claim about a relation that is always already and necessarily in place. By this emphasis, ethics is not the study of imperatives through which we privilege relationship or some aspects of relationship; rather, it is the inevitable and persistent fact of finding oneself in relation to the other. (p. 7)

Spargo (2004) draws mostly from Levinas, Williams, and Ricoeur when asserting a post-modern distinction between ethics and morality:

I employ the term *moral* (or *morality*) most often when referring to the conventions, regulations, or parameters of knowledge that determine behavior, and I use the term *ethics* to refer to more basic structures of relationship as well as to the critique that motivates and conditions “all” moral knowledge. (p. 8)

For Spargo, a mourner’s refusal to relent her grief signifies a movement toward ethics and ethical responsibility.

***Reconfiguration of social norms.*** Having established the relationship between ethics and mourning, Spargo (2004) asserts a third element of unresolved mourning.

When mourning sides with the impossible, it demands an ethical reconfiguration of



deeply held social norms (p. 5). In his analysis of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Spargo (2004) argues, "almost every literary work of mourning develops a dialectic between those who are outside (those, for example, who have mourned inadequately) and the mourner who is truly dedicated to the memory of the other she laments" (p. 5).

In mourning, Antigone's solidarity with her dead brother stands as a "dissenting act" against the political system upheld by Creon who refuses to give her brother a proper burial. (Spargo, 2004, p. 6). Spargo contends that the elegiac literary tradition has been characterized by an attitude of resistance to cultural models of mourning that emphasize resolution and incorporation of the dead into a cultural memory that absorbs the alterity of the other.

At the intersection of unresolved mourning and ethics, Spargo contends that if acts of mourning were to treat each death as an injustice, these cultural practices would expose our cultural tendency "to conflate morally and socially normative attitudes about death with the philosophical acceptance of injustice" (p. 9). The mourner's impulse to see injustice as being inherent in each death would protect the vulnerability and the alterity of the other and would reconfigure social norms. Other critics and scholars in the field of the poetic elegy have, in various ways, underscored this critical intersection of ethics, inconsolable mourning, the resistance to consolation and elegies as powerful responses of ongoing grief, social protest, and discovering cultural origins.

African American writers and critics have often taken the lead in pushing concerns at the intersection of cultural memory, ethics, and origins. In an expression of unresolved mourning, Toni Morrison (2008), writes that "memories and recollections

won't give . . . . total access to the unwritten interior life of those people [African American forebearers]" (p. 71). Morrison employs imagination and encourages others to recognize the fragmented and fractured nature of collective memory. Spargo (2004) might view Morrison's encounter with the vulnerability of the other as "a belated protection of the dead" (p. 6) and as an act of dissent insists on "the other's uncancellable and unassimilable value" (p. 13). Spargo asserts that it is the unresolved nature of mourning that makes it a dissenting act with "irremissible" ethical meaning and a concern for injustice done to the one being mourned (Spargo, 2004, p. 6).

Morrison's attempts to give voice to unmourned, unjust deaths reconnect lost ancestors to the present so that the living have an ethical responsibility to one another. Morrison (2008) continues, "In literary archaeology, on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork, you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" (p. 71).

Spargo might view Morrison's literary archaeology as an act of unresolved mourning honoring the other's vulnerability in the presence of the helplessness of the other for whom she can no longer provide tangible protection from harm.

Another scholar who underscores this critical intersection of ethics, inconsolable mourning, and a reconfiguration of social norms is poet, human rights activist, and professor Carolyn Forché and her well known works, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (1993) and *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English* (2014). Both edited volumes present culturally diverse poets— within and beyond English-speaking countries—who have written under extreme conditions, such as

war, exile, and imprisonment. Forché is known for creating the term “poetry of witness” and “poet of witness,” which might seem to refer to the personhood of the poet testifying through his/her writings what he/she had experienced. Forché (2014) defines the poetry of witness as “a mode of reading rather than writing, of readerly encounter with the literature of that-which-happened, and its mode is evidentiary rather than representational—as evidentiary, in fact, as spilled blood” (p. 21). Building on Forché’s definition, I suggest that reading elegies in a spiritual care context that engages in collaborative conversation has the potential to reconfigure and revise social norms by creating some of the conditions necessary for beneficial change.

Forché’s push to recognize injustice through resolved mourning and her focus on maintaining a memory of the dead without perpetrating injustice itself are what align her concerns with Spargo’s. Like Spargo, Forché engages Levinasian ethics. She writes:

Witness, then, is neither martyrdom nor the saying of a judicial truth, but the owning of one’s infinite responsibility for the *other one (l’autri)* . . . it is necessary to move beyond both place and ourselves under and before the other in an ethical relation that precedes ontology (Levinas), an understanding that humans come into being through relation. (2014, p. 26)

In a later work Spargo expands this notion as he draws on Levinas and insists that “if the suffering of the other is to be understood ethically . . . it must remain absolute in its uselessness, calling us to responsibility for the other’s suffering *without finding ways to make it meaningful*” (Spargo, 2006, p. 251, emphasis added). Spargo emphasizes that the suffering of another cannot be justified. Any attempt to understand the suffering of the Other through rational explanation constitutes a flight from responsibility. In Spargo’s view, the exploration of the relation between useless suffering and ethical

remembrance enables the immemorial command of Holocaust memory to gain even greater urgency: We must understand it as forbidding the hearer to appropriate the suffering of the Other for his or her self. Thus, the act of resisting the meaning-making enterprise becomes part of ethical memory.

***Temporality of mourning.*** The fourth element I wish to draw from Spargo’s work is the “temporality of mourning” (Spargo, 2004, p. 77), which occurs when a witness confronts the loss of another. Throughout *The Ethics of Mourning*, Spargo seems to be invested in another kind of time—when the mourner grieves time itself. Spargo (2004) writes briefly about this in his section discussing Hamlet (pp. 76-80). This time seems to include the mourning of a yearned for time-ness that once offered comfort and stability. The idea that trauma can change the structure of temporality is commonplace. Freud (1895/ 1975) famously articulated the problem of time with the notion of “Nachträglichkeit” or belatedness (sometimes translated as afterwardness) as first introduced in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. More recently, in his chapter “Trauma and Temporality,” psychologist Robert Stolorow (2015) writes,

in the region of trauma all duration or stretching along collapses, past becomes present, and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition . . . . A traumatized person may live in an experiential world incommensurable with those of others . . . . Torn from the communal fabric of being-in-time, trauma remains insulated from human dialogue. (p. 20)

Professor of psychology Ronnie Janoff-Bulmann’s focus on shattered assumptions in trauma has been extremely influential in describing the impact of trauma, and is another helpful entrée into notions about temporality. In her seminal work,

*Shattered Assumptions*, Janoff-Bulman (2002) describes the concept of the assumptive world as:

a conceptual system, developed over time, that provides us with the expectations about the world and ourselves . . . a set of assumptions or internal representations that reflect and guide our interactions in the world and generally enable us to function effectively. (p. 5)

Building on Janoff-Bulman's work, psychotherapist Jeffrey Kauffman (2002) in *Loss of the Assumptive World*, states "the assumptive world concept refers to the assumptions or beliefs that ground, secure, or orient people, that give a sense of reality, meaning, or purpose to life" (Kauffman, 2002, p. 1). My point here is that Spargo, although he doesn't phrase it in this way, seems to be on the verge of theorizing the temporality of mourning to invoke the loss of *assumptive* time. What Spargo seems to be saying in his considerations of unresolved mourning—through figures such as Antigone and Hamlet and in the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath—is that part of literature's value lies in its potential to represent the *assumptive* time of the loss of a loved one in a way that straightforward, journalistic accounts fail to do.

Furthermore, according to Rebecca Chopp (2001), the poetic of testimony's concern is also with "renam[ing] and reconfigur[ing] the real against the representations of dominant discourses" (p. 61). Literature can move the reader (as a witness) because it resists the imposition of linear time, especially in those moments that arrive too soon to be processed in a neat and linear fashion that cultural codes prescribe.

In Spargo's book, I wish for a more explicit theorization between the intersection of time and mourning. Fortunately, Denver University Professor W. Scott Howard fills in many gaps that Spargo omits, particularly in Howard's contribution of pivotal

arguments for the contemporary elegy as a form of resistance to consolation, traumatic witnessing, and regenerative temporality. According to Howard (2017),

An elegy serves as a vehicle for the transformation of loss into gain, absence into presence, sorrow into solace and also—by logical extension—the past into the wished-for present and/or future. The genre, therefore, is inherently implicated in the philosophy of time. (p. 317)

Drawing upon Ramazani (1994), Lambert (1976), and Sacks (1985) among others' critical work concerning the poetic elegy, Howard advances the body of work of the elegy at the intersection of time and mourning by including concepts such as “historical figuration”<sup>52</sup> (2006a, 2017), “dialectical temporality,” and “contingent temporality.”

Concerning the modern and postmodern elegy, Howard's (2003) work was the first in the field to theorize and to argue for “dialectical temporality” generated from a concept of Arcadia as a “utopian landscape” (2003, p. 54). “Dialectical temporality,” is a mode of how elegiac temporality works in dominant western culture. He theorizes “a negotiation of . . . balance” (p. 54) between time spent in an idealized place (in one's mind) and time spent in the “civilised world.” Howard writes: “Arcadia embodies a dialectical experience of our own temporality and necessary erasure from an imagined community where we may wish to remain but cannot” (p. 54).

The argument concerning the resistance to consolation and elegiac temporality is also at work in Howard's (2006b) chapter on Robert Hayden's elegies in *Reading the Middle Generation Anew*. He writes:

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<sup>52</sup> About historical figuration Howard (2006a) writes: “The elegy thus comes to illustrate the individual's most inward apprehension not only of their own spiritual self-reckoning, but of their historical imagination; the genre itself thereby takes on a heightened chronotopic significance and reveals . . . [a poetics and praxis] . . . of temporality particular to the aesthetics of literary discourse” (p. 1133).

While Hayden's elegies address primarily the intractable work of mourning that necessitates varying degrees of resistance against consolation, the poet's modernity, I believe, resides in his predominant concern with articulating solace (however qualified or negated) within and against interpersonal, cultural, and historical contexts rather than with positing any firm belief that loss may be compensated by the intervention of immutable, transcendent values. A difficult paradox here, though, at the heart of Hayden's life and work, emerges from the productive tension between his personal quest to surpass racial, cultural and social differences and his artistic commitment to remaining engaged, through his work's crafted autonomy, with the specific conflicts and contexts of human time. (140-141)

"Contingent temporality" is at work in Howard's (2017) article about the poet Katherine Philips's elegies. Howard traces poetics of loss from "teleological transcendence to contingent temporality." Through Philips's elegies, he argues that her elegies preoccupy themselves with earthly concepts such as friendship and politics that resist "transcendent signification" (p. 317). Like the elegiac poets in Howard's work, the poets in Spargo's book refuse consolation. Both critics attempt to move beyond a psychic model of mourning that focuses on the survivor's resolution. Howard's theorization of mourning's time helps to name particular concepts present in the poets' interpretations of the traumatic time-ness of loss.

For Spargo, while "temporality of mourning" and "belatedness" seem to be important elements of the poetic elegy, obligation to the other becomes more important. Spargo insists that we realize how implicated we all are in a traumatic past, and that—despite our own inclinations to the contrary—we can't so quickly or easily forget our responsibility to the millions who have died unjustly.

### **Discussion: Spargo's Four Elements in Relation to Practical /Pastoral Theology and Care**

Through Spargo's four elements, his discussion of an ethics of mourning supports a critique of contemporary psychotherapeutic and spiritual care practices which can view unresolved mourning as a pathology. In the 1950's, the clinical paradigm of pastoral theology and care was greatly influenced by psychology when many theologians drew on the resources, perspectives, and theories of psychology.<sup>53</sup> Even though the clinical paradigm has evolved to paradigms that include post-modernity, interculturality, historical processes of colonialism and economic oppressions, some theologians argue that the clinical paradigm is still enmeshed in today's methods of pastoral theology and care. For example, Larry K. Graham writes, "[the clinical paradigm] is still the default paradigm organizing pastoral theology and care" (2015, p. 174). Psychological and theological theories and practices that seek the resolution of grief without adequately honoring the presence of the dead in our cultural world amount to an ethical failure of cultural forgetting. In Chapter 7, the final chapter, I will give a recent account of this as it manifests in public theology.

This dissertation argues that sustaining lamentation is rooted in caring for an individual, their families *as well as* advocating for a position that attends to the oppressive mechanisms which render many silent and invisible. Pastoral theologians and

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<sup>53</sup> To continue with a very brief history of paradigms in pastoral theology and care . . . human problems were interpreted psychologically, and as theologian John Patton (1993) writes, "the psychological context...[became] recognized as normative" (pp. 39-40). Theologian Archie Smith (1982) that problems became "personal (or private) troubles" eventually "traced to their origins in psychic, biological dysfunction, or family disorganization," or explained as "dysfunction in personal and familial terms" (p. 39). Since the 1970's many new paradigms have evolved, especially ones that emphasize contextual, social, intercultural, and economic networks and their impacts on pastoral theology and care. Since the 1990's theologians have developed resources and theories to address the restructuring of power dynamics in relation to race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and various forms of violence. For an in-depth history of the evolving paradigms in pastoral theology and care, see Lartey (2006), Pattison & Woodward (2000), Patton (1993), and Ramsay (2004).



spiritual care practitioners would do well to take a theoretical rendering of lamentation with ethical elements (such as Spargo's four elements) into significant account. The alternative would be a cultural way of being that could re-inscribe new modes of individualism, leave us unaccountable to those outside our social location and context, and construe God as an ambivalent force solely responsible for cataclysmic events. Being in touch with ours and others' reactions of pain and grief as well as and the impacts of systemic racism, oppressive systems, and their hierarchy of values, would we could move to a clearer awareness of our interconnectedness? Building on Spargo's thought, I argue that an inquiry of our implications in others' deaths could move us toward viewing God as an empowering ally.

Fortunately, pastoral theologian Larry K. Graham's (2006) theory on lamentation aligns with similar concerns. He writes:

Part of lamentation struggles with a search for truthful speech about devastating and unjustified loss. A pastoral-theological interpretation of lament provides the basis for moral outrage, social protest, and for engaging and revising theological interpretations of God and the world. (p. 4)

However, as I explicate, L. Graham's theory in greater detail in the final chapter, I will address the following: it may be that part of L. Graham's theory does not call sufficiently for acknowledgment of the kind of ethical responsibility that Spargo's four elements point to.

### **Last Words: A Modal Shift**

In this dissertation, I have chosen sustaining lamentation to be a modality that provides the practice of intercultural bereavement care. Lamentation offers opportunities of interconnectedness and to engage and revise theological interpretations of God and the

world. While this project's objectives are scholarly analysis and constructing new conceptual frames, this project also speaks on behalf of, and is therefore accountable to, careseekers and their families in a hospital setting.

Not only is religious thought (theory) at the heart of human coping, but also the making and application of practice (ritual) has the potential to generate an emotional continuity of past with present. My job is three-fold: 1) as a scholar, to frame my topic and argument in conversation within and against the field of research; show something of the complexities and epistemologies of that field, and show how my work presents a new perspective within and against that field; 2) as a chaplain, to be concerned with the healing, guiding, sustaining, reconciling, empowering, and liberating methods of spiritual care and counseling that address intercultural care in the context of praxis; and 3) as a person who writes, to talk about the act of reading poetry in an objective way as if one could step outside one's self and know the machine of one's body, whose heart, according to the poet John Keats, is "a horn Book" (2005, p. 291).<sup>54</sup> I will try this impossible task. If the experience of poetry were riding a bike, then the discussion of poetry would be an exploration of balance.

At this juncture, I shift from an argumentative, theoretical, and critical mode to a mode of discovery. The researchers' task now becomes a process of inquiry without a

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<sup>54</sup> In a letter dated 14 February–4 May 1819 to his brother, George, and sister-in-law, Georgiana, poet John Keats writes: "I will call the *world* a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read. I will call the *human heart* the *horn Book* used in that School, and I will call the *Child able to read, the Soul* made from that *school* and its *hornbook*. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! Not merely is the Heart a Hornbook; it is the Mind's Bible, it is the Mind's experience, it is the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity" (Keats, 2005, p. 291, emphasis in original).

predetermined thesis. This assumes “that what is called reality is socially constructed so that people make the meanings that create the world” (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 142).

This project does not privilege one method over the other, rather it seeks to show how multiple methods are necessary as there is no appropriate separation between theory and practice. Without the other, either will perish. “This method . . . characterizes theology as ‘performative knowledge’, that is, a way of knowing that is inseparable from doing. The fundamental assumption here is that theory and practice are inextricably joined” (E. Graham, Walton, & Ward, 2005, p. 170). Under this demand and here on this page, the theoretical work of this dissertation temporarily leaves behind a further in-depth critical engagement within and against perspectives in the fields of the poetic elegy and pastoral theology and care.

In the last chapter I will return to a more analytic, theoretical tone, one that takes up a new term, *theopoethics*. I return to one of Spargo’s elements, Chopp’s poetics of testimony, and L. Graham’s theory of lamentation as three cornerstones in a framework of sustaining lamentation. I hope to move both fields in a new direction as the final chapter addresses the final methodological step (Step 6) where proposals for new lived praxis are made and lived into.

Now, I shift the emphasis away from Spargo, Sacks, Ramazani, Zeiger, and Howard, in order to prioritize a tone of inquiry and exploration. Concerns with poetic genres and modes will still be relevant, but less central. In Chapter 5, I highlight Rebecca Chopp’s poetics of testimony and discuss five poets and their contemporary poetic elegies as examples of the poetics of testimony assisting us in discovering “truthful

speech about devastating and unjustified loss” (L. Graham, 2006, p. 4). After intensifying the poems’ themes and patterns, ones that are significant to bereavement care, I analyze and make sense of them with the help of literary criticism in the field of the poetic elegy, including R. Clifton Spargo (2004).

In Chapter 6, the dissertation will be oriented toward the pragmatic possibilities of real application. In that chapter, rather than emphasizing the literariness of elegy as a genre or mode, I will engage with the poetics of testimony as a praxis of grief expression and mourning practices that are essential for the community I want to reach.

## Chapter 5

### Sustaining Lamentation through Five Contemporary North American Poets

#### Introduction

This chapter illustrates the dissertation's fourth methodological step by discerning and engaging in constructive dialogue with sources of knowledge that are relevant to particular contexts of intercultural spiritual care such as bereavement. Chapters 3 and 4 laid the theoretical groundwork to begin to step outside practical theology and draw upon other resources such as poetic elegies to construct new practices, theological interpretations, and visions for flourishing.

Now, I look for poetic themes within and against the field of the poetic elegy and discern what practical theology might learn from them. I describe contemporary poetic elegies as examples of the poetics of testimony by taking as the central research question: "How is mourning manifested throughout the book?" With this question in mind, certain themes should begin to appear and inform a secondary question: Do the themes use the occasion of loss as an impetus for seeking new ways of staying connected with the deceased? The scope of the chapter limits its discussion to contemporary poems written about loss, broadly defined here as the written elegy (also including the anti-elegy).<sup>55</sup> By

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<sup>55</sup> R. Clifton Spargo (2010) defines the anti-elegy as "not so much a new form of poetry or a break with the tradition of elegy as a tendency within elegiac poetry to resist consolation by setting a contemporary mourner against past cultural and poetical conventions . . ." (p. 415). He goes on to state that "the death registered by the anti-elegiac mourner has provided insight into the injustice on which the world is founded,

“contemporary” I mean that the poetic elegies most central for my study are those that sustain lamentation in order to resist transcendental signification—that is, resisting both the politics of normative mourning and the placement of consolation in a transcendent, a-temporal realm, while advocating a position that includes multiple voices and does not ignore the mechanisms by which many are silenced and rendered invisible. Thereby, through sustained lamentation, poetic elegies would affirm the poem’s gift of contingent temporality (i.e. contemporaneity) that contributes to ongoing cultural mourning and thus constitutes “the historical imagination on both personal and public levels of discourse” (Howard, 2003, p. 67). By “contemporary elegies,” I mean poems written since 1920, ones that channel the modality of lamentation as a dynamic resource for regenerating temporality. After traumatic losses, time matters as we figure out how to live again while sustaining lamentation with complex past losses. In some of the poems below we might discover lamentation as a practice of putting time back together again.

I illustrate the elegies through my own thoughts and others’ literary criticisms. In addition, in order to give the poets in this chapter greater theoretical coherence, I revisit four elements of unresolved mourning that I amplified from R. Clifton Spargo’s (2004) work. Discussed in Chapter 4, the four elements are: 1) An end to consolation or resistance to closure; 2) An ethical crux to mourning; 3) Reconfiguration of social norms; and 4) Temporality of mourning. I end each poet’s section with a paragraph or two about one or two of Spargo’s elements.

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initiating the reader into the rigors (sic) of absence by which we are constituted” (p. 428). Simplifying matters in this dissertation, I do not differentiate between “elegy” and “anti-elegy.” I am using the word elegy to include anti-elegy.

## **Five North American Poets Respond to Personal Loss**

The poets discussed in this chapter are Akilah Oliver, Rebecca Lindenberg, David Ferry, Anne Carson, and Benjamin Alire Saénz. The criteria for selection of the contemporary elegies include: poets who have been born since 1920; North American; white and/or person of color; male/female/gender fluid and whose entire book is about loss. These poems acknowledge an openness to language that allows for ambiguity, complexity, and tension without diminishing mystery.

**Akilah Oliver (2009) in response to her son's negligent death.** Akilah Oliver (1961-2011), born in St. Louis, lived for many years in Boulder, Colorado where she taught at Naropa Institute's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. Known for poetry-performance, in the 1990s she founded the multiracial, feminist group "The Sacred Naked Nature Girls," whose work examines "the social inscription of identity on the bodies of women" (Mullen, 2012, p. 70). Oliver's work illuminates an imagination that drives her to explore loss with eloquence, wisdom, and deep insight. Her books include: *The She Said Dialogues: Flesh Memory* (1999), which received a PEN Beyond Margins award and *A Toast in the House of Friends* (2009) written in response to her son's medically negligent death. Although I will mention her first book, in this chapter I focus on her later book as it is most emblematic of the speaker's painful personal loss and of loss related to her sociological location. The relationship of fragments—from the present, the past, and the distant past—to each other evokes the ways racism and discrimination compound traumatic loss.

Oliver begins *The She Said Dialogues: Flesh Memory* (1999) with a statement of her intention to

investigate the non-linear synapses between desire, memory, and blackness (as both a personal identity and a non-essentialist historical notion), sexuality, and language . . . . The work I've been doing seeks to disrupt [the African American literary/performative] tradition. To play not only with language and form, but with the representational idioms of "blackness," "femaleness," "homogeneity" . . . as a kind of insurgent text within the African American literary tradition. I see the dialogues as part of the emerging outsider tradition in black literature which restates memory and identity in a post-Civil Rights framework. A framework which is multiplicitous . . . . Stretching the dialogue . . . . Making itself up as it goes. (pp. 4-5)

This statement shows her familiarity with innovative and experimental writing practices and sets up the multivocality that has evolved out of the inherited literary origins of "the African American literary tradition" and have entered into her poems. In her book *The Cracks Between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be: Essays and Interviews*, poet Harryette Mullen (2012) writes:

Oliver's work explores the possibilities for freedom, innovation, and critical thinking in the conscious choice of outsider status; in this manner she investigates escape from the sometimes oppressive spaces in which black people have learned to survive to the sanitized spaces of affluence that white privilege affords, a space in which it is possible for a struggling artist to live off the fat of the land. (p. 72)

Here it seems appropriate to discuss briefly the African American literary tradition.

Stretching from the era of American plantation slavery into what many now regard as the Era of Trump, the African American literary and critical literary traditions seem to be characterized by two strivings: 1) the quest to document the African American's experience of life in the United States; and 2) the quest to wrestle that experience and its legacies—often ineffable, unspeakable, unrecognized—into existing works of literature.



What literary conventions and critical innovations have black poets relied upon or created to undertake these strivings?

Black women poets such as Akilah Oliver work within a literary tradition established long before them, one that has only relatively recently allowed black women within its confines. Within this tradition, black women have been, for the most part, ghostly presences as both authors and as figures within works, and when black women characters are present in works, they have traditionally been created solely by others. Largely excluded, and often marginalized or distorted when included, many black women writers find themselves grappling with a literary tradition never intended for them, a tradition that comes to them with many of its exclusions and assumptions still intact. Oliver is not satisfied merely working with language within the continuation of literary tradition; instead she seems to feel the need to closely examine dominant constructs of her origins, and to challenge, if not overturn the still embedded restrictions she has inherited as a writer.

*Inherited literary origins: The body and remembrance.* Early African American writers such as Frederick Douglass spoke out against slavery by writing about the discriminatory and violent practices that black communities dealt with on a daily basis. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845/1997), Douglass's own unease and hesitation about describing and relaying the details of the beating of his Aunt Hester, an enslaved woman, took him into uncharted discursive territory. His interests to abolish slavery demanded that he confront those indescribable events in whatever manner he

could.<sup>56</sup> He narrates both his personal and systemic entanglements of oppression while defending black humanity, but in such a way that made the story “palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it” (Morrison, 2008, p. 65).<sup>57</sup> Implying that the truth of what happened to a black woman’s body cannot be fully disclosed and must be “safely left to conjecture” (Douglass, 1845/1997, p. 15), Douglass’s recount shows the risks that are encountered when trying to protest inhumane actions. As Dr. Tayana Hardin (2012) of the University of Denver writes,

... rooted as it is in a desire for the abolition of slavery, Douglass’s story nonetheless delineates both the gains and costs of writing about slavery, for the story betrays an unsettling intimacy with the pain and violence inflicted upon his aunt. Carving out a discursive space for his story meant impinging upon the discursive space of Aunt Hester’s body and co-opting her pain, thereby enacting a form of discursive violence that, though different from Captain Anthony’s beating in intent, nonetheless subjects her body to his own discursive needs. The achievements made by narrating the singularity of his individual story forcibly pushes Aunt Hester’s story into the background. Even though her heart-rending shrieks testify to the pain that she feels, this pain is nonetheless co-opted through Douglass’ narrative goals, such that her cries no longer register her experience of the infliction of violence, but instead communicate Douglass’ tribulation of knowing finally that he is enslaved; that he, too, is vulnerable to such abuse; that, as a slave, he too is without a discourse of redress or vindication. (Hardin, p. 81)

One could say that a black woman’s body became “an outward projection” of someone else’s agenda in pursuit of larger political interests and social concerns (Hardin, p. 82). While Douglass’s story asks us to consider how a black woman’s body became

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<sup>56</sup> Douglass (1845/1997) recounts the blood, torture, and violent display of the black female body creating what he calls a “most terrible spectacle” (p. 15). In the first chapter of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass shares with readers the “bloody transaction” (p. 15) that introduced him into the system of slavery: his Aunt Hester’s beating by Captain Anthony, the owner of the plantation on which Douglass lived as a young boy.

<sup>57</sup> Other writers who also faced these dilemmas include Harriet Jacobs (1861/ 1987) who wrote, “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself,” first serialized in a newspaper and published as a book in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent and Henry Box Brown (1849/2008), who wrote, “Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself,” among others.

“an outward projection” of someone else’s agenda through the lens of 19<sup>th</sup> century slavery, the poet Akilah Oliver asks us to consider how a black man’s body became “an outward projection” of medical negligence within the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In *A Toast in the House of Friends* (2009), Oliver laments her son, Oluchi Nwadi McDonald (1982-2003) who died in an incident of medical neglect widely covered by the *Los Angeles Times* (Landsberg, 2004). Oliver directs the book’s focus not on the negligent events leading up to her son’s death, but on her life without him and also on a backdrop of relevant social issues and frustrations with capitalist systems.

Illinois State University Professor of English, Kass Fleisher, can help interpret these poems and offer comments as to the breadth of Oliver’s art and the depth of her intellect. Fleisher (2010) writes:

Formally, the poems nod to William Carlos Williams, Black Mountain, Oulipo, the ‘negro spiritual,’ and more; the content strikes at poststructuralism, feminism, and queer theory, with specific hints of Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, John Berger, and Roland Barthes. (p. 17)

Unlike autobiographies that dominated the origins of the African American literary tradition, Oliver writes in the aftermath of the loss of her son but does not narrate his story. A quick internet-search of her son’s name (found on the dedication page) returns a tragic backstory. Her 20-year-old son, Oluchi Nwadi McDonald (1982-2003), a graffiti artist known as LINKS, died in a Los Angeles emergency room after waiting hours without treatment. This incidence of medical neglect has been widely covered by

the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>58</sup> Does the reader's knowing about the way McDonald died affect the way these poems are read? Perhaps, yes—by not writing directly about McDonald's death or the pains of his body, Oliver wards away sensationalism and thus exposes US racism and elitism with powerful understatement. Fleisher writes,

Her choice has been not to tell the story (“i could do that novelistic thing and map the / narrative for you but i can't remember and it was in july or june...”); perhaps she doesn't want us to Google McDonald; perhaps she prefers to render the reader a wanderer, focused not on the story but on what matters about the story. (p. 18)

What matters about the story? Oliver's (2009) 20-page poem “an arriving guard of angels, thusly coming to greet,” begins with an epigraph “i am gasping at hosts” (p.36) followed by a letter written to her departed son. Dated two months and five days after his death, the letter touches upon objects in the house that remind her of him. With devastating simplicity Oliver writes:

. . . that is what I really want. to see you again. to oil your scalp. to hear you walk in the door, say *ma I'm home*. give me a chance to say welcome home son. or when leaving, *don't forget your hat*. what do you wear out there? . . . i'm so sorry for the way you died. (p. 37)

After this direct beginning, Oliver uses language in innovative ways to lament and document her memories that might otherwise record pure abandonment, absence, and loss if restricted to straightforward clarity of the opening letter. The poem continues with short phrases that have no capitalization at the beginning. Some phrases connect to the next one and some of them don't as these phrases recall time lamenting her son:

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<sup>58</sup> Additionally, a Pulitzer Prizewinning series of articles about Drew/King County Hospital from the *Los Angeles Times*, which was in part inspired by Oluchi's story and Akilah's activism, can be found at <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/los-angeles-times-3>.

double face days		murdering days
hyena days	days of last regrets	
haunting days (p. 39)	the days of times	the storied days

Throughout the page the poem's form of short phrases makes the speaker's perspective seem urgent and caught in the immediate flow of memories. The short phrases seem to be fragments of a long history the speaker is trying to get straight. Describing the sense of being decentered, in her essay "The Rejection of Closure," the poet Lyn Hejinian (2000) uses the term "off-balance," whereby "language itself is never in a state of rest. . . . The progress of a line or sentence, or a series of lines or sentences, has spatial properties as well as temporal properties" (Hejinian, 2000, p. 50). The white spaces between the short phrases seem like pauses in the speaker's process of reflecting and we readers seem to be with the speaker passing time.

Usually followed by three syllables, the word "days" gives the poem a strong beat. When the syllabic pattern shifts—in "days of last regrets" and "the days of times"—the word "days" seems offbeat. In other words, when read the passage aloud, the sound of "days" gives us a distorted sense of temporality as though a clock were ticking at odd intervals. Now, we seem to be with the speaker in a different sense of time. In the above lines, I think the sense of being "off-balance" in space is echoed by the offbeat repetition of the word "days" in time. Written across pages from left-margin to right-margin the poem continues with more blank spaces, bold font, italics, repetitions, and slight word changes that build to crescendos:



The words use up the entire page and can be imaginatively seen as a metaphorical gesture of “rose petals” falling all around a blank space of absence. Both bodies seem encountered by the text across the page and held by it as the mother’s body travels with her son’s body “walking in spirit / all the way up there.”

In a dialogue published in *The Brooklyn Rail* between Rachel Levitsky and Ana Paula on the occasion of the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Oliver’s death, Levitsky (2017) says:

After her son died, there was so much grief, the experience of having the body, the body that came to her body, the body that was grieving, and the body that was responding to the world in a certain way. What she experienced after her son died was such a profound loneliness. In a way she was a We and then it was no longer true or it was ruptured, her experience of fluid we-ness with Oluchi. She faced down the enormous responsibility of losing a child, and she was on her own. Maybe that’s where the I came from. (para. 20)

A social commentary begins to push back at the seemingly dreamlike or meditative quality of the poem:

*cartography of ghosts*  
*...And as a way to talk...*  
*of temporality*  
*the topography of imagination*  
*this body whose entry into the articulation of history as rapturous becoming*  
*& unbecoming,*  
*greeted with violence,*  
*i take permission to extend this grace (p. 47)*

The words “this body whose entry into the articulation of history as rapturous becoming / & unbecoming” could be read not only as a description of her son’s body “greeted with violence” but also as a commentary on violence done to all black bodies. This hints at the historical origins of the display of black bodies, or the making of their bodies into public or discursive spectacles, which, in Douglass’s (1845/1997) narrative, were a display of captive flesh, separated from familial bonds, and a medium of exchange within

earlier US history. Traces of that captivity remain etched on that flesh's surface as color made visible by the economic and social institutions' oppressive stereotypes about the black body.

This idea finds its theoretical counterpoint in the work of Vanderbilt Professor of and literary critic Hortense J. Spillers. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers (1987) grounds her analysis of slavery on the individual and collective experience of gendered and raced bodies. In her argument, she distinguishes between the flesh and the body. According to Spillers, the flesh is that which exists prior to and separate from language; it is vulnerable to the lash, the knife, the bullet. The body exists within the realm of culture and discourse after it has been liberated from the vulnerability of the flesh. She describes "the 'flesh' as a primary narrative" written in the language of physical torture. She writes:

These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually "transfers" from one generation to another. . . . (1987, p. 67)

With this declaration, Spillers affirms the potential of trauma's discursive transference and the transformation of the oppression black Americans experienced in slavery into transmissible cultural phenomena.

Other theorists' writings echo Spillers' argument about traumatic mobility. For example, professor of English and American Literature at Harvard University Elaine Scarry (1985), in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, asserts that pain associated with a lack of articulation becomes a language of its own, and therefore,



one must read with a particular sensitivity to the body upon which and with which that language has been written. More recently, in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, poet Claudia Rankine (2014) explains how Serena Williams received race-based discriminatory line-calls in her tennis matches due to her body's appearance by acknowledging the transmission of traumatic experience moving from generation to generation. Rankine writes:

Yes, and the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight. The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness—all the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through, even as we are eternally stupid or everlastingly optimistic, so ready to be inside, among, a part of the games. (p. 28)

Rankine is not only writing about the racial issue Serena Williams experienced; Rankine is describing a message of how racial microaggressions accumulate. Spillers' statement—about marks on the captive body moving from generation to generation—offers a view of the transmission of traumatic experience, one that accounts for the materiality of the captive body at the originary traumatic moment even as it recognizes the discursive transmission of the traumatic experience in later generations.

Rankine brings the reader inside Serena's head to witness how the umpire's bad calls accumulate inside Serena's body. The implications of the original slaves' captive existence live on in the cultural imaginary and return the liberated subject to a state of symbolic captivity through the invocations of hyper-visible stereotypes such as the black woman's body as Jezebel. Rankine locates mourning not in the racial experience itself, but in what produces the experience in the first place.

Similar to Rankine, Oliver uses experimental forms—blank spaces, fragments, pictograms, lists, stammers—to re-imagine identity. In an essay, “From Rupture to Remembering: Flesh Memory and the Embodied Experimentalism of Akilah Oliver,” Laura T. Smith (2010), associate professor of English at Stevenson University, describes Oliver’s poetry as work that “augments the record of markings and loss . . . with an alternative epistemology of bodily presence” (p. 103). While Douglass’s (1845/1997) act of bearing witness through writing revealed ways in which black women’s bodies were necessary to demarcate and compensate for the limitations of discourse surrounding the abolition of enslavement, Oliver’s poems are not “sutured to trauma” as Professor of English at the University of California, Riverside, Fred Moten writes (2017, p. ix). Her space of mourning her son forwards a broader, richer understanding of the black body in its historical context. Oliver imagines being with her son’s body, while acknowledging the desire to re-experience a celebratory sense of her daily self as a mother that’s more whole, more recognizable: “i get to be all now mama I get to / be all now mama i get to be all now mama i get to be all now all now all now” (p. 45). Spillers, Rankine, and Oliver opt for a materialist approach to traumatic experience that refuses the erasure of the traumatized body while acknowledging the desire for a sense of one’s self that is more sayable.

Saidiya Hartmann (1997) is a professor at Columbia University specializing in African-American literature and history. In her book, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, she illuminates the modes of terror and resistance that have shaped black identity. She writes, “By defamiliarizing the

familiar, I hope to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle” (p.4). Rather than convey the routinized violence of racism and its aftermath through invoking the shocking and terrible, in her poem “our good day,” Oliver (2009) chooses to look elsewhere and writes about where racism can hardly be discerned as in “the lover’s vocabulary” (p. 82). In Rankine’s writing about Serena, when the reader understands all the bad calls are internalized with “unflappable resilience” (Rankine, 2014, p. 28), we realize that all “the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience” (Rankine, 2014, p. 28) does not erase any of the moments lived through.

Oliver’s (2009) use of poetry’s formal elements—blank spaces, repetitions, short phrases, stammers—implies other moments she has lived through. She puts blank spaces between “murdering days” and “dream days” and “haunting days” and “forget me not days” (p. 39). This gives the reader a sense of the complexity of living with grief during the “cycle of little deaths” (p. 40) not as disparate experiences but as facets of a single experience.

In this way, the space of mourning her son also encompasses a mourning beyond a social condition of constructed racial identification if we think of black subjectivity as resulting directly from a history of traumatic loss, namely the transatlantic slave trade and the physical and cultural displacement of people of African descent through the Middle Passage and by means of forced and voluntary migration in the United States.

In Oliver’s elegy, the poetics of testimony are thusly rendered as experimental forms, multivocalities, and linguistic innovations—including fragmentation, stammers,

brackets, blank spaces, made-up words, lists, and pictograms—that allow for disembodiment, instability, and resistance as ways to archive blackness of her son’s body. Her lament for her son reverberates within a lament for the horrendous violence of racism.

Lament within a poetics of testimony about the violence of racism questions whether a search for wholeness (Pargament et al., 2016) or seeking recovery (L. Graham, 2017) is possible. I am not dismissing these stellar works of Pargament and L. Graham; I am pointing out that through poetry (and one might say through the poetics of testimony), black mourning does not always point to wholeness or recovery, but helps people, as in white people, get in touch with alterity and not foreclose on it.

Oliver (2009) presents her suffering, longing, loneliness, and grief for her son as if it were happening in the here and now—a dream-like account forever suspended in time and space with no hope for a resolution of meaning. She describes her desire to be with him as “this impenetrable filmy mist that surrounds / stay let go no stay here in me a little longer keep you here in my body a little longer on / earth” (p. 40). Oliver invites the reader to encounter vulnerability through acknowledgment of the we:

*the dream a site . . .*  
*for example, I hold you . . .*  
keeping time with spirits we have love we have love *I get to be all now we . . .*  
love we have love who dem all come an arriving guard of angels, thusly  
coming to greet. (p. 42; p. 46)

“We” evokes in the reader a sense of connectedness made very profound because of our interrogation of own accountability in not protecting her and her son from the

consequences of racial supremacy.<sup>59</sup> This radical poet questions subjectivity, identity, gender, and race through experimental forms and her constant stream of thought.

***Theme of multivocality.*** Oliver's poems are examples of innovative / experimental forms. Her poems about the loss of her son contain multi-voiced forms in order both to connect with him and to show grief as a constant in black people's lives. In Oliver's navigation of grieving in her poems, she does not explicitly reveal the medical neglect that led to Oluchi's death. How does a black mother mourn? How does she speak the self? Or as American political theorist Wendy Brown (1995) asks in *States of Injury*, "given the subjectivizing conditions of identity production in a late modern capitalist, liberal, and bureaucratic disciplinary social order, how can reiteration of these production conditions be averted in identity's purportedly emancipatory project" (p. 55)? In other words, Oliver's poetry provides the material for irreconcilable loss. Her son's black body was atrociously and malevolently neglected through the insidious trauma of

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<sup>59</sup> In 2011, literary critic Kenneth Warren published *What Was African American Literature?*, a critical work that claims there is no longer an "African American literature." He argues that black American writing, as a literature, began with the institution of Jim Crow legislation and ended with desegregation. From his view, black writers wrote as a means to counter notions of inferiority. He writes: "Absent white suspicion of, or commitment to imposing, black inferiority, African American literature would not have existed as a literature" (p. 15). Warren's work brings to light the literary conventions and critical innovations that black writers have relied upon and makes us readers think about how the works and scholarship in African American Studies have demonstrated unresolved pain, suffering, and violence of the past and how it impacts the present, and, furthermore, relevant to Akilah Oliver, how African American women poets are redressing their black origins through experimental poetry. Oliver's experimental language of racial mourning locates its grief not in racial experience itself, but in what produces an identity-based experience in the first place. Thus, African-American origins impact the way we think about and mourn the "other." Another scholar whose work remains critical of fixed narratives of race is Jennifer D. Williams (2006). She posits that literary and cultural tradition of mourning complicates conceptions of black cultural memory and identity. She draws on African American music, literature, and film to argue that "[i]nstead of 'rooting' African American identity in any fixed place, I think it is more useful to think of modern blackness as a migratory subjectivity" (p. 18). Building on literary critic Fred Moten's (2003) work in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Williams describes black music as "a site of memory and mourning and a means of rescuing blackness from authenticating narratives and locating it in the rifts, breaks, and slippages of identity formation instead" (p. 24).

racism and because of that mistreatment, Oliver grieves both her son and the lack of a place where a black mother might generate the terms of her own identity. W. Brown's (1995) book argues that the injury of exclusion not only enforces the stability of minority identities, it is required for their formation in the first place.

Oliver's poems juxtapose images from multiple contexts and multiple speakers, perhaps as a means of redressing racial trauma, reconstructing the black body as a collective, a body that has been displaced from a site of origin, and recreating the black visual body that has been subjected to physical and discursive violence throughout US history. Laura T. Smith (2010) writes, "Oliver suggests, however, that such multivocality is not disjunctive—that it does not disrupt or undermine subjectivity. Rather, this multivocality or inherent pluralness, Oliver suggests, is a condition of the remembering body's subjectivity" (p. 113).

Oliver's poems promote a consciousness of lamenting personal loss and socially constructed histories. Her work adds an enriching dimension to pastoral theology and care by pointing to ways that black private grief are entangled with issues of identity and in what produces identity-based experiences.

*What can we learn about a facet of grief by reading Oliver's poetry?* As mentioned in Chapter 1, psychology researchers Paul C. Rosenblatt and Beverly R. Wallace (2005) consider the potential effects of slavery, racism, and white ignorance and oppression on African American experience in their work. They tell us:

Some African Americans who are grieving a death are, at the same time, dealing with grief connected to racist oppression experienced by self, the deceased, the family, and all African Americans both recently and in the past; that is dealing with cultural grief. (2005, p. 169)

Rather than assuming everyone shares a common culture when it comes to lamenting loss, Oliver's poetry shows us through innovative forms that an intercultural spiritual caregiving approach ought to include learning about a grieving person's potential struggles with identity and how that impact their cultural ways of dealing with loss and death. Reading Oliver's crucial poems, chaplains learn about medical racism as a cause of death in ways that are cannot be measured by psychological studies with Euro-American participants.

Womanist and practical theologian Phillis Isabella Sheppard, associate professor of Religion, Psychology and Culture at Vanderbilt Divinity School, describes the cultural distortion of black women's bodies. According to Sheppard (2011), "the wounds of silence and hurt not only mark them but also come to define who they believe others to be . . . and black women cannot consider silence as a liberative option" (p.17). Sheppard's (2011) work centers around women telling their experiences of suffering in community.

To get difficult conversations started, multi-ethnic poets are providing some of the most powerful and affirming ways of escaping enclosures of traditional racial ideology, opening up possibilities for the poetics of testimony to lament social injustices and support liberative strategies that care for persons and worlds. While the material and historical realities of race should influence the ways in which we engage African American texts, an interrogation of the psychic impact of race can change the ways we read history, respond to grief, and others' ways of knowing about God. In *A Toast in the House of Friends* (2009), Akilah Oliver grieves her son and the lack of a place where a

black mother might generate the terms of her own identity. In terms of Spargo's elements, her book insists on an ethical reconfiguration of deeply held social norms.

**Rebecca Lindenberg (2012) in response to her partner's disappearance.**

Author of two poetry books, *Love, an Index* (2012) and *The Logan Notebooks* (2014), Rebecca Lindenberg teaches in the Creative Writing program at the University of Cincinnati. In *Love, an Index* (2012), Lindenberg tells the story of her relationship with the poet Craig Arnold who went missing while hiking an active volcano on the small Japanese island of Kuchinoerabujima in 2009 and never returned to the inn where he had been staying. Later, through the discovery of Arnold's alleged footprints at the volcano, it was suggested that he had suffered a fatal fall from a high cliff, but his body has never been found (Blasdel, 2012).

In *Love, an Index*, through a fragmentary narrative, Lindenberg's poems describe living with loss through an impulse to accumulate and catalogue objects. A large portion of the book is in fact an index, or at least in the format of one, cataloguing memories, emotions, places, and physical objects along with an explanation of their importance through footnotes and definitions. Her poems document and enact love through catalogues, lists, and an alphabetical index.

Lindenberg alphabetically indexes items she and Arnold accumulated and experiences they shared. In her long 30-page poem, "Love, an Index," Lindenberg writes,

. . . I want  
to gather everything into this poem's *now*,  
but can't. All is gloss. (See also: GLOSS). (p. 35, emphasis in original)



Lindenberg (2011) implies that the impulse to gather, accumulate, list, and catalogue pays tribute to what has been silenced in her life since Arnold's absence. In her own words, she writes,

The central poem, "Love, an Index," constellates annotations to suggest a narrative that is never provided, and "Love, n<sub>1</sub>" borrows the form of etymological definition from the Oxford English Dictionary to describe "love" through an accretion of literary observations. (p. iii)

Of the desire to accumulate and to gather, the poet Czesław Miłosz (1983) says, "a poet stands before reality that is every day new, miraculously complex, inexhaustible and tries to enclose as much of it as possible in words" (p. 56). That impulse to recall, maybe to sacramentalize the silence, is seen in her other poems such as "Catalogue of Ephemera," (2012, pp. 12-13) wherein she makes a list of things Arnold had given her. She makes two lists of flowers and their meanings before his presumed death in "The Language of Flowers," (p. 14) and after his presumed death in "The Language of Flowers, *Revised*," (p. 15). Sound, voice, words, song, poems. Is this the other end of the spectrum from vanishing and/or silence? The very concept of a spectrum like a seesaw implies both sound and silence are necessary. Allen Grossman (1992) writes, "[a] poem begins and ends in silence" (p. 217). If all poems begin and end in silence, they also exist somewhere else along the line between.

After Arnold's disappearance, honest, useful things—toast, a bus, a rabbit, a coaster—seem to be expressions of discordance when listed together. Author Ian Bogost (2012) writes, "The off-pitch sound of lists to the literary ear only emphasizes their real purpose: disjunction instead of flow. Lists remind us that no matter how fluidly a system may operate, its members nevertheless remain utterly isolated, mutual aliens" (p. 40).

Yet, we readers cannot help but feel the connection between Lindenberg and Arnold. Perhaps because Lindenberg's accumulation of objects also echo the same or similar collected objects in Arnold's work. For example, in Arnold's (1999) poem "Scrubbing Mussels" the speaker prepares mussels before they are cooked alive in a skillet. "Your fingers come too close / to what you hoped would stay hidden . . . . "Slice the lemon" (pp. 7-8). In "Catalogue of Ephemera," Lindenberg (2010) writes, "You give me lemons softened in brine . . ." (p.12).

In his poem "Hot," Arnold (1999) writes of cooking with "fragrant mint" (p.41). Lindenberg writes, "You give me the scent of bruised mint" (p.13). Furthermore, Lindenberg's "freckled lilies on a vase on the windowsill" (p.12) echoes Arnold's flower "set in the ink-trussed windowsill" (p. 22). I am not suggesting Lindenberg's lemon, mint, or windowsill are the exact same objects as the ones in Arnold's poem, but they echo each other. Like a stone thrown into a lake the poems keep making ripples. We readers could go on filling out implications because that's what these poems do; they seem to leave a temple bell ringing in us so we respond with a kind of flowering reciprocity. Simply put, from Arnold's poems, we readers have a sense of what Arnold's relationship to a lemon is. When Lindenberg writes of a lemon that Arnold has given her, the lemon takes on a deeper meaning for the reader.

In Lindenberg's book, her accumulations are objects that bear histories, experiences, and memories. She writes:

[These poems] examine the relationship between language and experience—the experience that language purports to describe, and the one it purports to elicit. . . . Several poems riff on other kinds of gloss, including catalogues and marginalia and Facebook 'status updates.' These forms allow for simultaneously writing and

questioning a poem; for example, the marginalia of “Illuminating” correct and doubt the veracity of the events recounted in the main body of the piece. (2011, p. iii)

Acts of writing and questioning, correcting and doubting, forgetting and remembering, losing and finding, being hopeful and hopeless, being separate and together—all exist at the same time, each element containing its opposite. Bogost (2012) writes, “. . . lists help underscore those separations, turning the flowing legato of a literary account into the jarring staccato of real being” (p. 40). Certainly, one argument the book makes is for compassion and for identifying with the other rather than making facile judgements. The questions of evil or suffering, the mix of light and dark are not resolved so much as accepted, even embraced if only briefly as they attain a momentary balance of peace and suffering.

***Theme of ambiguity.*** Lindenberg’s book addresses the theme of ambiguity through the implications of both erasure and accumulation, the nature of lists and what’s left out. An impulse to accumulate or embrace in poetry is an exchange between the poetry world, inner and outer, between what is perishing and the powers of transformation which come to light in the act of engaging. Lindenberg points to a sense of addressing something beyond the self, an awareness of the enormity of experience, the vastness of the world.

***What can we learn about a facet of grief by reading Lindenberg’s poetry?***

Author and therapist Pauline Boss would likely describe Arnold’s unresolved circumstances, where the information needed to process the reality of the death is

permanently unavailable, as “ambiguous loss.” Echoing Lyn Hejinian’s essay, “The Rejection of Closure,” Boss writes:

In the United States, there is a tendency to criticize and judge how people grieve their losses, especially if they take more time than we think they should. The cultural value is to get over it, find closure, and move on . . . . Closure is a myth valued by a culture intolerant of ambiguity. (2004b, p. 561)

Lindenberg’s elegies show the importance of personal items of the deceased as a response to ambiguous loss. Her gathering up of personal items might be understood as a lament and the moral stress of not being able to finally care for the body and lay it rest. Furthermore, Lindenberg’s social location as a white woman shapes her lament. While she cannot honor the deceased by laying his body to rest, she also knows that no effort was spared in recovering his body.<sup>60</sup> The extensive search was an honoring of his body, in contrast to the dishonoring of body through racism in Oliver’s elegy.

In terms of Spargo’s elements, in *Love, an Index*, Lindenberg (2012) presents her suffering and memory of her deceased partner through making lists as though they were accounts forever suspended in temporality and space with no hope for a resolution of meaning. Many of her lists seem to be examples of Howard’s (2003) concept of dialectical temporality, since time in the book is spent in an idealized place with Arnold and in the real place of his physical absence. The reader’s own vulnerability is engaged through the invitation to identify with the objects on the list while experiencing Lindenberg’s painful particular memories of them.

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<sup>60</sup> For more discussion about the extended efforts to find and claim Arnold’s body, see Christopher Blasdel’s (2012) “An exchange for fire: The final pilgrimage of Craig Arnold.”

**David Ferry (2012) in response to ongoing conversations with Arthur Gold.**

Poet and translator David Ferry holds the Sophie Chantal Hart Professor Emeritus of English at Wellesley. Critically praised for his translations of classical works by Virgil and Horace, Ferry is also a prize-winning poet. His book of poems, *Bewilderment: New Poems and Translations* won the 2012 National Book Award. This collection is dedicated to literary scholar Anne Ferry, his wife of forty-eight years, who had died of cancer. Throughout the poems in this book, bewilderment and sadness are part of lamenting that make it hard to experience the ending of things.

Ferry devotes one section of the book to his close friend and colleague Arthur Gold, who died of lung cancer. Throughout their friendship Gold kept his poems a secret, but when he was dying he shared them with Ferry. When Gold passed away, Ferry was writing him a letter in response to the poems. In *Bewilderment*, Ferry structures an entire section around five of Gold's poems and writes a verse response after each one. Poet Will Schutt (2014) writes, "The dialogue between Gold and Ferry takes the form of literary interpretation rather than anecdotal remembrance. It shows Ferry at his best—a close reader of lines, enriching our experience of the original text, generously standing out of the way" (para. 20). These poems seem to answer the question, what does one do with a response that comes too late? In response to Gold's poetry, Ferry wrote poems making them seem like an overheard conversation with Gold as if the two men were sitting comfortably in front of a fire before it was too late.

The poet W. H. Auden says, "Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead . . . without communion with the dead, a fully human life is impossible" (1968, p.

141). One senses Ferry's communion with Gold in the poem, "Reading Arthur Gold's 'Trolley Poem.'" Gold's poem begins by asking: "Do you / Remember?" (Ferry, 2012, p. 72). Ferry answers, "Arthur, yes, I remember . . ." (Ferry, 2012, p. 72). Ferry then adds details to Gold's memory. He picks up on his friend's metaphor of faith in God and expands it. God becomes a trolley driver flashing lights and ringing bells. Ferry writes:

. . . God, on your way to some station,  
Rattling and clanging, making a lot of noise.  
One thing you're famous for is making noise. (p. 73)

Then Ferry follows the shift in Gold's poem, turns to the image of "the monkey on our backs," and extends the image further. God becomes "the habit we can't get free of" (p. 73). In the midst of all the noise and commotion Gold has become bone-tired, anguished, and incapable of staying on track. He is powerless to shake off his obligations to virtue and "setting some kind of example" (p.73). His roles of father and teacher are still riding him like "the monkey on our backs" in his extremity of illness.

Ferry interprets, elaborates, and enhances Gold's poems. In Ferry's process of internalizing Gold's poems, Ferry is also changing how he discovers his own lived experiences and understands them differently. In the poem Ferry then writes about his sister Penny on "The day her blood reported that the cancer//had intensified ten times since the last report" (p. 73). Since understanding Gold's struggles between social obligations, roles, and personal anguish, Ferry now realizes his sister's similar struggles with "The obligation of being who she was/Listening to the family pleasantries" (p. 73). Painstakingly, the speaker observes what he sees on his sister's face: "something like what seemed to be like pleasure" (p. 73). The very awkwardness of the line is its

excellence, because it captures our stumbling toward language, the way private and social worlds vie for expression on one face. The “desire to be good” (p. 72)—the need to please—is in tension with the need to grieve “something like what seemed to be like.” How lonely Penny must have felt when her cancer recurred or how relieved if she knew she had been seen.

Of Ferry’s dialogue with Gold, poet Lee Sharkey (2013/2014) writes:

It’s a brilliant example of how poems in conversation with other artists honor their subjects by passing on the gift, introducing their work to readers or shedding new light on it . . . The implication is that creative and critical faculties, too, might be in conversation. (p. 48)

After Arthur Gold died and the letter being written no longer had a recipient, it seems as though Ferry held Gold in his mind. Gold’s poems haunted, instructed, and enlarged Ferry. Ferry’s poems joined a part of an urgent conversation that led him to live in dialogue and discover a deeper understanding of his sister’s challenges and obligations.

***Theme of preservation.*** Ferry’s poems, in dialogue with his deceased friend’s poems, bring into focus the theme of preservation. What is an act of remembering through addressing and writing to a deceased friend if not an act of preservation? To make the invisible visible, Ferry responds, interprets, and embellishes his friend’s poems and creates a sense of continuity. Ferry’s poems investigate his quandary of how to live with the loss of Gold’s presence which also involves how he leaves him behind—or what of him and the relationship Ferry really leaves behind—and how he carries Gold in his memories as a part of his present and future.

Poet and critic Allen Grossman (1992) defined poetry as “a principle of power invoked by all of us against our vanishing” (p. ix). No known writer writes to be

forgotten. Ferry implies that one writes less to preserve oneself than reaching back to the past, looking for the threads that lead to the fabric of relationships, remaining in conversation, and being changed.

In his essay “As Day and Night: On the Paintings of Jan Peter Tripp,” in *A place in the country*, W. G. Sebald (2013) writes:

Remembrance, after all, is in the end nothing other than a quotation. And the quotation interpolated into a text or an image forces us . . . to revisit what we know of other texts and images, and reconsider our knowledge of the world. That, in turn, requires time. In taking it, we enter upon narrated time and cultural time. (p. 180)

Sebald’s way is to follow a thread of influence from writer to writer, place to place, coincidence to coincidence until he becomes himself by including all others. In his section dedicated to Arthur Gold, Ferry’s poems are a mix of internalizing his friend’s influence, carrying it on, and revising his own life experiences. Sebald and Ferry remind us that what writing preserves is this shared experience of living on earth.

***What can we learn about a facet of grief by reading Ferry’s poetry?*** Ferry and Gold’s social location makes their poetry speak to immediate family, without a need to widen the family to include the family of oppressed, as Akilah Oliver’s poetry does. Ferry’s dialogue with Gold reminds us of the importance to keep people talking about the deceased, the strengths of the family, their hopes and dreams, and what legacy they may want to carry from the deceased. If the family stops talking, silence might keep a family frozen at the point where a person died. It is helpful to remember that experiences and memories generate a family legacy that needs to be acknowledged. How might spiritual



care provide safe places where anxiety is not handled by distance or fusion but by staying in the kind of conversations Ferry had with Gold?

In terms of Spargo's elements, both Oliver (2009) and Ferry (2012) resist closure by holding open the question of the potential for communication and dialogue with the beyond, figuring the elegy on the page as a place for exploring the possibility of collapsing the divide between this life and whatever may or may not come after it. In Ferry's (2012) dialogue with Gold, he reaches back to the past looking for the threads that have led to him wanting to create a sense of continuity to see what larger conversations they might be a part of. Ferry makes us wonder about when we get bogged down or when our work feels small to us, can we open it up by resisting closure and inviting in one of the deceased friends we hold in our minds?

Like Ferry, Oliver (2009) views her work in the context of an ongoing conversation. She writes, "I conjugate occasions, ask just for time, just a little time/ to get love right" (p. 14). The immediate temporality of writing intermingles with the fraught hovering of grief in which the disappearance of the deceased is as unimaginable as any real future sense of an afterlife. The suspended time between these two impossible poles of impossibility is especially, for Oliver and Ferry, where grief lives and living this moment in time is the task of the elegy.

**Anne Carson (2010) in response to her brother's unexpected death.** As a notable Classicist, poet Anne Carson uses classical texts as epistemological models for the contemplation of personal loss. In 2000, Carson's older brother Michael died unexpectedly in Copenhagen. Because his widow couldn't find Carson's phone number,

it took two weeks for the news of his death to reach Carson. Michael had only communicated with Carson a handful of times between 1978 until his death. In a 2011 interview with Carson in *The Irish Times*, book critic Parul Sehgal (2011) gives us autobiographical details:

In 1979 Anne Carson's brother fled Canada to escape being arrested for dealing drugs. For 22 years he roamed India and Europe under false passports, writing home infrequently and calling only half a dozen times. He resurfaced in 2000, calling the poet at her office . . . . He lived in Copenhagen now. He wanted to see her. He wanted her to meet his wife and his dog. They made a plan, and a week before she was due to visit she received another call from Denmark. Her brother was dead. (para. 2)

"When my brother died I made an epitaph for him in the form of a book," Carson writes on the book's outside cover. In *Nox*, she intersperses a wealth of personal artifacts, photos, prose poems, and letters alongside her translated words from Catullus's "Catullus 101," one of the most famous elegies written in Latin in the Western literary tradition.<sup>61</sup>

Anne Carson treats the materiality of language literally by crafting a tombstone/box-shaped art book that serves as a physical space for the seeking of the dead. Made from a single, uncut sheet of paper (folded into nearly two-hundred pages, accordion-style), *Nox* is a hybrid text, caught between scroll and codex. (A scroll presents information in sequential access and codex presents information in a format of random access). When I first took *Nox* out of its box, half of it tumbled through the air, unfolding from my hands while the other half remained still and closed in my hands.

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<sup>61</sup> Catullus, a Roman lyric poet (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) wrote this elegy upon the occasion of his traveling to his brother's grave near Troy. For more information refer to <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gaius-valerius-catullus>.

Jason Guriel describes this difficult activity: “you have to wrestle with *Nox* the way you would grief. It’s an object of mourning, an elegy made material” (2013, p.51). To open the book, one performs a gesture that simultaneously holds on to the book and lets go of it.

*Nox* incorporates photographs, stamps, collages, paintings, the only letter Michael wrote home, and Carson’s own typed fragments. Some of these pieces are made to look as though they are pasted in and other pieces seem to be stapled. Images of the staples are visible, even on the sequential page. The first page of *Nox* is a yellowing version of “Catullus 101” in Latin, also an elegy for a brother who died on a distant shore.

In a 2010 New Yorker article, “The Unfolding,” writer-critic Meghan O’Rourke describes how Carson soaked her typescript overnight in tea to achieve yellowing, (p. 82). On each left-hand side of the page, one word of the Catullus poem is translated into English. The right-hand pages introduce Carson’s personal narrative that meditates on the difficulty of elegizing a brother Carson knew as a child, but grew apart from and never knew as an adult. The struggle of dealing with Michael’s absence and life echoes the paradox of writing an elegy which is attempting to define and make sense of the thing that cannot be seen. Resonating with Catullus, Carson writes, “Nothing at all is known of the brother except his death” (7.1).

While the elegy is clearly written for her brother, it is also a moving meditation on absence. Carson makes clear that *Nox* is not simply about the contours of her own grief. “It’s about understanding other people and their histories as if we are all separate

languages. That's what I was trying to explore" (Sehgal, 2011). *Nox* goes beyond private mourning and explores a cultural elegy.

Two-thirds of the way into the book, Carson presents us with her full translation of Catullus's 101:

Many the peoples many the oceans I crossed—  
I arrive at these poor, brother, burials  
so I could give you the last gift owed to death  
and talk (why?) with mute ash.  
Now that Fortune tore you from me, you  
oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me,  
now still anyway this—what a distant mood of parents  
handed down as the sad gift for burials—  
accept! soaked with tears of a brother—  
and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell (7.1)

In the middle of the fourth line, Carson inserts why? Why would we feel the need to “talk with mute ash”? Much of *Nox* is focused on decoding this question. She writes about emptiness, the things in between, that which is unseen, that which cannot be said. There are many material places within the book that show Carson's need to explore such voids. For example, the entire other side of each page is blank which could represent a sustained connection with the absence of her brother. What can be seen through the pages is nearly as important as what's on the page. In *The New Yorker*, Megan O'Rourke (2010) writes that Carson, “views translation as an act of retrieval; it enables her to mourn a brother lost to her long before he died” (para. 1).

In the book, Carson's metaphorical piecing together of her and her brother's fragmenting communication becomes a literal translation held in tension with her translation of Catullus's elegy. Carson writes:

Nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy. No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction, which at its most sorrowful has a deep festivity, like one of those trees that turns all its leaves over, silver, in the wind. (n.p.)

Within the book many places show Carson's need to explore voids of the unseen and the unsaid. Carson continues:

I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101. But over the years of working at it, I began to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end. (7.1)

In the book, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, Eviator Zerubavel (2003) observes that "Continuous identities are thus products of the mental integration of otherwise disconnected points in time into a seemingly single historical whole" (p. 40). For Carson, the assembly of such an array of fragments recognizes the self-reflexive process of memorialization, "allowing us to establish the distinctly mnemonic illusion of continuity" (Zerubavel, 2003, p. 40). *Nox* gestures towards the "illusion of continuity" (*Nox* is a single, uncut sheet of paper) and "disconnected points in time." The uniqueness and authentic fragility of her brother's addiction is made clear through her translation of a centuries-old classical text. Catullus's poem provides a model for her contemplation of personal loss.

***Theme of disruption of temporality.*** Carson's poems disrupt temporality. Her book deploys experimental forms that use archival material as practices of mourning. Archival material seems to be her way of translating her brother into a figure as, at the same time, she translates Catallus' poem 101.

Poet Kristin Prevallet (2007) writes in *[I, Afterlife] [Essay in Mourning Time]*, “it is the desire for time to be interrupted—by either going or coming back—that is the elegiac burden” (p. 46). Time is constructed by: 1) a presentation of photographs with missing subjects or empty things—an empty chair, swing, clothesline, landscape, etc., and 2) a muteness and silence in only hearing from her brother sporadically. Carson’s book dramatizes grief in “a fragment of unexhausted time” (Carson, 1999, p. viii).

In an interview with the eminent critic Stephen (now Stephanie) Burt (2000) in *Publisher’s Weekly*, Carson comments that lyrical poetry “attempts to enter so deeply into history at a particular moment that time stops” (p. 57). She also theorizes the lyric poem specifically in its positional relation of in-betweenness. Carson writes:

[The lyric poem] aims to capture a moment of change from one time to another, from one situation to another, so it’s not that you describe any moment in the day and make it intense, you choose the moment in the day when everything changed because of some little thing or thought or mood. Homer can tell you the whole history of the fall of Troy, he has 24,000 words to do it, and there’s no necessary choice of frame, of the critical moment. (p. 57)

E. L. McCallum (2007) theorizes Carson’s use of the photograph. Carson, according to McCallum, reorients the photograph towards time itself, so that the photo becomes “the tain of time, bouncing the past into the future like the silver backing on a mirror that bounces our image back to our eyes” (McCallum, 2007, para. 6). In Carson’s *Nox*, the classical elegy performs as a way to think about the present and as a way to imagine how to reconstruct lost values and lost time.

***What can we learn about a facet of grief by reading Carson’s poetry?*** Carson’s book uses experimental forms to mourn her brother about whom she knew very little. On the one hand he had the means to flee in the face of drug arrest charges; on the other

hand, these charges dramatically shaped his life in ways similar to those whose social identity is forever shaped by criminal records.<sup>62</sup>

Carson seems to cope with her brother's death by disregarding the linearity of time, altering time, and suspending time. What we can learn about grief is to be attuned to and aware of the suspended moments and lapses in time associated with grief and loss. What Carson's work discloses is that life sometimes is cruel and unbending. There may be no way around the challenge to engage, endure, and live again.

In Carson's (2010) *Nox*, the moment she presents her full version of the translation of the Catullus' 101 poem comes half way through the book. A time shift happens. Instead of making language respond to her direction, she recognizes the limitation of her direction and creative will by allowing the language move her. She has stopped translating and allows the reader to see her as she is. From this we might learn to be present to what is true and feel the truth as directly as one can as a way of being human and becoming whole and caring. There is a theological point here: the present always provides something, however small, to reconfigure the past in novel and more life-giving ways. It might be thought as a part of God's continuous presence in continuous creation.

Both Ferry and Carson are scholars and translators of the classics and interestingly, both use their own translations to help them express of their grief. Carson translates Catullus and in the section of Ferry's responses to Arthur Gold, Ferry translates

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<sup>62</sup> For further discussion about the importance of helping people move beyond their criminal record, visit: <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/19/692322738/scrubbing-the-past-to-give-those-with-a-criminal-record-a-second-chance>.

a Virgil poem from the Aeneid. According to David Biespiel (2011), founding director of the Attic Institute of Arts and Letters in Portland, OR, “To translate is to unveil the hidden. It’s to be humble before the task of bringing the cultural and literary drama of one language into another, while also being bold in the certainty that, as translator, one can actually do such a thing” (para. 6). Even though no translation can be as exact as the original, and cannot bring a dead loved one back to life, both Carson and Ferry make the translation and in the process they come to a more complete understanding of the dead loved one. It seems as though Carson’s and Ferry’s careful attention to the nuances of language in the act of translation spills over into their careful attention to the emotional, personal states of others.

**Benjamín Alire Sáenz (2010) in response to the brutality of the border and the impact of loss on relationships.** Benjamín Alire Sáenz (b. 1954) is a poet, novelist, author of children’s books, and a former Catholic priest. He was born in his grandmother’s house in a small farming town, Old Picacho outside of Las Cruces, New Mexico. After making his way through the American educational system in different places while emerging from a Mexican-American upbringing, as an adult Sáenz settled in the border region between Texas and New Mexico and currently teaches creative writing in El Paso. In recent years, his prose has received more attention than his poetry.

This section focuses on Sáenz’s second, third, and sixth poetry collections, *Dark and Perfect Angels* (1996), *Elegies in Blue* (2002), and *The Book of What Remains* (2010). Set in the United States-Mexico borderlands, his poems illuminate the experiences of men, women, and children who are marginalized due to their race,



ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and language. As in his other work, these poems insist that redemption (social and spiritual) can come only through a true identification with the poor. He grounds his poems in the real world and not exclusively in the imagination. Sáenz's experiences of moving within, between, and among multiple worlds informs his perspectives and shapes his work.

The poems in *Dark and Perfect Angels* are often biographical: recounting the final days of a friend in the hospital, remembering his father's alcoholism, relating accounts of how several men ended up in the El Paso County jail, and telling stories of Sáenz's ancestors and relatives. In his search for images that express his cultural and linguistic realities, Sáenz's hybrid identity often shows in his bilingual poems. For example, in his poem "To the Desert" from *Dark and Perfect Angels* he writes:

I came to you one rainless August night.  
You taught me how to live without the rain.  
You are thirst and thirst is all I know.  
You are sand, wind, sun, and burning sky,  
The hottest blue. You blow a breeze and brand  
Your breath into my mouth. You reach—then *bend*  
*Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.*  
You wrap your name tight around my ribs  
And keep me warm. I was born for you.  
Above, below, by you, by you surrounded.  
I wake to you at dawn. Never break your  
Knot. Reach, rise, blow, *Sálvame, mi dios,*  
*Trágame, mi tierra. Salva, traga,* Break me,  
I am bread. I will be the water for your thirst. (1996, p. 96)

The word at the beginning of each new line is capitalized, which is a convention going back hundreds of years. The capital letter breaks up a sentence into discrete phrases and gives prominence to the first word of the line. We slow down and pay attention. Over all, this formal element combined with the lines' similar lengths amplify the poem's

sense of earnestness and integrity. Along with other prayer-like poems, “To the Desert” is in a section titled “Prayers for the Holy and the Dead.” For Sáenz, poetry is spiritually necessary because it connects the poet with the community. In an essay, “Notes from the City in Which I Live,” on his development as a poet, Saéenz (2002) writes:

*. . . neither my politics nor my art can be separated from the community to which I am bound.* There is yet another irony in my life: I started my journey toward becoming a poet with the idea of the beautiful. I understand, now, what the beautiful is. The beautiful is to be engaged in a struggle that matters. The beautiful is to be grateful for the ground that was given me.

This city on the border—this large and cruel and awesome and difficult place—this city has given me words. I return them to this city. This is what I do. I call this an aesthetic. I call this arriving at beauty. I call this poetry. (pp. 113-4, italics in original)

“To be engaged in a struggle that matters” is an apt statement of resistance and resilience in Sáenz’s work, which includes revising Christian motifs as well as making known the material sufferings and needs of those who live in the borderlands. Sáenz practices what the late University of Denver scholar Luis León (2004) terms the “religious poetics” (p. 5) of Latinx-Americans who have utilized religious rituals, symbols, and myths, and transformed them in order to resist systems of oppression that structured their lives.

Another struggle that Sáenz lives with is not belonging to an identifiable Latinx-American tradition in poetics. In Sáenz’s (1994) fundamental essay, “I Want to Write an American Poem: On Being a Chicano Poet in Post-Columbian America,” he writes,

I too may not always know what I am, but I know what I am not: I am not an Ovid; I am not Alexander Pope; I am not T.S. Eliot. I am not Emily Dickinson . . . . I do not feel myself to be the true heir of Walt Whitman, to William Carlos Williams . . . . (p. 523)

Sáenz does not have a long lineage of famous Latinx-American poets to claim as his tradition, which suggests many of the Latinx-American literary works that have been

overlooked and have not found their well-deserved places on bookshelves in libraries where oppressive environments are often still entrenched. Yet, through his poetry he has been influenced by the poets he mentions above and their craft. Precisely because of not working in the Anglo-American tradition, the form of his poetry is textured with difference—his culture, working-class roots, bilingual heritage—as he continues to understand how he writes a Latinx-American poem, probes his poetic norms, and creates a psychic landscape or refuge.

Scholar Gloria Anzaldúa’s work wonders about the connection between language as identity and how poetic forms and content are related. In “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Anzaldúa (2012) begins with a statement that asks,

. . . what recourse is left to them [Chicanos] but to create their own language? A language which they can connect to either identity, one capable of communicating their realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés* [authors italics], but both? (p. 77)

Can an American poem have its own language, if English itself has so many derivatives? If Spanish in America also has many derivatives? Anzaldúa explores this idea when she lists some of the many languages that Chicanos speak:

1. Standard English
2. Working class and slang English
3. Standard Spanish
4. Standard Mexican Spanish
5. North Mexican Spanish dialect
6. Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California have regional variations)
7. Tex-Mex
8. *Pachuco* (called *Caló*) (2012, p. 77)

What matters here are not only the assumptions behind the Anglo-American canon, language, and literary tradition, but also certain ideas about language purity. Sáenz

attempts to write from experience and to capture voices as he hears them, and this includes testifying in their original voices, whatever language that might be. Sáenz shows that the concept of writing in English means mixing languages and their nuances, which give the formal feature of the line a polytonality and a musicality, both of which can be thought of as “non-meaningful levels of language” (Forrest-Thomson, 1978/2016, p. 40), but certainly palpable or audible.

***Theme of alienation leading to vulnerability.*** In Sáenz’s sixth collection of poetry, *The Book of What Remains* (2010), sixteen poems are each entitled “Meditation on Living in the Desert” and interspersed amongst the other poems. The desert becomes a geography that remains central to his writing and to the reader’s psychic experience of the borderlands<sup>63</sup> as the reader returns and passes through the desert meditations. In all three collections I am discussing here, alienation—as well as the potentials for living—is a core theme.

When alienation occurs, the disruption reveals something vulnerable which leads to a connection with others, including us, the readers. For example, in “Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy,” Sáenz is able to produce the vulnerability of what it means to arrive at sources of the speaker’s tragedy and live with inconsolable regret. In the last section of the poem, a man forgets his infant in a car as he rushed off. Sáenz writes:

...I keep seeing this man  
As he reaches the place where he parked the car, knowing  
That the heat of the day must have—*no, please, God, how*  
*Could I have forgotten, no, God, no* I see him as he flings

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<sup>63</sup> I borrow the term “borderlands” from Gloria Anzaldúa’s (2012) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. The concept comes from the blending of two or more cultures, races, languages, and worldviews to form a “third country—a border culture” (p. 25).

Open the back door to the car. He is inconsolable  
As he holds his limp son in his arms. *How could I have  
Done this? What have I done? What have I done?* (p. 89)

Later in the poem he links this pain of regret to a sculpture of Quetzalcoatl his ex-wife  
had given him:

... Quetzalcoatl is lying down  
In a small and lonely boat. He is in mourning.  
He, too, is inconsolable. Tenochtitlán has been razed  
To the ground. Cortés has won the day. Quetzalcoatl alone  
Has escaped to tell the others: *Mexico has fallen.* (p. 90)

The poem links biblical, individual, and other societal experiences, and each brings new  
complexities of what it means to bear “the weight of that kind of grief” (p. 90). His  
poems reflect on what it means to be a Latinx-American gay man and ultimately why  
being himself in this book is dangerous.

In another passage, Sáenz (2010) tells the story of nineteen-year-old Juan Patricio,  
an unarmed and undocumented migrant worker that is mercilessly gunned down by  
Border Patrol agents in the poet’s hometown:

... The transplanted palm tree—two  
years and still struggling to stay alive like an exile  
living in a country that will never love him,  
a refugee repeating the same simple question every  
day of its miserable life: Why am I condemned to grow  
roots in a land not my own? And houses. Everywhere  
houses, well-kept, made of stone and brick and built  
to last. And you tell yourself that on the inside  
these houses are immaculate and full of objects  
collected on trips to foreign countries—Mexico, France,  
Japan, every cherished item in its proper place . . .

. . . Ahhh! And you find yourself shaking  
your head and you chastise yourself for your  
  
shallow and banal thoughts because you know  
that this does not matter, that none of this matters  
  
as you think of the bones of the dead women  
of Juárez and you wonder who is killing them—  
  
after all this time, they do not know and you have  
told yourself a hundred times that they do not know  
  
because they do not want to know because these  
women do not, did not matter and you think of that  
  
young man, nineteen, Juan Patricio, shot by agents,  
surrounded in a sea of uniforms in his final  
  
moments, and you see him as he lies in the street  
and you remember the altar, a cross, candles, flowers,  
  
his name on the sidewalk, *this, this is where he was  
killed . . .* (pp. 41-42)

Throughout Sáenz's poem, he emphasizes the act of remembering. The narrative retelling of his experience of living on the border, whether factually accurate or allegorically so, expresses Sáenz's unresolved mourning and refusal to forget both the dead and the death of his own innocence and faith in God. Above in the third-from-last stanza, the word "final" is the line's last word but not the sentence's. This is an interesting line break. "Moments" would rhyme with "agents" were it one line above. The sound would give the couplet a sense of formal completion. However, Saézn chose to break the line after the word "final," which visually tears the poem and ruptures the expectation of hearing "moments" on the couplet's second line. It gives the reader pause as though someone has abruptly stopped moving forward. The reader stops and feels

Patricio being surrounded. Breaking the line after “final,” Saéñz gives the reader the sense of Patricio’s isolation when being surrounded by border guards. Saéñz deploys the formal element of the linebreak to emphasize the helplessness and fear of being surrounded by US border guards.

In “Prologue,” Sáenz (2010) also emphasizes the importance of remembering:

. . . over the course of our lives we completely change every memory we visit. The final result is that there is no purity to remembering. Memories . . . are beautifully sincere. They also lie. . . . The fact that our memories may be half-truths doesn’t break my heart. There is a litany of sadder things—much, much sadder things—that have broken my heart.

There is no need to be specific is there?

But now that I am on the subject of memories, I am thinking that even *if* memories lie, even *if* no memory is true, despite all of that, there must be some truth that remains—even within the lie. And that truth is what I’m hanging on to. That is all that remains. (p.1)

Saéñz points out that for him the significance of truth is what gives him strength to continue his life. In chaplaincy we listen for and build on what is real for the careseeker as they are learning to live with loss.

***What can we learn about a facet of grief by reading Sáenz’s poetry?*** In learning to live with his losses, Sáenz writes with a sense of vulnerability. In his poem, “Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy,” the speaker’s attachments to those he loves are never completely severed, and while the speaker may recover from the initial shock of loss, s/he will never be entirely appeased. His poems turn toward and not away from suffering and require a vulnerability and a willingness to sit with different worldviews. Sáenz writes poetry as a transcultural spiritual practice that links him to the history, landscapes, and

people of the United States-Mexico borderlands. Many of his poems are filled with Catholic imagery and language. His poems likely would present a challenge to some Christians who might prefer to imagine and pray to a glorified, resurrected Christ instead of a humiliated, vulnerable, suffering one.

An image of a glorified, resurrected Christ could make Christians ignore the physical needs of the poor. Sáenz (2018) writes:

There is something of the tragic in our brokenness, and it astounds me how difficult we find it to go to the source of our tragedies, be they societal ones that affect our emotional and psychological well-being or personal ones that arise out of the more intimate relationships we share with others or with ourselves. I have come to believe that if we are not brave enough to go to the place of the pain—which is to say where the truth of ourselves is laid bare—then we are losing out on experiencing the beauty of our humanity and on coming to an understanding of what we were meant to do in our brief moments of residence on this lovely and blessed planet. Like you, I live my life in the intersection between personal tragedies and the greater cultural and political tragedies that shape the milieu encircling me—cultural and political tragedies that define me, whether I am aware of it or not. As creative as I'd like to think I am, I did not give birth to myself, nor did I invent myself. Just as I had no control over my beginnings, I will have little or no control over the way my story ends. (para. 3-4)

Sáenz pushes the boundaries of more conservative traditions by using poetry to transform how some Christians understand the essential symbols of their faith. He challenges readers, particularly those from a Christian background, to acknowledge the violence of their history. He is able to do this because he has allowed himself to be vulnerable. When providing spiritual care for Latinx persons, I would remember this poem and have in mind that it is the vulnerable dying patient who waits for our attention to be protected from isolation and silence.



In terms of Spargo's elements, Sáenz's act of refusal to resolve his mourning into resolution of grief, serves as an act of cultural dissent and a motivation toward an ethical crux to mourning. Sáenz's words reinforce both Granek's (2010) critique of psychology's framing of unresolved grief as "pathology" and Spargo's (2004) understanding of unfinished or unresolved mourning as an ethical act of dissent and protest as well as current realities of injustice. His words stand in opposition to the psychological imperative to resolve suffering and incorporate the dead into one's own self-understanding and cultural memory. The text includes scene after scene of heart-wrenching human vulnerability. His poems maintain memories of the dead without perpetrating injustice. In so doing, Sáenz invites the reader to encounter Sáenz's own vulnerability in a way that evokes both a sense of helplessness and outrage in the reader.

### **Last Words**

In this chapter, in the context of practical theological method (Step 4), I engaged contemporary elegies as resources from outside the field of practical theology to discover new ways for the practice of lamentation to include visions for human flourishing. I discussed contemporary elegies as examples of the poetics of testimony that can "describe the real in ways that require people to see these events that reason and theory do not count, do not authorize, do not signify" (Chopp, 2001 p. 64). In the above poems, death permeates the nameless and those with known names who have died natural deaths, ambiguous deaths, sudden deaths, and unjust deaths at the hands of medical neglect, ambiguous loss, addiction, and border politics while a silent world failed to intervene successfully. If the purpose of poetry is not consolation, these poems also suggest it is

not self-expression either. The poems in this chapter exercise a demand on one's conscience. To remember is to be unsettled and disturbed. The poems break through the silence that makes possible the carrying on of horrific acts of dehumanization, racism, and oppression.

The poetic themes I discovered from the elegies were: multivocality, ambiguity, preservation, disruption of temporality, and vulnerability. These themes use the occasion of loss as an impetus for seeking new ways of staying connected with the dead so that mourning becomes, rather than recovery from grief—as in Freudian frameworks and stage-theory models explicated in Chapter 2—an attempt at transforming the mourner's understanding of death. Many parts of these books of elegies illustrate expressions of unresolved mourning as an impetus toward ethical responsibility and therefore human flourishing on the part of the poet as well as readers. Through poetic studies, I emphasized arts-based ways of knowing through poetry as supplementing evidence-based spiritual care.

In the previous chapter, after having considered foundational, critical, and theoretical works in the field of the poetic elegy and situating Spargo within and against this field, I drew out and amplified four important elements of Spargo's work. In this chapter in an attempt to give the poets greater theoretical coherence, I revisited four elements of unresolved mourning that I amplified from R. Clifton Spargo's (2004) work. These four elements can be used as a framework for thinking about potentials for unresolved mourning to serve as a means for preserving alterity, to resist cultural and psychological narratives of resolution, and to maintain memories of the dead without

perpetrating injustice. Spargo's book calls for a sense of collective ethics, an ethics that takes responsibility for those deaths in which we have not had a direct hand. For Spargo (2004), a sense of peril comes with the recognition that "the death of the other demands a renewal of responsibility—on the other side of loss, as it were, in a beyond that structurally remembers the obligation that precedes the event of the death" (p. 29). Ultimately this obligation, this responsibility, is at the heart of Spargo's model of ethics, which requires a willing listener who hears the testimony of a witness without reducing the speaker and his or her story to an easily assimilable experience.

I deployed the field of poetic studies and its criticisms to intensify what has not yet been addressed in practical theology: A theoretical rendering of lamentation with ethical elements that account for an acknowledgement of responsibility to maintain memories without perpetrating injustice and attend to the mechanisms of power by which mourners are rendered invisible or denied legitimacy. This would lead to a practice of intercultural bereavement care that addresses the power of forgiveness and reconciliation as necessary for co-creating a just world in which we can invest our hopes. Given how complex forgiveness and reconciliation are, I identify these themes as areas of future research.

By the final Chapter 7 what will be needed is a theory of constructive theological reflection that: 1) sustains lamentation as a mode of intercultural bereavement care that addresses those dynamics of power which invest some perspectives with great legitimacy while dismissing others; and 2) combines theology, poetry, and ethics to do so. In the final chapter I construct a theory of what I term *theopoethics*. In the context of practical

theological method, the final chapter presents proposals for lived practices that can be made and lived into (Step 6). The final chapter builds on Spargo's reconfiguration of social norms, L. Graham's tri-partite model of lamentation, and Rebecca Chopp's poetics of testimony as three cornerstones of sustaining lamentation as a mode of intercultural bereavement care that does not ignore the mechanisms by which many are rendered invisible and/or denied legitimacy.

In terms of method, Chapter 6, the next chapter, shows a critical understanding of present practice, tradition, and resources outside practical theology (contemporary elegies as examples of the poetics of testimony) in conversation to see how they relate with one another in the context of hospital chaplaincy. I bridge what we have discovered here and apply it to intercultural spiritual care. I illustrate the process of reading contemporary elegies in a multi-faith context where traumatic grief is engaged by persons, families, and their worlds. I introduce a process of reading elegies in a hospital setting as an intercultural spiritual care practice, one that engages collaborative conversation in order to (re)build relationships by how one relates rather than by how one talks about or seeks to guide relational change.

Chaplains, as competent spiritual care practitioners, would do well to sustain lamentation in particular ways without foreclosing on alterity as both an ethical responsibility and a theological resource for intercultural spiritual care. Including the expression of unresolved mourning through elegies as poetics of testimony, chaplains could preserve the religious and cultural alterity of the other by not foreclosing on their multiple voices of unresolved mourning, often characterized by ongoing grief,

uncertainty, and ambiguity in the face of traumatic circumstances. It will be made clear that race, class, gender, and sexual orientation influence not only origins, histories, and attributes of the contemporary elegy, but also humans and their relationship (or not) to God. Moreover, from the elegies we have learned new language, expressions, and forms that articulate the margins, where people have to negotiate cultural and social worlds in complex ways. This demonstrates a need for intercultural spiritual caregivers to provide care, to acknowledge the mechanisms by which many are rendered invisible, and to address the dynamics of power that deny legitimacy.

## Chapter 6

### A Practical Theology Engagement with Sustaining Lamentation in the Context of

#### Hospital Chaplaincy

To live in the Borderlands means knowing  
that the *india* in you, betrayed for 500 years,  
is no longer speaking to you,  
that *mexicanas* call you *rajetas*,  
that denying the Anglo inside you  
is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black ...

Gloria Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 216

. . . . In your  
boyhood, the river was a river. Not  
a border . . .

Benjamin Alire Sáenz, 2002, p. 81

#### Introduction

This chapter turns toward praxis and the spiritual care offered by chaplains and visiting pastors in a hospital setting, where people often witness sudden, tragic, traumatic and violent losses of their loved ones or are themselves recovering from a traumatic event. This chapter illustrates the dissertation's fifth methodological step in practical theology, which is to articulate a dialogue between the description of what is going on and the normative resources as mediated through my own on-the-ground experience of hospital chaplaincy described through composite vignettes. In the last chapter, I turned to contemporary elegies as normative sources for theology to ask what can chaplains learn about traumatic grief in various contexts? I explored themes from five different poets'

books. In this chapter I draw upon Latinx poetry to sustain lamentation in the practice of intercultural spiritual care.

In chaplaincy, poetry can be used in several different contexts. In the long-term process of facing death, opportunities may arise for a chaplain to explicitly share contemporary elegies to lament with patients/families facing the void of death. For example, in hospice care, certain poets may be read over a period of time. Certain poems may also be explicitly used with a bereaved faith community that would meet over a period of time as a grief-group.

A second context that poetry can be used in chaplaincy is in the immediacy of a crisis. A chaplain would be more likely to use a poem when a family might ask for something other than a prayer. Even if the patient/family cannot explicitly draw upon elegies in the crisis of death, a chaplain may suggest a relevant poem to accompany a prayer as this chapter will demonstrate.

A third context where poetry can be useful is in a theological classroom context that prepares people for chaplaincy and/or ministry. Intercultural spiritual care is a task of both listening to and identifying unresolved mourning in one's own experience and then learning to draw upon such experiences as a potential empathic resource in caring for another. For example, reading *Whitman's Drum-Taps: The Complete 1865 Edition* (2015), one might choose a phrase from a poem that could be a form of an ongoing mantra-like lamentation. A person I know sometimes finds herself saying the phrase

“incessantly softly wash again”<sup>64</sup> (Whitman, p. 131) when she is aware of sadness and/or doing some task related to grief. Phrases from poems could become a way to connect to grief in life-giving ways, thus becoming potential empathic resources. From this example, a chaplain could use a poetic phrase as a reflexive practice to search for his/her own meanings. Then applying this example to the caregiving task, a chaplain might relay a story in a clinical setting with a mourner and ask him/her whether there is a phrase from a poem that stands out in response to a mourner’s particular grief. In this way, an inner search for meanings in the face of suffering can sustain lament by deepening connection.

Another example where poetry can be useful in a classroom setting is in an archival assignment. Archives are rich in memorial-making and excavation. They help think about questions such as: what legacy should be brought forth? What are the ethics of the unresolved pain, suffering, and violence that we inherit, how does it impact the present and how might we consider humanity’s losses beyond representation? Library Special Collections that explicate the past through archives can be used for chaplaincy students to co-create meanings that witness these complexities of historical, cultural, and personal losses.

Lastly, a fourth context for a chaplain to use a poem would be in a more public sense, such as in a public memorial service. Examples of poetry in public theology will be explored in the next and final Chapter 7.

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<sup>64</sup> From the book *Drum-Taps: The Complete 1865 Edition* (2015), this phrase comes from Whitman’s poem “Reconciliation.” The book’s editor Lawrence Kramer describes the phrase as “a cleansing process by which nature absorbs the fallen and renews itself” (p. 168). In the poem, Whitman paraphrases the cleansing process in the line, “That the hands of the sisters Death and Night, incessantly / softly wash again, and ever again, this soil’d world. . .” (p. 131).



In Chapter 2, I drew upon psychological and pastoral theological literature to describe traumatic grief and the need for lamentation, and how intercultural, evidence-based, socially just care can help complexify meanings, promote coping, and ultimately try to connect us with goodness. From Ken Pargament's research articles, I focused on religious/spiritual struggles that demonstrated their pervasiveness across religious traditions and even with atheists. One interpretation of the atheist research is that atheists can have embedded punitive god theologies that give rise to r/s struggles (Sedlar, 2018). Implications of this research suggest that r/s struggles can mediate trauma and potentially reduce post-traumatic stressors. The attribution of God as punishing is a significant factor to pay close attention to in the context of hospital chaplaincy care, since there is a wide-spread cultural assumption that atheists would not have r/s struggles.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 (the heart of the dissertation), I drew upon poetic studies of contemporary elegies to describe and illustrate the ways that contemporary elegies use poetic language to sustain lamentation in the face of traumatic grief. In this chapter, I bring these literatures into dialogue in order to demonstrate certain ways that poetry may become a normative source for theologies of suffering while reinforcing intercultural, evidence-based, and socially just spiritual care. Poetry supports intercultural care in at least three ways. First, it uses elements of common language in an imaginative way to express particular dynamics of grief without the need to prescribe solutions or quick remedies to rid mourners of their pain. Second, poetry respects the mystery of the other by providing a safe haven to explore alterity, defined as "each person's otherness: those aspects of an individual's religious or spiritual world hidden by what seems similar or

familiar” (Doehring, 2015a, p. 2). Third, contemporary elegies can help chaplains engage in embodied listening: poetry attunes attention toward sounds, rhythms, and breaths in the body, which enhance the quality of conversations. As pastoral theologian Rubén Arjona (2015) writes, a “non-judgmental atmosphere can also help individuals face their demons and fears and discover the value of their darkest moments” (p. 565).

Combined with elements—such as psychosystems thought (L. Graham, 1992), collaborative conversation (Anderson, 2007), and religious coping theory (Pargament, 2011)—poetry can assist us to be who we chaplains are no matter what the situation, to engage others with respectful agential and receptive power, explore the dominant narratives, and rebuild relationships by how we relate rather than by how we seek to guide relational change.

Among other things, poetry theologically enhances evidence-based care when it enhances empirically demonstrated markers of spiritual wholeness that have positive outcomes: (1) connecting people with benevolence and/or a loving God (for those with theistic worldviews); (2) searching for differentiated complex meanings about suffering; (3) more flexible coping responsive to the mystery of suffering and hope experienced in grief, (4) more ongoing spiritual integration of suffering (Pargament et al. 2006/ 2014). In these four ways, poetry theologically supports socially just care by attending to the social justice dimensions of death, dying, grief, and loss. With its imaginative, musical, and category breaking dimensions, poetry can help clarify “the different ways in which God may be at work in a person’s life” (Arjona, 2015, p. 565).

In order to demonstrate the ways that poetry may become a normative source for theologies of suffering that support intercultural, evidence-based, and socially just spiritual care I will begin with a composite vignette based on my lived experience of providing spiritual care to the A family (a Latinx family), struggling to come to terms with Mr. A's declining condition after the traumatic event of his massive stroke. In this composite vignette, a medical treatment team's agenda to remove a comatose man from life support—when according to the medical team there is no hope for recovery—seems to foreclose on the process and time a family needs to realize the impacts of what they are facing in order to make a healthcare decision.

I show how chaplains might draw upon contemporary elegies to sustain lamentation in two contexts: 1) An explicit context: By reading poetry in a family meeting, chaplains deepen their understanding of cultural nuances in end-of-life conversations, which would give chaplains and families words to engage in collaborative conversation about ultimacy; and 2) In an implicit context: By reading poetry in chaplaincy training,<sup>65</sup> chaplains deepen their sensitivity about structures of power that silence the experience of suffering communities. Both settings could give chaplains deeper listening skills for “the discursive practices and various voices that seek to describe or name that which rational discourse will not or cannot reveal” (Chopp, 2001, p. 56).

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<sup>65</sup> For example, a class called “Lived Theology and the Poetic Imagination” would acquaint chaplaincy students with the experience and practice of exploring themes in contemporary poetry that are meaningful for studies in practical theology in chaplaincy contexts.

## **Composite Vignette**

This vignette involves the patient Mr. A, his wife Mrs. A, eight grown children (with some spouses), a granddaughter, and a medical treatment team consisting of: neurosurgeons, renal consultants, and nursing staff. An ethics member, a chaplain, and a Catholic priest were also on board. A multidisciplinary team became important for determining whether, how, and when to withdraw or withhold of advanced care in ways that respected the family's wishes.

**History of facts.** A 64-year-old Latino man suffered an aneurysmal bleed in his brain for which he was admitted to the Emergency Room (ER). He had been eating dinner with Mrs. A, a 60-year-old Latina woman, fell sideways out of his chair onto the floor, and was unresponsive. Mrs. A called 911 and waited ten minutes for a bilingual interpreter before she could communicate with a dispatcher in order to get help. Mr. A arrived at the ER by ambulance. Mrs. A arrived by car. Her youngest daughter arrived separately. Initially, my role as the ER chaplain was to provide the family with support and information with permission and as wanted during the initial crisis.

That night Mr. A received surgical drainage, clipping (a surgical procedure that isolates an aneurysm from the normal circulation without blocking off any small nearby arteries), and remained intubated in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) with nearly complete damage to his right hemisphere, some damage to the left hemisphere, and post-surgical strokes. By day three Mr. A's devastating neurological injury became an adversarial care situation because the medical providers felt that further treatments were "futile." Family A did not agree. The medical team's prognosis and recommendation were to remove Mr.

A from life support so that he could die. The family wanted to keep treatment (feeding tube, antibiotics, oxygen, etc.) going. This adversarial care situation continued for four weeks after the initial event, during which Mr. A remained unresponsive in the ICU, with episodes of pneumonia and increasing kidney failure.

Initially, my role as chaplain was to provide the family with general support and link them to their parish priest. Mr. A received “Anointing of the Sick” on day 10 at his wife’s request. The medical treating teams were frustrated because the family refused to talk about Mr. A’s condition and seemed to not understand what the treating team, painstakingly, on multiple attempts, had tried to explain. The family challenged the team that “If we were up on the top floor in the VIP suite, you would be giving him a brain transplant and treating him differently.” Their reference to “a brain transplant” as I will elaborate, was their way of raising questions about social inequality and systemic racism. To many on the medical team, the family’s reference to “a brain transplant” represented the family’s lack of medical knowledge about treatment options, and not how such responses infuse very difficult dynamics at every level of experience. For example, perhaps the family’s response about the injustice gave them a measure of agency in the face of one of their biggest challenges, even though the agency it provides isn’t the most optimal form of agency available to them with help.

**Chaplain’s involvement.** I was involved on day one, coming into the ER during the crisis. Later, I was involved on the shifts I worked, seeing the family three days per week. According to hospital protocol, the first chaplain to see a patient becomes the main chaplain who then consults with other hospital chaplains about the patient’s and

family's ongoing care. As the main chaplain, I was involved in family meetings with the medical treatment team as they occurred on my shift. Ethics consultation was called first on day 19 to answer the concrete question: Does the medical team need to offer dialysis to this patient who has a devastating brain injury and will not survive? I was involved in that consult and in a repeat consult on day 32.

My feelings and thoughts at the first consult were ones of sadness, but not surprise that the medical team had delayed their asking for help with family communication. When the medical team did ask for help from the ethics consult service, it was primarily for a technical question linked to "futile" care and reflected a high frustration level that they were unable to communicate with this family.

**Major issues.**

*Medical issues.* Mr. A did not have an advance directive.<sup>66</sup> Although the physicians presented him as a "fatal" stroke, Mr. A was not brain dead or dying, and the other organ failures (kidneys, lungs, skin) were mainly secondary. When the phlebotomist was drawing Mr. A's blood, the family reported seeing Mr. A move his right arm in a withdrawing reflex to the needle sticks,<sup>67</sup> and after three weeks the doctors acknowledged that he had some cortical function on the less damaged side of his brain.

Many interpretations are evident. The medical team diagnosed the functional death of

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<sup>66</sup> The term "advance directive" is used for a document(s) that allows an individual to state in advance his or her wishes regarding medical treatment. Often such documents avoid certain difficulties of terminating treatment for incompetent patients.

<sup>67</sup> In brain-dead patients, involuntary movements such as tics, jerks, shivering, muscle contraction, etc., happen (Hannawi, Abers, Geocadin, & Mirski, 2016) and may be interpreted by hopeful loved ones as signs of consciousness.

this patient. The family was told that Mr. A. was virtually dead, but trust was eroded when the family saw Mr. A's hand withdraw and his head turn in response to stimuli. On the 38<sup>th</sup> day, the wife told me, "I saw his foot move today. That gives me hope." For the team, these small signs of brain activity did not equate to functional life. Because of his comatose state, Mr. A's cognitive functioning was not fully determined. His vital signs changed when he was rolled for wound care, which made the family wonder whether he experienced pain. Psychological pain for the family was due to Mr. A's persistent coma and the visual impact of massive edema up through his scrotum as a result of kidney failure.

This is an adversarial care situation. Clearly, the doctors and most nurses think that the family needs help to stop resisting and denying Mr. A's "futile" situation. The A family's struggles are not uncommon. Zier, Sottile, Hong, Weissfield, and White (2012) found that regarding families' interpretations of prognostic information in dire contexts, medical decision makers (such as Mrs. A) estimate a median 10% survival (range 0 to 50%) when physicians say there is "no chance" for survival, citing the need to stay optimistic and knowing special strengths about their loved one that they hope may improve their odds, even if doctors say further interventions are "futile."

Moreover, researcher Carolyn Kohlhasse (1995) created a foundational study about Latinx culture and religion and their influence on beliefs and attitudes toward end-of-life decisions. She writes that in Latinx culture:

The emotion of hope may often be connected to a belief in God, faith, and in the potential for miracles . . . . When asked directly whether hope always exists and whether a person always has hope for recovery, even when a physician

determines there is no physiological way the patient will get better . . . 66% answered yes. (p. 46)

In the chaplain-notes, I read that Chaplain L was called in on night 4 to comfort Mr. A's distraught son, J. I read the chaplain's words describing the family as in the "denial stage." Chaplain L noted his efforts help the family "move toward acceptance" of Mr. A's death. Chaplain L hoped to not prolong Mr. A's suffering by 'moving' the family from 'denial' to 'acceptance' of death and compliance with the treatment plan of the medical team. In hindsight I wonder about what needs the medical team had in this adversarial care situation? For example, is there a need for the providers to get relief from their urgency to alleviate Mr. A's suffering, which was becoming oppositional in the face of the family's hope that meaningful life could have been sustained in some way? How can a chaplain provide care by being able to empathically understand and respond to family members and the medical team in an adversarial care situation?

*Intercultural issues.* Only two family members spoke English. The youngest daughter initially translated the doctor's words. She seemed to understand the hopeless prognosis and needed to consider the doctor's suggestion for the transition to "comfort care," but was tearful when relating: "When I tried to talk to my mom about this, she said to me: 'You're on their side. You don't know what you are talking about.'" Her words indicated both a clear family hierarchy and a strong sense of family and togetherness. The daughter, in a tough situation, was caught between her own needs, the agenda of the providers, and her mother's/family's status.

Mr. A's life, work, social activities, insurance, and family structure were unknown to providers at time of admission to the ICU. With Mrs. A.'s permission, on



day three I reached out to a family care social worker, the family's parish priest, and later on, a bilingual speaking priest, Father L.

Initially, Mr. A's work and community support were unclear. The youngest daughter mentioned that Mr. A was the first in the family to arrive in the US 18 years ago. The large family was scattered in the US and Mexico and was Mr. A's main source of support, care, and guidance. In their book, *Pastoral Care and Counseling with Latino/as*, chaplains Montilla and Modina (2006) write about the cultural significance of family for Latinx identity: "The family is the place where they draw their strength, celebrate their achievements, lament their losses, perpetuate their values, and experience the fullness of what it means to be human" (p. 7). It seems, Mr. A's family would play an important role in decision-making.

In the United States, societal values are rooted in autonomy and self-determination. As theologian Richard Coble (2018) writes, "individualistic model(s) mirror the medical-disease model prevalent in diagnostic medicine" (p. 36). Thus, as emphasized above, the significance placed on the values of autonomy, self-determination, and individualistic models that undergird US healthcare would not be as commonly present in different cultures with strong kinship ties and residing in the United States.

From the Department of Family Social Science, University of Minnesota in St. Paul, Solheim, Zaid, and Ballard (2016) found that "when Mexican family members were asked where they would turn in an emergency, the majority of participants referred only to family" (p. 348). In another foundational study, Schur, Bernstein, and Berk (1987) found that some Latino/as believe that "enduring sickness is a sign of strength . . . . They

often rely more heavily on home remedies and care by other family members” (p. 628). For example, Maduro (1983) points out that good health is associated with those faithful to God and illness is equated with sin and the will of God. A cure depends both on strengthening a faith in God and a balance of fluids in the body, often treated by methods of indigenous healing or curanderismo as “legitimate religious practice” (León, 1997, p. xvi).

***Spiritual and theological issues.*** Mr. and Mrs. A are Catholic, with weak linkage to their church in the US, but with strong linkage in the past to their parish in Mexico. On day 7 Mrs. A brought a rosary and pinned a scapular to Mr. A’s hospital gown, indicating that she wanted to bring religion into the practice of her daily life with Mr. A. On day 12 she brought a curandera, a Mexican-American female elder who brought a special herb “to clean his spirit of bad luck.” The family was involved with the ceremony performed by the curandera, a practitioner of curanderismo.

The A family’s particular religious orientation influenced their beliefs and values concerning Mr. A’s suffering and medical care in complex ways. An intercultural chaplain would do well to find out more about the ways their Latinx heritage might shape their beliefs and values. For example, Shorris (1992) describes the nature of “fate” with Catholic Latinx as concerning the belief that one’s life is in God’s hands and, consequently, that individual action has no meaning (pp. 363-365). Furthermore, through the curandera, “creates a shamanistic and often prophetic consciousness” (León, 2004, p. 161). The intersection of Catholicism and curanderismo, as Luis León, points out, can be contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church. “For them, only a tolerance for

contradiction, a pragmatics of truth, works to produce good in the world” (León, 2004, p. 161). Catholic Latino/as might approach illness and suffering both in terms of its relation to God’s will and with “a tolerance for ambiguity.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, a reasonable hypothesis I make for the A family is that their ability to tolerate the uncertainty of Mr. A’s prognosis influenced their decisions to prolong his life and deepened their relationship with God.

The treatment team had little theo-socio-cultural understanding of what values and beliefs might influence patient care during the discussion of end-of-life decision-making. The treatment team seemed not to consider the impact of the language they used with the A family, given their cultural context. For example, words such as: “futile,” “making the right choice,” and “quality of life” made the hopeful A family feel misunderstood.

Although not Catholic, I provided support and prayer. I arranged for sacraments and tried my best not to impose my world-view on them. Rather than the stage model of grief, I was more concerned with trying to build a relationship of trust with this family by respecting the particular ways each member expressed their painful emotions. As Doehring (2015a) writes, “Intercultural spiritual care, then, is about, first, trusting that the mystery and sacredness of the care seeker’s religious world will be respected and, second, constructing life-giving spiritual meanings and practices . . .” (p. 6). At this point, I hoped to learn about what resources were available to this family that accounted for their endurance and survival.

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<sup>68</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa’s (2012) concept of the “mestiza consciousness” is: “a consciousness of the borderlands. . . . The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity . . . . She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (p. 99, p. 101).

***Grief and loss issues.*** This patient's stroke is a "long" death<sup>69</sup> due to severe brain damage, but also an "unanticipated" or sudden death,<sup>70</sup> as Mr. A was working the day before he collapsed and had no symptoms of an imminent, life threatening health crisis. Most family members were in shock. One of the hardest things for anyone to cope with during a sudden terminal conditional and/or death is the jarring nature and shock of it. The coming to (some semblance of) terms with death can be unwieldy and intimate and, like individual experiences of pain, truly unknowable, even to the person walking or stumbling through it. It can be difficult for some family members to make a connection with someone in the midst of it, even if that person is your doctor, chaplain, partner, best friend, or even oneself. A shock of traumatic loss can be so great that finding words to express feelings or reactions would be nearly impossible.

Thus, grieving before and after a death is complex because the loss of Mr. A isn't death outright, though the doctors see an inexorable path to death. When the neurosurgeon referred to "quality of life," he seemed to introduce this term prematurely. I think the family's heaviest grief came from being asked to make medical decisions in a situation that the family could not imagine.

In the previous chapter when writing about poet Rebecca Lindenberg's loss of her partner Craig Arnold, I used Pauline Boss's (2004b) work to describe Arnold's disappearance while hiking a volcano in Japan as a type of "ambiguous loss," which occurs when "a loved one is *physically absent*, but kept psychologically present because

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<sup>69</sup> In his seminal book, *How We Die*, Dr. Sherwin Nuland (1995), a medical doctor, describes a weeks-long death of a patient who dies of septic shock in the ICU as "long suffering" (pp. 148-152).

<sup>70</sup> Dr. Dorothy Becvar (2001), a licensed marital and family therapist, describes an "unanticipated death" as one that is "sudden or accidental" (p. 48).

his or her status as dead or alive is unclear” (Boss, Roos, & Harris, 2011, p. 164). A second type of ambiguous loss is relevant in this vignette. It’s when “a loved one is *psychologically absent* but physically present . . .” (Boss et al., 2011, p. 164). For example, Mr. A. sustained severe cognitive impairment and was in coma, resulting from a massive stroke. Pauline Boss and her colleagues describe the notion of traumatic grief in the midst of ambiguity and uncertainty when they write: “At times, as when someone is literally missing or is cognitively impaired, the loss remains unclear, as when people don’t know if a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present” (Boss et al., 2011, p. 164).

As mentioned previously, Solheim et al., 2016, did a study using the ambiguous loss framework elaborated by Boss (1999) to examine and understand the family experiences of Mexican immigrant agricultural workers in Minnesota. In the participants’ narratives, Solheim and her colleagues found certain dimensions of ambiguous loss such as “feelings of chronic/ recurring loss.” They write:

In the category of chronic/recurring loss, participants in both countries experienced chronic worry from not knowing if family members were safe, ambiguity regarding when the immigrant would return, and chronic stressors that compounded these feelings of loss. (Solheim et al., 2016, p. 338)

Pertinent to this composite vignette, the A family’s immigration experience involves several complexities of loss. Regarding parent-child separations during the migratory process, researchers Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie (2002) describe ambiguous loss as “particularly relevant” (p. 628). Since the parent is gone (not dead) for what is expected as a short time, “permission” to grieve may not be granted. Suárez-Orozco and her colleagues continue:

The child's loss may thus go unrecognized and lead to disenfranchised grief, whereby silence surrounds the loss (Doka, 1989). Under such circumstances, the expected emotions of grieving—sadness, guilt, anger, and hopelessness—may be prolonged because there is no public arena in which to express these emotions. (2002, p. 628)

When Mr. A left initially Mexico for migrant work, he sent remittances to Mrs. A. Their family members were separated until she and their children could join him. It took over twelve years for the family to be together again.

As a chaplain, listening to Mrs A's and her children's experiences of how they came to the US, we might engage in a dialogue that would create a safe space for grief and accumulated ambiguous losses to be heard that neither denies suffering nor excludes God from places of pain. We could discuss Mr A's health crisis in a broader systemic framework that would envision both particular individual experiences as well as "the systemic interweaving of grief reactions in the family, community, and culture" (Shapiro, 1994, p.6). Furthermore, Solheim and her colleagues' research on the migrant experience found that:

As great as their worry appeared to be, participants on both sides of the border refrained from telling each other about their troubles for fear it would make things worse. There seemed to be an implicit agreement that it was better to remain silent about their true situations and feelings. (2016, p. 347)

Orona, Koenig, and Davis (1994) examined cultural aspects of nondisclosure and noted "nondisclosure as protection was explicitly tied to filial obligation as a cultural value" and that "the duty to withhold information involves keeping hope (and the patient) alive" (p. 343). Thus, such cultural values would affect decisions regarding the use of life-sustaining medical treatment.

In the circumstance of the A family, Mrs. A seemed to protect her family from worrying by saying to her daughters that after dialysis (or some other treatment) Mr. A would get better because “God guides us to nurture and protect each other.” Another example of the A family’s cultural value of nondisclosure as a way for the family to maintain hope and pray for Mr. A’s quality-of-life to improve concerns J, Mr. A’s son.

On night 4 when J, the son, after seeing Mr. A for the first time, asked the ICU doctor: *How bad is he?* The doctor told J that Mr A would not regain consciousness. J kept this information to himself until after Mr A died. There existed a family pattern of strong filial duty to protect the family (and Mr. A) from harm resulting (in this circumstance) from disclosure of certain medical information, particularly that of poor prognosis and the futility of further medical interventions to prolong his life.

Families like the A family face gruesome choices: how would they know when Mr. A’s “quality of life” had diminished to the point where letting him go would be the best way to care for him? Even when a nurse presented the family with *A Spanish version of the McGill quality of life questionnaire* (Tolentino & Sulmasy, 2002, pp. 95-6), the criteria for “calidad de vida” and its scale from zero to ten was disputed among the A family members. For example, Mrs. A said, “when my husband can no longer breathe, he has no quality of life . . . I pray for a miracle. . . I want to give him every chance.” All the children but one agreed with Mrs. A. J, who arrived on night 4, felt shame for not having visited his father sooner. Another son felt guilt for not insisting his father see a doctor after Mr. A had nearly fainted in the son’s home. He felt responsible for causing harm and inappropriately blamed himself, believing that suffering was a consequence of

his sin and a punishment from God. In contrast to her mother and brothers, the youngest daughter said: “When my father can no longer think, he has no quality of life.” The tensions among the family made it difficult for them to know how to best care for Mr. A.

Intercultural spiritual caregivers step into these “contending values,” for example, between family members and/or between a medical team pushing for end-of-life discussions and those family members wanting to prolong life. Intercultural spiritual caregivers must use caution not to impose any agenda, but guide an in-depth exploration as to what “quality of life” means to the family. Taking an holistic intercultural approach in the context of healthcare chaplaincy means to cultivate presence without an agenda.

The A family was dismissed since their request for a “brain transplant” was felt to be a sign of complete ignorance and their request for kidney dialysis was felt to be “extraordinary life-sustaining treatment.” This back-and-forth for finding common ground shows how entrenched human individuals and systems can become. For example, in their request for a “brain transplant,” the A family had to counter an implicit cultural message that blamed/accused their reaction without considering the cultural factors.

Some of the medical team viewed their requests for dialysis and hope for a miracle as problematic ways of coping with Mr. A’s eventual dying and death. On the one hand, family members who choose to insert a feeding tube for a patient with a terminal diagnosis or who advocate for the use of extraordinary measures such as dialysis to keep kidneys functioning and to maintain a future life in a vegetative state with no possibility of recovery may be seen as individuals who endorse a “steady progress of biopolitics that denies or covers over death and loss with therapeutic imperatives” (Coble,



2018, p. 147). On the other hand, the therapeutic language caught up in “the biopolitics of healthcare” that Coble aptly critiques may offer hope and give precious time to family members to discover how to help their loved one die.

**Main interventions.** After two weeks, I became increasingly frustrated with the medical team, which seemed to know very little about this family and their belief systems. My hope was that engagement would allow a greater level of relational trust. If both “sides” could have their hopes, fears, and griefs in relation to Mr. A expressed, perhaps a common ground could be found. Furthermore, if we could offer the family a safe place where they could express hope and lament without external pressures and without rationalistic solutions, then a potential for liberation, care, and compassion might be encountered. Doehring (2015a) explains compassion as: “the courage to be emotionally and spiritually open to the pain of strangers . . . who may hold truths and values that seem foreign and even threatening” (p. xvii).

On day 15, the ethics member and I called a meeting with the family, and with their permission, a staff interpreter and a bilingual priest, Father L (not the family’s own priest). The goal of the meeting was to “know” the patient and family better and listen—we specifically did not want any other goals. Without an agenda, “the pastoral caregiver stands within, not outside or above the pangs and promises of those needing care and guidance” (L. Graham 2017, p. 11). To learn about Mr. A, we had a wide-ranging conversation with his wife, eight adult children, one in-law, and one granddaughter in her teens. Mr. A and his wife had been married for 45 years, emigrated from his large ranching homestead along the Texas border in Ciudad Miguel Alemán, Mexico eighteen

years ago, and now worked construction. Mr. A ruled the family and made all decisions. Mrs. A. did not work outside their home. Mrs. A said that Mr. A had stated that he wanted to live until at least 70 years of age; his parents had lived to over 90 years of age. The entire family was Catholic and believed that, according to the youngest daughter, “God and Mr. A will decide when it is *tiempo de morir*. Our family cannot decide when my father’s life will end.”

The family conversed freely with Father L, who stopped to translate carefully the terminology Mrs. A was using. He reflected the youngest daughter’s English / Spanish terminology back to her. He did not use the words “God’s will,” but *la decisión de dios*. Father L talked about how difficult it was at times like this to know *la decisión de dios*. Father L offered an important interpretation of death when he said that removing the life-support machines / *máquina de soporte en vivo* would not be killing Mr. A. In offering this interpretation, Father L did not try to impose his own meaning of Mr. A’s condition onto the family. He did not say that “God does not give them more than they can bear, this suffering is their cross to bear, or that suffering is an opportunity to find Jesus and be saved” as Doehring (2009, p. 14) describes how some American ministers react initially to tragic situations. By using the same words as the family, Father L did not impose medical language on this family’s lament.

During conversation, when a caregiver’s aim is not to flow smoothly toward resolution, it becomes possible to linger within the families’ hesitations. The act of slowing down to explore honestly and assess a range of values, experiences, cares, and fears is part of the human story of preparing to embrace life and to assist one another

when life becomes out of reach. The family began to trust Father L. as he spoke at length about how the family might come to know *la decisión de dios*.

After establishing trust and a safe haven with the family, Father L. asked, “What might be a sign that God wants to embrace Mr. A into his world?” The family (with tears and reluctance) could not decide.

Poetry could be an explicit resource for spiritual practices of lament that connect the family and the medical team within an interconnected web of goodness that transcends this impasse, opening up more complex meanings about hope, life, and death. At this point, the poem “Oración: A Man at Prayer” by Benjamin Alire Sáenz (2002) could sustain lament for the family where they were. With the family’s permission, Father L. translated the poem, ending with these words:

Amor . . . I have learned how  
To speak in the hard language of the world—I want  
My words soft as a new and tender leaf. I want to say  
This: love makes nothing easy. (p. 3)

Mrs. A. asked Father L to pray and then wanted him to read the poem again. After the second reading and prayer, Mrs. A. began to tell her story of the struggles she and Mr. A. had endured in their life together and what was hurting the most was that she could not imagine her life without him. She offered: “God gives us a reason for suffering. God suffered before us; now we suffer.” A son-in-law responded: “I think we have to suffer through this.” The poem alongside the prayer allowed each person space and invited particular ways of mourning.

Father L. asked the family members if they thought Mr. A. is suffering, and solicited from some family members their concurrence that Mr. A is, indeed suffering.

The majority of the family maintained their belief that Mr. A was not suffering. In the respectful space created by Father L, the family began to further explore Mr. A's condition, using their own language rather than the phrases the medical treating team used previously with them such as: "quality of life," "making the right choice," and "futile."

"We have seen miracles happen," Mrs. A said and later related other stories of miracles. The family had seen a great uncle, whose family made promises to saints, recover from a coma. In fact, the mother of a priest living their hometown of Ciudad Miguel Alemán, Mexico had recovered from a stroke. The family held onto the hope for a miracle and were not ready to let Mr. A go. I like to bring up the paradox that hoping for a miracle and being realistic are not antithetical. One does not need to abandon hope in order to receive the dire medical prognosis. With tears, the family decided that if Mr. A's heart were to stop (as a fourth organ that was dying) that would be such a sign and they would not want the doctors to do CPR.

This was the time to affirm the use of medical life support to "buy time" for miracles and recovery. The ethics member was brought into the family's deliberations by gently drawing upon their experience of miracles, "When we see miracles, it is usually in the first two weeks. With time, the machines have their own complications, which we are seeing now." A nurse affirmed that Mr. A's underlying condition, not the removal of life support, would be the cause of death and "doctors would do all they could to keep him comfortable." This respectful dialogue relayed facts without a coercive agenda. Father L was very clear that withdrawing treatments was a theologically sound option. At the

same time, he was very empathetic with the difficulty of discerning the right way forward to know *la decisión de dios*.

My own conversation as their chaplain moved between present and past tense when referring to Mr. A. I'm not sure if that was reflected in Father L's translation, but the priest found it seamless, and, though not intentional, it might have helped the family "try on" the notion that Mr. A was not going to be with them. In my experience, when families access their version of what is going on, they move comfortably between the denial and the realism in the conversation. It is when a decision or interpretation is pushed on families that the discomfort of entrenched language emerges. The mutuality of telling and receiving is, in itself, empowerment and healing.

The purpose of such a meeting was to listen. Father L, the ethics team member, an ICU nurse, and I tried to enter the family's world and to engage it productively. Our listening was openly received by the family. There were some gentle laughs and explorations. After we asked for their narratives, they were able to "word them forth" for us as attentive listeners, thereby creating a knowingness that is intangible but consequential.

Ultimately, Mr. A. deteriorated again over the next couple of weeks and died with his family by his side as his kidneys were failing, his lungs were stiffening, and the edema and skin breakdown were getting severe. The family supported each other; I think they still felt like outsiders at the end. The doctors were right: he was dying and changing this was futile. It was unfortunate that palliative or inpatient hospice care was not available at this hospital.

Theologically, I see life as requiring a communitarian, interactive, sensate existence, and Mr. A was unable to enjoy this. Knowing the inexorable complications that would lead to his death over weeks to months, I sympathized with the medical team looking for a more gentle and swift ending. But in the course of many similar cases, I know that there is no consensus culturally (or legally) that supports that unilateral judgment, and that for some patients/families, any life is sacred.

Father L was a great resource as he read and translated the Sáenz poem in a way that emphasized the line breaks, led to a slowing down of time, and released pressure to make a final decision. This kind of collaborative conversation shows the explicit use of poetry and how it set the groundwork for ongoing discussions that respected the time Family A needed in order to be ready for the finality of Mr. A's life.

Olena Nesteruk, Associate Professor of Family Science and Human Development at Montclair State University, writes that “the experience of migratory loss and grief may have repercussions for other losses immigrants experience later in life” (2018, p. 1014). While being mindful of the multiple migratory losses and associated grief experienced by immigrants, chaplains would have an opportunity to recognize the depths of personal growth, resilience, and faith that immigrants develop as a result of coping with profound losses and discontinuities in life.

The next section discusses the implicit use of poetry for intercultural chaplains to deepen their sensitivities about how structures of power—based on North American histories of exclusion, imperialism, and colonization—continue to silence the experience of suffering individuals and communities. The poems show immigrants' experience of

grieving and also show their full experiences of living as an immigrant, or child of an immigrant, and how they have found resources, strengths, and spiritual practices as a result of coping with losses and discontinuities in their lives.

### **Contemporary Latinx Elegy as a Theological Source for Spiritual Care**

In the context of this composite vignette, an explicit use of Sáenz's poem helped open up time and space for the A family to tell their history and cultural background and lament past losses evoked by Mr. A's health crisis. Mrs. A recounted the story of her sister and her small niece who had died of heat exposure attempting to cross into the United States from Mexico. A daughter-in-law recalled how all her photos of her grandparents and their families had been lost. Over time, sustaining lamentation for this family would lead to an acknowledgement of many losses: the loss of experience, the loss of others, the loss of a life untouched by trauma, the loss of memories and histories, etc. and the ways family A accessed their strengths (through faith, family, and nature) and by listening to ways their traumatic experiences have made them stronger and perhaps more resilient. In lamentation we find the means to recognize and respect difference in ourselves and others.

Having elaborated the composite vignette of this family and the impasse with the medical team, I turn now to exploring how Latinx poetry could become an implicit theological source for intercultural care, for example in the context of chaplaincy training.

**Latinx poets.** Through reading Latinx poetry, a chaplain could become more sensitively aware and culturally humble when listening to the impact on a Latinx person's

life when making a new country home. Literary critic Ricardo L. Ortiz (2019) writes that in a US latinidad<sup>71</sup> context,

home can start with the mere question of housing, of who enjoys the guarantee of shelter and who doesn't, of how the struggle to secure and maintain shelter that isn't ever guaranteed requires of those who can manage it the commitment of time to secure space, the expenditure of at least short-term but also long-term labor and, for some, long-term debt, and for those who can't manage it the dependence on others, from the family, to the community, to the state . . . (p. 60)

Poet Javier Zamora's (2017) book, *Unaccompanied* humanizes the polarizing rhetoric of border-crossing as the speaker remembers, laments, and imagines the country, torn by war and gang violence, he left behind. A nine-year-old boy, he travelled four thousand miles to the US by himself. His book touches upon the "forms of experiential shock and trauma related to the desire for, and the failure to secure, some important modes of shelter and home, and on both individual and collective levels" (Ortiz, 2019, p. 64).

In a long poem "June 10, 1999," about this journey, Zamora (2017) retrospectively writes:

. . . we were lost and didn't know which star  
was north what was east we all  
dropped out of the van too soon to remember  
someone said the sun rose east we circled  
so much we had no maps and the guide we paid  
twisted his ankle was slowing us down

. . . I don't know  
his ankle *was* swollen he *was* feverish  
it's true

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<sup>71</sup> Ortiz defines US latinidad as "a demographic, historical, political, and cultural formation, one better characterized by fluidity, heterogeneity, unevenness, and nonidentity than by any more conventional, categorical, essentialist or in any other way fixed identitarian logics" (2019, p.1).



the sun's heat *was* a reptile but I know  
if we hadn't left him we'd still be  
run-over toads (p. 80, italics in original)

Later, in the same poem he writes:

I wasn't born here  
I've always known this country wanted me dead

do you believe me when I say more than once  
a white man wanted me dead . . . (p. 87)

Zamora's (2017) book suggests that poetry's role in the world could be: The freedom of imagination as a last resistance to repressive power. Having read this book, a question to ask a person with migratory experience could be: What does home mean to you? In context of this chapter, I would ask Mrs. A, "What ways would you say the traumatic experiences of the deaths of your sister and her infant in the desert have made you stronger? What do you imagine now about what could help you cope now with Mr. A being in the hospital?"

Furthermore, reading Zamora's (2017) *Unaccompanied*, we would learn about the way poets move back and forth between English and Spanish to create a unique rhythm. This book makes me think of ideas about language purity in the US and places where a polyglot aesthetic is not commonly welcomed, or perhaps even feared and misunderstood. Zamora's book underscores what other Latinx writers/poets such as Roberto Tejada (2009) call our "shared image environments" (p. 8) between the seer and the seen that takes place temporally at the site of engagement and "can be awakened in

the present act of viewing” (p. 153).<sup>72</sup> Tejada makes visible the impact systemic violence and racism have on bodies as they register the effects of detention and forced separation on families. He helps us see the mass effects of displacement as the “shape surrounding certain / words was mint and glycerin / drugs and explosives” (Tejada, 2012, p. 54).

Poet Vanessa Angelica Villarreal’s (2017) book of poetry, *Beast Meridian*, could help me better understand Mrs. A’s youngest daughter’s experience as a first generation Mexican American. Villarreal’s poems are about experiences of cultural displacement, the inheritance of generational trauma, sexist and racist violence, economic struggle, the immigrant working class condition, and institutional racism and sexism that disproportionately exclude girls of color in crisis. Her poems contain some Aztec mythology such as the Mictlán, reimagined as a state of constant mourning that challenges American notions of healing from trauma by acknowledging sadness, mourning, and memory as a necessary state of constant awareness to forge a “way back” toward a broader awareness of earth, time, body, and history. Poems from this book would make me ask the youngest daughter, I was moved by your description of your father, who ‘didn’t know what to do or how to help’ you. What would you like him to know about what you have lost? Have your beliefs in God changed as a result of these losses?

In *Elegies in Blue*, Benjamin Alire Sáenz (2002) writes at the grave of his father, a seasonal migrant worker:

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<sup>72</sup> Tejada (2009) discusses the histories of the U.S.-Mexico border as a site staging transnational dramas between U.S. and Mexico. Encounters with images and the visibilities they produce move between the image as a site of social inscription and totalizing visibility that is bound up with the production of colonized space and racialized bodies.

. . . People crossing back and forth, a daily ritual. Like morning Mass. In your boyhood, the river was not a river. Not a border. I see you, a boy crossing passengers on a raft for a penny. I see you, a skinny youth, jumping trains to Colorado. . . (p. 81)

Realizing the full extent of loss, in this poem Sáenz expresses grief both for the loss of his father and for the social conditions he endured throughout his life. An act of being present with the pain and shock for not just Mr. A's death, but also for other circumstances of hardship is the foundation for anything good to happen. Rather than trying to soothe or make things better for a mourner, Dorothy Becvar, a licensed marital and family therapist, advocates for providing a sense of real support by offering presence.

By presence she means:

a willingness coupled with an ability just to be with [mourners] and allow them to cry, to rage, to despair, to express all their feelings rather than trying to soothe them or make things better, rather than getting caught up in the mundane details of daily living. (2001, p. 57)

Sáenz describes the tension between beauty and justice in his political and social poems. If we readers could become more present to troubles in the world, if in some way we would feel those troubles to be our own either through a sense of responsibility or direct or indirect experience then they will find their way into our lives. And if they find their way into our lives, they will find their way into our caring for one another. And perhaps the tension between art and justice is in fact necessary. If as the past editor of *Image*, Gregory Wolfe (2015) says, "Justice demands that art care about the world" (p. 109), then would not art require that justice or any view of the world take into full account its complexity, and its own ambiguous motives and desires?

Ultimately, many of Sáenz's (2002) elegies in this book are love poems complicated by confession, by summing up an imperfect life, but love poems nevertheless, or love poems precisely because of these things. Can it be a matter of life and death, what poems have to offer? What causes people to die miserably? An absence of purpose, of meaning? A sense of entrapment, physical drudgery, or an exclusion of what literature cannot forget—what the writer Toni Morrison<sup>73</sup> (1989) calls “the ghost in the machine” (p. 11)? What is found in a poem may be a vehicle for attention, attentiveness, for engagement with the world, a lens to discover beauty and order and what disrupts them, a lens to see what we fear, to understand our burdens, to make it possible to suffer with, have compassion for others. Elements without which the spirit dies. Pauline Boss and her colleagues write about what helps in the aftermath of ambiguous loss. “Because ambiguous loss is a relational loss . . . authentic human connection is essential to build resiliency . . . . Mourners find resiliency through fuller human connections” (Boss et al., 2011, p. 165). A poem becomes a life-giving force, a kind of gift offered in the context of a troubling and troubled world.

It could be helpful for chaplains to be aware of the significance of home remedies and indigenous practices on Latinx culture, regardless of a particular religious orientation. For example, curanderismo is significant because for many Mexicans, it relieves “the pressures of paternalistic Catholic teachings . . . by allowing the people to speak for themselves” (Léon, 1997, pp. xiv-xvi). A person cannot fully be understood

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<sup>73</sup> Toni Morrison demonstrates how race and representation intersect. According to Morrison (1989), “in spite of its implicit and explicit acknowledgment, ‘race’ is still a virtually unspeakable thing.” She suggests that the “presence” of African-American literature within the American canon is itself an “unspeakable thing unspoken,” and she compares the quest for it to a search for “the ghost in the machine” (p. 11).

apart from their heritage. The poet Ariana Brown is a black Mexican-American poet from San Antonio, Texas who writes about curanderismo as a folk healing tradition from Mexico that finds its roots in Spanish, African, and Indian heritage. A curandero/curandera is a healer who has been trained in this practice. In her poem “Curanderismo,” A. Brown (2019) writes,

They know nothing  
of touching the world without an impulse to own . . .  
. . . if you are alive,  
you are descended from a people  
who refused to die.  
Nothing is more sacred than you. (p. 6)

Reading “Curanderismo” would illuminate particular aspects of spiritual practices of lament that connect the family within an interconnected web of goodness that transcends an impasse, opening up more complex meanings about hope, life, and death.

A book that would help sustain lamentation for complex themes of chronic sorrow could be poet José Olivarez’s (2018) book *Citizen Illegal*. Son of Mexican immigrants, Olivarez paints vivid portraits of families clinging to hope, gentrifying barrios, and creating a home out of life in the in-between. Olivarez takes on complex issues of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and immigration using an everyday language that invites the reader into his world. As pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring (2015a) writes, “Stepping into artistically portrayed suffering can foster compassion” (p.88).

Marcelo Hernandez Castillo’s (2018) debut collection of poems *Cenzontle* humanizes grief reactions. His poetry illustrates the acts of bias incidents and microaggressions as continuous realities for people of marginalized identities. For example, his elegy “Origin of Birds” (pp. 44-48) describes the consequences of

agricultural pesticides and fertilizers on farm workers, who come into contact with them on a daily basis and are poisoned by them. Farm workers are too afraid to report incidents and do not have access to medical care. Castillo addresses this particular lament to his late uncle, Ramón Hernandez Gonzalez, whose cancer is

*. . . in your blood,  
which means  
it's all of you.* (p. 46, italics in original)

His elegy ends when Ramón's life ends:

A flock of birds crawled out of your mouth  
and drew the stillness outside the room.

They pointed their beaks  
at the same time  
toward the quiet. (p. 48)

From this book I learned that sustaining lament with the A family would mean to be aware of the socio-historical conditions that are part of the Latinx culture and how such conditions could impact people like Mrs. A. What appears to a medical team as a noncompliant family or patient may be simply persons with different values and beliefs. For example, a culture may believe that acknowledging a loved one's impending death would be akin to casting a death curse on him or her. This has important implications for dealing with the needs of transnational cultures to mourn their particular narratives of grief, especially during times of illness and crisis.

Castillo and other poets' elegies grieve from the border, which suggests the ripple effect of grief reverberating through immigrants and their future generations. We caregivers might learn to interrogate our own privilege and assumptions, if we are white, but also to become more sensitive to the impact of a culturally biased healthcare system

on people of a different culture. Moreover, in this particular case, how might chaplains cultivate a safe haven where the medical treatment team's anxiety is not handled by distance, but by staying in the kind of conversations Father L was having with the A family? According to pastoral theologians Montilla and Medina,

Pastoral counselors connect with Latino/as when they appreciate the diversity among them and embrace their multicultural-mosaic nature. There is unity in the sense of purpose, suffering and hope, but the diversity is so vast that trying to put Latino/as into one category is delusional. (2006, p. 131)

From poet Ada Limón's (2018) fifth book *The Carrying* we would discover that Latinx writers do not necessarily address their heritage through the lens of immigration. There are many ways to live and write as a Latinx poet. Her experiences are nuanced and singular. Yet, she also describes sociohistorical stressors and how they are related to ways the speaker copes throughout the book. Her poems invite me (a white person) to recognize my ignorance and give me words and images to invite Mrs. A to enrich my knowledge of her culture and the importance she placed on religious practices and how they expressed her different ways of belonging. In her poem "Ancestors," Limón writes:

. . . I don't remember what I first saw, the brick of light  
that unhinged me from the beginning. I don't remember  
my brother's face, my mother, my father.

Later, I remember leaves, through car windows,  
through bedroom windows, through the classroom window,  
the way they shaded and patterned the ground, all that  
power from roots. Imagine you must survive  
without running? I come from the lacing patterns of leaves,  
I do not know where else I belong. (pp. 2-3)

I suggest the act of reading poetry and being familiar with marginalized voices through Latinx elegies encourage new ways to open intercultural spiritual care conversations about death in families. Although crossing the US/Mexico border and the ongoing search for belonging may not be a part of every person's experience in Mr. A's family, these elegies attune us to a reality that dying is not something that is just happening to Mr. A and its impact on the social and relational experiences of his family, to whom we are ministering. But dying is also about the meaning and impact of unjust deaths across generations, as we discovered in a later family meeting, Mrs. A's sister and her infant had died of heat exposure attempting to cross into the United States from Mexico.

In both disenfranchised loss<sup>74</sup> and ambiguous loss, "losses must be endured without community validation or official verification" (Boss, 2004a, p. 237). Grief can be very lonely, and survivors of these types of losses may feel disconnected because others do not understand their pain. "By normalizing and contextualizing distress, practitioners can help family members enlarge their perspective to see their difficulties as understandable in light of the adversities they face" (Walsh, 2006, p. 132). By reading these poems a reader does not experience loss as a visual representation *away* from the border but witnesses the mourner's painful reactions to having mourned. As a reader, we might co-create meanings with the poem.

In Mrs. A's case, the elegies about deaths in the desert at the border would attune us to cultural factors of disenfranchised loss, such as possibilities of the family having

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<sup>74</sup> Disenfranchised loss is "a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (Doka, 1989, p. 4).



ungrieved losses from unjust deaths that could be tragically impacting the ways they are feeling and coping with Mr. A's approaching death. Understanding cultural factors influencing disenfranchised loss, we might ask Mrs. A: "How did your sister's death change things for you? I wonder how you are different for better and worse since she is gone." We might find an appropriate time to ask J, Mr. A's son: "You say that God judged you for what happened. That it was somehow your fault that your father lost consciousness, because you didn't take him to the doctor sooner; and yet your values of advocacy, integration into a new culture, and courage have made you strong. Are there any other values that you want to talk about that have made you resilient?"

I will end the section with poet Brenda Shaughnessy's (2018) words. Of Castillo's book, she writes:

A reader can't merely receive passively, however grateful s/he is . . . . Song comes from grief and love that lingers, mutates, is absorbed . . . . And song comes from rage, demanding justice, in which compassion is not meant to forgive but to remember, to inscribe, to know by heart. And in case anyone forgets, the poet seems to say, the centazole [mockingbird] doesn't. (p. 9)

### **Last Words**

Some medical caregivers do not understand fully the need to establish safety and trust or to be curious about how different families communicate—culturally and linguistically. This composite vignette illustrates ways that chaplains often shuttled information back to the staff about the family's framework for decision-making and understanding Mr. A's health crisis. I interpreted to the medical team the family's language of "brain-dead." I heard the frustration of the medical team's uncomfortable feelings expressed in the statement, "We should just send this bill to their country!" After

reminding them that Mr. A had adequate insurance through his work, I wanted to offer a poetry workshop to the medical treatment team. Such a workshop would highlight Benjamin Alire Sáenz's poetry book *Elegies in Blue* and other Latinx poems that name both the beauty of marginalized peoples and the historical injustices that they endure. For example, Sáenz's poems are adept at illustrating that Latinx values are placed on family members to protect them from suffering and to provide them with hope and an expectation of an ongoing connection with God as opposed to the autonomy paradigm found within the US medical system.

As the Latinx poets in this chapter show, life is more than what is going on in a person; it is also what is going on between a person and his/her entourage (family, social system, culture, religion, etc.). So, as a chaplain I could not stand by my medical treatment colleagues (as they had wanted me to) to allow them to unilaterally take advantage of this family and withhold offering dialysis and other support. It was important to honor both the family's theology without diminishing the medical team's training and values, their responsible ethical standard, and the economics of the situation (for example, there are a limited number of ICU rooms which means that people who also needed Mr. A's room were turned away). This composite vignette is an example of "contending values."<sup>75</sup> All the parties have legitimate perspectives, but these do not cohere and care is hampered accordingly. The role taken by a chaplain and the priest can make a difference in bridging these disparate cultures.

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<sup>75</sup> According to Larry K. Graham (1992), "contending values refers to the dynamic interplay between the quality of the achievements and creative potentials of the entities comprising the system, and the system as a whole" (p. 64).

I am not sure this kind of extended dying, (not “deathing,”) <sup>76</sup> is helpful for families, as common as it is becoming in medicine. The repeated questioning of how long to continue and when to let a person die is painful. I am not always sure what language to use to convey that or how to relieve people of unnecessary burdens in decision-making. I think this is where education and preparation are badly needed—for all parties. This subject is receiving more attention in the medical literature, yet culturally sensitive, evidence-based literature regarding cultural difference and implications on medical decision making has not been explored fully, even though work on palliative care, hospice care, and advance directives have made especially pertinent beginnings to this point, but as far as I know without the aid of contemporary poetry.

This chapter used a composite vignette based on my experience as a hospital chaplain to demonstrate the ways poetry can be a theological source for culturally sensitive spiritual care. Of course, poetry other than Latinx poetry can also be helpful. For instance, one of the themes from Lindenberg’s (2012) book is that of accumulation of Arnold’s objects and how they took on new meaning. With a patient like Mr. A, his personal belongings and clothes could easily take on a similar significance, especially if he were to die wearing a hospital gown and never again resume the life represented by the clothing and possessions put in a bag when he was admitted into the ER. A chaplain mindful of the significance of such objects could ensure that the family knew where these personal items were and may suggest using them in a ritual before, during, or after the withdrawal of life support.

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<sup>76</sup> Deathing is a form of extended dying. Anya Foos-Graber (1989) describes deathing as “conscious dying: it is dying that is not left to chance or contingency” (p. xv).

Sustaining lamentation holds the complexity of suffering and allows people to nuance lamentation in a variety of cultural contexts. Our experiences of loss are what we make of them, and there is more than one way to make something from them. The contemporary elegy by people of color helps to discover cultural ways that social oppressions intersect in unresolved mourning. Poems can help connect emotional dynamics of grief to a mourner's coping practice, an essential task of intercultural spiritual care. As pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring writes: "While psychological research helps [caregivers] understand the emotional dynamics of grief, trauma, and addiction, caregivers need to connect these emotional dynamics with care seekers' values, beliefs, and coping practices" (2015a, p. 120). Poems can tell us about cultural and religious pluralism that are built on *values, beliefs, and coping practices* and that demand constructive theological methods for engaging difference. Poets show us that the thoughts they have held about loss don't necessarily have to pertain to today and tomorrow in the same way that they have up until now.

From the contemporary elegy, practical theology may learn to weave a tapestry of spiritual and relational elements, which contain a mixture of unmitigated horror and unresolved mourning along with exquisite love. Among mourners in a community, poetry can make conversations possible that many would never have the nerve or comfort level necessary to engage.

## Chapter 7

### Sustaining Lamentation as Hope Toward the Future

*Humanity needs a hope that is particular yet not exclusive: hope that elucidates the plight of black women (men and children) but does not forget the oppression of other peoples.*

Elaine Crawford, 2002, p. 109

*. . . They're long since dead.  
My heart has closed on itself, quietly  
Learning that silence is noble and sorrow  
Nothing that speech can cure.*

“The Wanderer,” circa 950 CE, trans. Burton Raffel

#### Introduction

One of the first preserved pieces of English poetry comes a thousand years after Plato. In the elegy “The Wanderer,” translated from Old English by Burton Raffel (1998), an Anglo-Saxon speaker describes a sense of exile and ruin caused by the death of the speaker’s lord and the loss of his kingdom.<sup>77</sup> The poem blends visual experience and lament with a larger vision of a lost world. In the above words, when the wanderer speaks of sorrow as “nothing speech can cure,” he implies that his motivation for speaking is not consolation. Perhaps it is simply the urge to give voice to a human need of leaving something behind, to make in the midst of tragedy and ruin something human. Along these lines, we might imagine a lone, weathered speaker stepping out of the crush

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<sup>77</sup> “The Wanderer” is an anonymous elegy from “The Exeter Book,” written in Old English. As discussed in Chapter 4, “The Exeter Book” is a compendium compiled or possibly composed around the 10<sup>th</sup> century and given to the Exeter Cathedral in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

of time and experience. Nothing glib—just the human need to speak of the ruin, the harsh buffeting, one’s inner drive to wander, one’s longing and grief.

Now, more than a thousand years after “The Wanderer,” the considerable amount of critical attention paid to loss and mourning confirms literary scholars David L. Eng and David Kazanjian’s (2003) contention in their introduction to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* that “at the dawn of the twenty-first century, mourning remains” (p. 6). Specifically, since 9/11 questions about mourning, lamentation, and memorialization have been thrust to the foreground of North American practical theological conversations. Traumatic loss—whether from natural disaster, moral injury, war, existence in the borderlands, exile, immigration, or mass shootings—initiates new actions and new histories in the world not only for the families involved, but also for our communities and nations.

At its core, practical theology “describes the critical reflection about the meaning of faith and action in the world” (Poling & Miller, 1985, p. 33). In this theoretical arena, postcolonial feminists, womanists, mujeristas, queer theorists, and intercultural spiritual caregivers concerned with the impacts of traumatic loss on individuals, communities, and nations continue to bring the many different testimonies into ethnographic research. But this dialogue—concerning the particular testimonies of bereaved people, many of whom are rendered invisible or denied legitimacy by the daily mechanisms of unequal power structures—is not finding its way into the broader workings and practices of mourning.

The project aligns with Rebecca Chopp’s claim for a theology that “continually engages in creating spaces, building bridges, and forming new discourses as practices of

emancipatory transformation” (2001, p. 67) and her call for people “in Christianity and theology to take seriously language as a site of transformation in subjectivity and politics” (1989, p. 9). Rather than a rejection of the impact of the Christian tradition and its central narratives such as crucifixion and redemption, this project roots itself within the tradition, turning to elegies as the poetics of testimony that begin to address broader perspectives outside/beyond the limits of practical theology’s methods and language. Christian theology must advocate for discourse that recognizes difference and dismantles oppressive systems without resorting to forms of essentialism in the context of the multiple ways people lament. Since systems are difficult to influence, this work requires an interdisciplinary method rather than a single-field approach. Thus, dismantling oppressive systems as theological work demands not only community organizing, but also discourse/language outside practical theology.

Spanning intercultural spiritual care, public theology, psychology, and poetic studies, this project carries a feminist theological trajectory forward by exploring the practical theological questions that traumatic losses and hidden griefs pose in the context of intercultural lamentation. Broadly, it asks: How does suffering shape our bodily and communal responses to cataclysmic experiences and form our bodily and communal practices? How might theological discourse about death and loss occur in public ways that do not further consolidate dominant social norms, norms that much contemporary post-colonial practical theological work seeks to upend and break open? Specifically, it asks: What can practical theologians learn from the elegy and its criticisms about

ambiguous loss, disenfranchised grief, and the mechanisms of power by which many are rendered invisible by the daily mechanisms of unequal power structures?

This dissertation begins to address the above questions by considering the place of poetry in and for the future of practical theology as a field whose “method . . . characterizes theology as ‘performative knowledge,’ that is, a way of knowing that is inseparable from doing. The fundamental assumption here is that theory and practice are inextricably joined” (E. Graham et al., 2005, p. 170). Under this stipulation, this project’s theoretical work has been oriented toward real application and its pragmatic potentials. This project shows that lamentation is particularly expressed in and through the particular testimonies of bereaved people and that the field of the poetic elegy and its criticisms offers a needed language for the particular and real ways underrepresented communities experience traumatic loss.

Working as a hospital chaplain, I have been disappointed when the language around death, dying, and mourning reflects medicine’s technology and power. Theologian Richard Coble (2018) shows us that in the context of hospital chaplaincy, grievable experiences are often ignored when the language of medicine reflects a hospital’s environment of the nonstop cascades of events amidst the backdrop of beeping monitors, lack of privacy, and split-second decisions that redirect the trajectory of a patient’s life. “Healthcare today,” Coble writes, “functions to sustain its patient population and control the demise of the body, employing languages of treatment, therapy, fulfillment, and choice that obscure the experience of loss inherent within dying and death” (p. 7). Furthermore, such a narrative often ignores the inequalities already



inscribed in the system being trusted to respect the inherent worth and value of human beings. As caregivers, how do we make the leap from facts into sacred insights that resist glib resolutions and open the fullness of humanity in all its complexity and chaos? How can we be attuned to the opening to holiness in the patient's narrative? I want to see a public practical theology that esteems the layerings and dimensions of the language of lament and grants access to liberative positions for all persons and communities. This goes beyond theological textbooks, scripture, and public habits of mind.

### **Ridding the Careless Role of Lamentation**

Lamentation as a practice in the context of public theology can be transformative for society, but it also faces numerous problems in an increasingly multicultural society because a true concern for the inequality of current structures would demand attention to broadening the role of public lamentation as more than just comforting one another in the face of traumatic loss. In the *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Ian McFarland (2011) takes up public theology's concern with multi-culturalism when he states:

Unlike liberation theology or feminist theology, public theology refers less to a theological programme than to a theological problem: how to bring theology to bear on issues of general concern (e.g., economic or military policy) within a pluralistic society. In other words, in the face of conventions that tend to limit theological discourse to the Church and (to a lesser extent) the academy, proponents of public theology seek to address matters of general (i.e., public) welfare from a perspective informed by the doctrines and symbols of Christianity, without presupposing that the public addressed shares a commitment to the Christian faith. (para. 1)

Public theology has not developed within practical theology per se but is, as McFarland describes, an attempt for theology to speak into the public sphere of common concern from a theological tradition.

In the context of public lamentation and memorialization, issues arise when a vigil is associated solely with one particular faith tradition, since there is not just a singular set of beliefs and values that make up the US culture. Another issue is when a speaker's discourse examines tragedy in light of one tradition such as Christianity's understandings of suffering, salvation, and resurrection without publicly recognizing the speaker's social location or assumptions.

For example, during the Aurora Theater public vigil Bishop James Conley (2012) led the evening prayer service. In his invocation, he prayed, "Each of us may join in the victory of (the Lord's) Resurrection." These words point to assumptions about Christianity in the United States: 1) A Christian pastor has the authority to speak for everybody; 2) "The Lord" will order history itself; history is hierarchical; and 3) lamentation is a process that humans need not be concerned with, because when it is in "God's hands," lamentation is finished and done with. (Earlier in the prayer Bishop Conley had stated, "let us place our questions, our fears, and our uncertainties tonight in the hands of our loving and merciful God"). In the aftermath of tragedies and catastrophes, if our public religious leaders are bringing premature resolution to the experience of grief, thereby failing to acknowledge the harm, stigmatization and marginalization of people coping with tragedy, how could it be possible for the public to

bear severe system and role loss? In extreme circumstances, ongoing, unresolved grief may be the only reasonable response to violence and injustice.

Pastoral theologian Larry K. Graham (2017) writes about dissonant elements and perilous discourse of public memorials. As sites of communal engagement through expressing lament, public memorials can also be contested sites fraught with danger, rage, violence, and a lack of accountabilities which can cause further harm. L. Graham writes:

Perhaps the most difficult lesson for those of us in dominant power positions is to recognize the truths of our own histories and the ongoing implications of the injuries our way of life has caused other parties. There is a tendency for dominant cultures to define the scope of permissible anguish, to have ultimate control over the discourse about causes, and to determine when it is time to get over the past and move on. (2017, p.151)

The perilous problem with Bishop Conley's words, "joining in the victory of the Lord's Resurrection," for all people is that these words foreclose on the cultural and religious other. In a Colorado Public Radio interview, Anna Panoka (2012) speaks with Iliff School of Theology Professor Carrie Doehring about the Aurora public vigil. Doehring speaks about "jarring moments" or moments that did not feel right at the vigil service. Doehring states:

Many of the religious leaders that were there were drawing upon Christian beliefs in a way that would assume that the audience was all Christian. The references to God and to Jesus Christ assumes that they would have meaning to everybody in the audience. (Panoka, 2012)

When public Christian leaders assume an audience is all Christian and only make references to Jesus Christ, resurrection, and hope, their actions foreclose on engaging

differences of deeply held beliefs and values, and the space for all to simply remember with sadness and anger is gone. It is a careless gesture.

Furthermore, the words “victory of (the Lord’s) resurrection” imply the history of Christianity as a history where Christians have imposed their beliefs on others and have disregarded the truths of other’s beliefs. The word “victory” aligns the Christian narrative with militaristic power and status while denying people’s grief-experience.

An impact of the denial of grief-experience on society is that it renders difficult self-examination, painful self-expression, and vulnerability as unnecessary and undesirable. Judith Butler’s (2004) *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, can be read as a wide appeal “for reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss” (Butler, 2004, p.20). Butler shows us a universal human vulnerability not as a condition, but as a process accompanying loss. She writes:

Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a “we,” for all of us [sooner or later] have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous “we” of us all... Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure. (p. 20)

The vulnerability Butler posits is a process of the necessarily receptive character of our emergent humanity. Public lamentation is a modality of acknowledging our vulnerability and moving beyond personal grief to be embraced by vital communal energies. The “victory” discourse does not address vulnerability.

In theory and in many academic circles, most contemporary paradigms of pastoral/practical theology have moved past the traditional models of redemptive and moral suffering (Lartey, 2012; Ramsay, 2013). However, at many vigils, public religious

leaders often speak about God with words that seem mired in the traditional models of pastoral theology, which are aimed at understanding “a moral view” of God as all powerful, all knowing, and all good (Nelson, 2003, pp. 399-402). These views of God as omnipotent are often formed in childhood and strengthened through family and social interactions. Pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring (2015a) refers to internalized beliefs, values, and ways of coping as “embedded theology” (p. 187). She writes, “embedded theologies of suffering push people beyond lament to accept resurrection as the ultimate sign of healing” (Doehring, 2015b, p.165). Embedded theologies reinforce normative modes of lament, which might promote a blind spot toward recognizing inherent structures of inequality.

A second issue concerning public memorials and lamentation rituals in the public square is that historically, the field of psychology has been prominently featured in pastoral theology as a resource. By definition pastoral theology draws upon social and behavioral sciences to do its work of analysis, construction, and implementation, and the field of psychology has been featured prominently in this. This is problematic for at least two reasons.

Firstly, psychological discourses are often modeled on evidence-based psychological literature privileging the white Eurocentric, heteronormative tradition and leaving out how people of color respond in particular ways to religious and spiritual struggles. Some pastoral theologians of color have been addressing which psychologies do or do not make sense, and why and whether it works to benefit people of color. For example, Carroll Watkins-Ali (1999) has created a psychology and Phillis Sheppard

(2011) has moved toward adapting a psychoanalytic/Kohutian psychology, but traumatic experiences of immigration and assimilation of the non-white bodied and/or the exiled and/or the immigrant are not widely reflected in evidence-based research. A core critical question is whether and under what circumstances psychodynamically-oriented psychoanalytic thought and practice can (and cannot) be a positive resource in addressing the suffering of African-Americans and other people of color seeking care.

In literary scholar's Jennifer D. Williams's (2006) critique of Freud, she asks: "How does one configure 'the lost object' when assimilation into whiteness is not the desired goal but the attainment of an authentic blackness is" (p. 16)? In one form or another such questions ought to be finding their way into the broader workings and practices of lamentation in our world where they might suggest ways of deconstructing or reconfiguring remembering and forgetting and thereby expanding the sense of relationality involved in visions of peace.

Secondly, the discourse of many public memorials and lamentation rituals in the US is based in common cultural interpretations of Freud's views on mourning and melancholia (described in Chapter 2) as successful or non-successful mourning. Western clinical models, aimed at helping the bereaved and those that counsel them, have proposed successful mourning as a process of moving through stages in order to relinquish attachment to the deceased. The assumption is that we go through a grief cycle or phase and come out healed. The notion of a successful way to mourn is not helpful.

When public leaders in communities try to put tragic events "behind" them and "move on," they prematurely apply the psychological language of the processes of

healing and closure and dismiss the ongoing realities of traumatic grief that do not go away in everyday lives of underrepresented communities in the U.S. A premature move toward hope is a careless use of lamentation and may inflict harm, alienation, and discontent.

Furthermore, the concept of working through loss to a successful end links grieving to a respite or reward. Further, the concept of reward for the work of grieving links to a traditionally Christian notion of a God that will reward one's hard work in heaven. This notion often is perpetuated in the public religious leaders' words of consolation such as: "He's in a better place," or "She was a hard-working mother, now she is rewarded with her loved ones in the afterlife," etc. With these words, Christian leaders unwittingly (or not) espouse an idea that there would be little need for earthly mourning because consolation awaits on the other side and mourners would see their perfectly embodied deceased loved ones again in heaven.

Furthermore, an idea of the resurrection as Christ's bodily wounds regaining their original unmarked skin invokes a figure of a perfectly healed body after a traumatic death. Such an erasure of wounds may comfort many and yet to others, it may bring to mind the erasures of indigenous ways of life, of racism, and of the impacts of colonialism's traumatic histories. It brings to mind the unseen dominating narratives of imperial, economic, and "civilizational" progress, thus echoing Adorno's (1986) suggestion that "coming to terms with the past" could involve "wishing to turn the page and, if possible, wiping it from memory" (p. 115). Does a public religious leader's use of a dominant image of a perfectly embodied messiah in a eulogy after traumatic deaths

persuade that nation's political agenda for a denial of accountability by moving its citizenry toward premature hope? On Sept. 21, 2001, in his address to Congress, President Bush (2001) addressed the 9/11 terrorist attacks by announcing that we in North America have finished grieving. He said, "Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution." What is the impact of prematurely moving those grieving toward hope on underrepresented peoples within the dominant culture?

Much more critique and interrogation about what theologians should address in their public speeches of lament is warranted. Which psychologies do or do not make sense in a diverse public context and what needs to be modified, rejected, and/or created to promote the psychological/ spiritual well-being of a pluralistic culture? My point here is simply that we must contend with questions like this if we continue to grant public lamentation the power to move people toward hope in a system that privileges the functional and the healed who already possess cultural access, social power, and economic capital. An acknowledgment of ongoing historical legacies of grief and the dynamics of cultural hegemony could set an example for new modes of mourning on the part of public religious leaders and the citizenry.

### **Expanding the Role of Lamentation**

While I seek to rid the careless role of lamentation in society, I also want to expand lamentation to its fullest potential, trumpeting its role as an initiator of social change and a contributor to accessing empowerment for the mourner through evoking ethical responsibility and motivation as a response to loss. Expanding Larry Graham's



(2017) model of lamentation, I draw upon R. Clifton Spargo's reconfiguration of social norms and Rebecca Chopp's poetics of testimony to construct a fuller model of lamentation as a method of intercultural bereavement care.

**Larry K. Graham's work on lamentation.** In Chapter 1, I described the way pastoral theologian Larry K. Graham (2006, 2011, 2014, 2017) defined, developed, and applied his tri-partite model of lamentation over the several writings in which he used it. Briefly, he discusses three reactions to catastrophic disaster: 1) sharing anguish; 2) interrogating the causes and systems that allowed for the disaster to occur; and 3) reclaiming life through various forms of assistance / reinvesting hopes (L. Graham, 2017, pp. 135-151). L. Graham is adamant that these three reactions are not steps through lamentation, rather they are "interacting poles" that are to be considered as "circular and spiral rather than linear and sequential" (2017, p. 139).

In his most recent work, L. Graham (2017) writes:

The central purpose of lamentation is to provide a way for individuals and communities to truthfully express the sorrows of the world that have come upon them and to register protest, complaint, and anger at those responsible for them. As we fully name the truth of our affliction, paradoxically, that affliction becomes bearable and the way is opened toward healing. (p. 138)

Looking through the lens of L. Graham's central purpose of lamentation, one can deduce that the ability to express outrage, "register protest, complaint, and anger" an individual would have to be in a position to be able to truthfully express their sorrows and to be in a position to be heard. However, not all people have access to these positions, and the lamentation process as L. Graham describes it would be difficult. Many underrepresented people do not commonly have the means to get legitimacy to

interrogate causes or register protests fully—especially when a religious leader is using language to draw upon religion in the public sphere as a universal authority and not as a resource for renewal in an accountable context. Further, L. Graham discusses an interrogation of God as benevolent, which may be possible in some communities, but I do not see as likely in all communities. Many people may not be interested in the interrogation portion of L. Graham’s model at all, with God’s role in their lives perhaps being decentralized and functional. Thus, to carry this project forward, I would suggest that L. Graham’s model of lamentation be expanded to address people’s lack of access to the position of registering protests, complaints, and anger.

HyeRan Kim-Cragg (2018) a postcolonial feminist practical theologian at St. Andrew’s College, Saskatoon, Canada, posits that the theology and experiences coming from the voices of those most vulnerable are always contextual. Thus, it is essential not only to hear, witness, and lament with these communities, but also to respond with liberative values, beliefs, and actions. Further, theologian Clare Louise Radford (2017) draws on the work of Walter Mignolo and Marcella Althaus-Reid, to argue that practical theological methodology must not ignore the full experiences of people living in the margins. She writes:

Recognizing the margins as sites of critical praxis indicates that practical theologies must resist framing experiences of the margins as experiences of deprivation and lack, and instead as experiences of active working, supporting and struggling against oppression together. (p 127)

Therefore, to suggest a position that advocates for L. Graham’s tri-partite lamentation as a fuller dynamic of solidarity, I amplify one of R. Clifton Spargo’s (2004) elements from

his ethical motivation in his work in the field of the poetic elegy: the reconfiguration of social norms.

**R. Clifton Spargo's reconfiguration of social norms.** From Chapter 5, recall that R. Clifton Spargo (2004), a writer and literary critic, explores the meaning and consequences of missed, delayed, or unfinished mourning within social norms bent on ending mourning through his examination of elegiac concepts and figures. In one of many of Spargo's literary examples, he describes Antigone's solidarity with her dead brother as an act of dissent against the political system upheld by Creon who refuses to give her brother a proper burial. Spargo writes, "a mourner's willingness to oppose those cultural norms that preside over his society's attitude toward death is what gives to mourning its ethical connotation" (p. 5). Spargo argues that on into our contemporary context, the elegiac Anglo-literary tradition has been characterized by an attitude of resistance to cultural models of grief that emphasize resolution and incorporation of the dead into a cultural memory that absorbs the alterity of the other. I suggest that Spargo's concern for an aspect of mourning as a reconfiguration of social norms would broaden L. Graham's second pole of interrogating causes in his tri-partite model of lamentation.

Spargo's concern for reconfiguring social norms would add to L. Graham's theory by turning to those who must negotiate cultural and social worlds that are much more complex than that of the dominant culture. In a world that persists in tearing its populations apart, isolating, excluding, and even killing its citizens in the name of identity politics, that which breaks the tyranny of identity, reconfigures social norms, and

yet expands the cultural spaces for real human difference and future relational possibilities is a practice desperately needed in the role of lamentation.

**Rebecca Chopp's poetics of testimony.** This dissertation is interested in modes of language that allow for individuals, communities, and nations to move beyond trauma and loss without foreclosing on it. L. Graham's tripartite model of lamentation calls for people to "truthfully express the sorrows of the world that have come upon them" and to "fully name the truth of our affliction . . ." (2017, p. 138). I suggest the poetics of testimony (Chopp, 2001) would be a useful mode that would move this model of lamentation more fully into practice. The poetics of testimony calls for theology to speak of "the real of which language ordinarily does not even know how to speak" (Chopp, 2001, p. 61). Recall from Chapter 3 that poetry often moves by its formal features: the resonances and contrasts of sound, the music of language, and by deliberate leaps of felt experience. A poem can open fresh possibilities by embodying or performing itself both as a mode of experience and as an alternative method of reflection. Poetry can break open abstracted, logical categories and grammatical structure by which our institutional frameworks and languages often violently fix and limit our humanity.

Echoing the belief of others before me that the language of lamentation has more to offer than the limited role of moving people through their grief, I call for lamentation to play a role in the more-just world we seek. In Chapters 5 and 6 the poetry I discussed offers ways to sustain lamentation as modalities of living with traumatic grief. Certain poems name the magnitude of intersecting social oppressions and economic systems loss by affirming them. Many forms of the contemporary poetic elegy challenge an

understanding of grief as a performance of variously “successful” or “unsuccessful” processes of mourning (in the early Freudian sense of the term). The poems I examine in this dissertation neither conform to Freud’s early model for mourning nor react directly against it; instead they seek impactful alternatives to living with loss and describe the particular place the deceased other holds in the world. Thinking about these texts as the poetics of testimony, we can “imagine theology as practices of negotiating between what is and what can be” (Chopp, 2001, p. 67). After all, public lamentation is one of the most powerful responses of our humanity’s being bonded together with one another to preserve life and it warrants ongoing debate and struggle as to what kind of influence it should have on the audience.

An alternative theological vision of lamentation seeks to free lamentation from its careless role as a path to premature hope and instead offer a more robust type of liberation, one that has been witnessed to throughout the history of people’s lived experience and their articulations of God.

**Sustaining lamentation as a method of intercultural bereavement care.** One contribution this dissertation makes is the concept of sustaining lamentation as a mode of intercultural bereavement care. My use of sustaining lamentation is grounded in three cornerstones mentioned in Chapter 1 and reviewed above: L. Graham’s tripartite model of lamentation, Spargo’s concept of a reconfiguration of social norms, and Chopp’s poetics of testimony.

This project puts forth the argument that sustaining lamentation in the context of hospital chaplaincy is a modality of spiritual caregiving that asks the caregiver to be

present with grief in co-creative, collaborative, and expressive ways that theologically explore the impacts of trauma, including historical trauma, with the careseeker. The practice of reading poetry in a faith community of bereavement becomes a practice of sustaining lamentation until something else emerges from the careseeker's experience.

Our attachments to those we love may never be completely severed, even years after their loss. While we may recover from the initial shock of loss, we may never be appeased entirely. The desire to live with the presence of the deceased runs counter to the efforts of creating distance between the living and the dead. It is at odds with the removal of death to hospitals, with the relocation of grief into therapeutic contexts, and with the public rhetoric of grieving: "letting go," "moving on," and "getting over it."

In fact, it exemplifies a greater tension between death and grief as they are theorized as compared to how they are experienced. Tony Walter, Director of the Center for Death and Society at the University of Bath, describes this contradiction. He writes:

The fashionable idea that the purpose of grief is to detach from the deceased and move on is based neither on research nor clinical experience, but on the western cultural value of autonomy...though some bereaved people do indeed cut their bonds, many do not. They continue to relate to the dead, sustaining an ongoing bond that is not static...but continually evolving. (Small, 2001, p. 34)

Along these lines, poet Rafael Campo urges that "in this age of 'shock and awe,' we must be even more cautious to avoid [the] facile and often conveniently public 'I feel your pain' notion of empathy [which performs a] kind of disengagement from the truths of war and suffering" (S. Gilbert, 2006, para. 3). Thus, the reading of contemporary poems that hold the complexities of grief is an application that contemporary elegies could have in

spiritual care communities as they attempt to grapple with the spiritual issues of tragic absences, psychological shock of dead bodies, and the social disorder of loss.

This project claims that contemporary elegies, as forms of the poetics of testimony, bear witness to the complex dimensions of traumatic grief in liberative ways that do not foreclose on alterity, but sustain lamentation as a task of intercultural spiritual caregivers of persons and communities. To foster ethical intercultural spiritual care in the context of bereavement, chaplains must be aware of the daily mechanisms of power by which many are rendered invisible or denied legitimacy. Sustaining lamentation is a practice of practical theology that engages in solidarity and new connections. From a caregiver's perspective, communal support becomes a sustaining presence for lament and co-creates ongoing meanings that help people physiologically and emotionally connect with grief and lament it. Such responses create solidarity that is available at any given moment to receive the lamentations of others while allowing them to create their own path through a grieving landscape. Sustaining lamentation co-creates meanings, connects personal and public grief to ongoing tragedy, and conserves the past.

When caregivers and careseekers read elegies, collaborative conversation helps to name and express truthfully the sorrows that have come upon mourners. Words open new ways of thinking and understanding. Futures are opened unexpectedly amid creative relations. Concepts and practices of hope are brought into a new light. This project puts forth the argument that as a spiritual care provider, it is not enough to be present with individuals, families and/or communities grieving losses. The theological implication is that it is not adequate simply to pray for a better time without pain in the midst of a

bereavement group or in the midst of political structuring of social welfare. To foster ethical intercultural spiritual bereavement care, chaplains must be aware of the daily mechanisms of power by which many are rendered invisible or denied legitimacy.

Pastoral caregivers provide a deeper attentiveness when attuned to the nuances of language and metaphor used to express spiritual experiences and their meanings. As to poetry and the sacred, writers Marilynne Robinson and John Polkinghorne (2008) speak of poetry and theology in similar terms saying they both push conventional definitions and explore perceptions that might be ignored or passed off as conventional, but when they are pressed yield much larger meanings. The assumption behind both they say is profound beauty and being simply in itself (p. 31).

Practical theologians have responsibilities to acknowledge the poetics of testimony as a potential for appreciation for real human difference within/between cultures and as a potential for tolerance for the ways pain resonates through different histories and the ways we lament. Poetic studies and its criticisms offer intercultural caregivers and careseekers new ways of connection that sustain lamentation until something else emerges from the careseeker's experience.

### **A Call to Public Religious Leaders: The Place of Poetry in Public Lamentation**

Public memorial services represent diverse public contexts in which non-secular sources such as literary texts are positive resources in publicly addressing the suffering of those seeking care in a pluralistic culture. I suggest that poetry can articulate experiences and aspects of human life that have been neglected or denied in dominant discourses spoken by public religious leaders during prayer vigils. Examples of poems that do not



foreclose on grief, but capture an ongoing sorrow and anger are those recited by the poets Tony Walsh (Gardner, 2017) at the Manchester vigil and Ben Okri (Gray, 2017) at the Grenfell Tower Fire vigil.

Recited at the Grenfell Tower Fire vigil, poet Ben Okri's poem, "Grenfell Tower, June, 2017," expresses the horror of the fire and the shift required to recognize the chasm between rich and poor in the wake of the incident. He captured local peoples' grief, anger, and frustration in his words:

And here it is every name  
Of someone burnt to death, on the stairs or in their room,  
Who had no idea what they died for, or how they were betrayed.  
They did not die when they died; their deaths happened long  
Before. It happened in the minds of people who never saw  
Them. It happened in the profit margins. It happened  
In the laws. They died because money could be saved and made.  
(Gray, 2017, para. 5)

The last four lines of this example name the magnitude of invisibility of marginalized people and the impacts on them of intersecting social oppressions and economic systems.

In the aftermath of the Manchester Fire, poet Tony Walsh (Gardner, 2017) recited his poem, "This is the Place" and showed poetry's capacity to connect with people during a vigil for the victims of the massacre. Walsh reminded people that Manchester had come through "some hard times: oppressions, recessions, depressions" in the past and it would again. Walsh's poem acknowledges "oppressions," continues the tradition of poetry speaking to traumatic events,<sup>78</sup> and shows that wounded Manchester recovers and rebuilds.

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<sup>78</sup> Percy B. Shelley (1819) wrote the poem "Mask of Anarchy: Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester," where Shelley highlighted the strength of Mancunian people. In Shelley's (1819) poem,

Both Okri's and Walsh's poems are communal laments whose words and rhythms inscribe themselves into our memories and acknowledge a truthful reality of people's afflictions in ways that go beyond most public religious leaders' eulogies. When poetry is included with public theology, we enter into a pluralistic world often characterized by ongoing grief, uncertainty, and ambiguity in the face of traumatic circumstances that have ended lives.

In responses to suffering, community-shared poetics has the potential to restore connections. According to Hebrew Bible scholar Kathleen O'Connor (2002), when we affirm the suffering we hear from another, "it restores the humanity of the victim because it validates their perception of the way the world has fallen from their feet" (p. 102). As roads, bridges, or hinges, poems and their musicality may be able to swing open a wider accessibility to unspoken dimensions of grief. The above two poems evoke a sense of shared grief that binds mourners together and gives voice to ongoing injustices.

### **A Call to Religious Educators: The Place of Poetic Studies and Its Criticisms in the Seminary Classroom**

Another future project that might be promising would be to include poetic studies and its criticisms in chaplaincy and ministry training in seminaries. Through critical reflection, creative thought, trauma theory, and collaborative discussion about current events, case studies, and contemporary poetry, such a course might explore and examine notions of death and mourning in relation to different racialized groups and what emerging tensions and strengths might impact spiritual care conversations. For example,

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"Science, Poetry and Thought" are the "lamps" of Manchester as are "Spirit, Patience, Gentleness" (stanzas 63-64).

Akilah Oliver's (2009) *A Toast in the House of Friends* and Tyehimba Jess's (2016) *Olio* could be read alongside literary theorist's Hortense Spillers's (2003) *Black, White, and in Color*, Fred Moten's (2017) *Black and Blur* and Kenneth Warren's (2011) *What was African-American Literature?* In their work, I keep fastening on the words, "live" and "survived" and wonder what force that has, if even a latent force, in the sustenance and rebuilding that does and can occur after tragic disruptions.

We would not only emphasize the importance of race and gender as determining factors in the lateral transmission of race-based trauma in today's US society, but also to understand what kind of empowering responses they render: integration, comfort, connection to God. This could be a task of public theology with the inclusion of poetry. Poetry interrogates the unspoken assumptions within trauma studies, psychological studies, and practical theological studies.

Furthermore, reading about contemporary artists such as Kara Walker and Titus Kaphar could call forth a traumatic history that still troubles the conscience of the US public and questions the possibility of healing after traumatic experience. Walker's visual silhouettes recode physical trauma in the symbolic language and caricature of black bodies. Studying Walker and Kaphar alongside Jess's (2016) poetry in *Olio* would be a powerful reference to a traumatic history while identifying the material trace that body has left within contemporary society.

From a Native American perspective, Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan engages the complexities of racism within people who may have a well-defined ancestry deriving from multiple cultures. The speaker in Hogan's (2014) poem "The Truth Is" articulates

these difficulties, compounded by the historically traumatic pasts, which divide an individual's identity between colonized and colonizer, and the confusion that can exist with such a dynamic heritage (pp. 65-66). Through contemporary poetry such a course might acquaint us with themes in lived theology that would be meaningful for interdisciplinary studies in practical theology. Above all this course could prepare us for further studies in identifying dynamics, issues, and modes of empowerment arising in the practice of intercultural spiritual care.

**Archives.** The study of the past through most university archives could present a rich opportunity for learning intercultural bereavement care. This section will explore the application of poets M. NourbeSe Philip's and Susan Howe's work to the process of learning intercultural bereavement care from the archives.

**Poet M. NourbeSe Philip.** In her book *Zong!*, M. NourbeSe Philip (2008) is preoccupied with the past. Her book consists of her selectively excising a two-page document consisting of a five-hundred word 1783 legal decision regarding slave ship captain Luke Collingwood's suit for insurance reparations for the loss of one-hundred and thirty-three African slaves he and his crew had thrown overboard in the course of a lengthy sea journey on the British slave ship named *Zong*.

Philip claims to use erasure and reconfiguration of a piece of the historical archive as a conduit for messages from the dead. In an interview with Patricia Saunders, Associate Professor English at the University of Miami, Philip describes her thoughts when working with the facts of a legal document whose emotions and feelings of the deliberate drowning of 150 people were removed. Philip says:

It is ironic, isn't it, to think that the very sea that took the lives of those Africans now performs the task of reconstituting those dried facts—the water in the ocean has filled this case with all of the bodies, all of the stories of those bodies that were squeezed out of this case to arrive at this two-page report. Which, by the way, doesn't even say that it was wrong to end their lives. Absolutely nothing (apart from one comment in the case) is about murder, though murder it was. And that to me is what then really makes me question the law—for us, as African people—and our relationship with it. How do you/we relate to the law when it once said that we were things, and upheld all of these decisions that supported that view? (Saunders, 2008, p.66)

Philip's endeavor, which is composed entirely by words and anagrammatic rearrangements of letters from the 500-word legal decision, courts repetition, disjunction and disintegration in equal parts. Associate Professor of English at Towson University, Erin M. Fehskens (2012) argues that the musicality of the words is created through increasingly chaotic re-workings of its source text. The sense of a myriad of voices emerges out of the "water as conduit" (p. 408). Philip floods the text to sputter partial utterances before being submerged again just beneath the surface. As can be seen here:

w w w            w        a wa  
                       w        a            w a                    t  
 er                    wa    s (p. 3)

The poetic dispersion of the word "water" breaks across several lines. The word water Fehskens writes, "resists graphic and aural cohesion while demanding repetition . . . . enact[ing] the timely interval between the moment a body hits the water and the moment before the body's limbs are submerged" (2012, p. 408).

In a chapter at the end of her book, Philip describes her experience of writing it. From the spare historical document, she released "the story that cannot be told, but which, through not-telling, will tell itself" (Philip, 2008, p. 199). Philip's gesture of

release could be seen as pitting the archive's tendency towards closure against poetry's will to openness.

Benjamin C. Hutchens Professor of philosophy at Rutgers, builds on notion of the an-archive. In imagining the text of the archive to contain within it the voices of the very subjects it silences, Philip figures the materiality of language as vested with the mediumistic capacity to conjure ghosts. Hutchens (2007) terms the archive, "the dead-letter office of lived memory" and points out that "the preservation of cultural memories eradicated from culture itself" simply establishes the authority of the archive by erasing "the incessant historical violence" through which the archive establishes itself (p. 38). His notion of the an-archive, then, is an alternative history of lived experience that reveals rather than conceals its own constructedness. In *Zong!*, Philip underscores mourning the victims of slavery whose lives and deaths have gone largely unrecorded and unmarked and have proven resistant to mourning.

**Poet Susan Howe.** Unlike Philip's work, the haunting and ghosts in Howe's work seem to be more preoccupied with the future than the past. Her poetic constructions render something that seems to transcend the history they were inspired by. In *Singularities* (1990), *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007), *That This* (2010) and *Spontaneous Particulars* (2014), her work redefines haunting and conjuration in terms of creative engagement with the multiplicity of poetic language. Howe describes the archives at Yale's Sterling Library as "Sterling's sleeping wilderness," and goes on to reveal:

I felt the telepathic solicitation of innumerable phantoms. The future seemed to lie in this forest of letters, theories, and forgotten actualities. I had a sense of the

parallel between our always fragmentary knowledge and the continual progress toward perfect understanding that never withers away. (2007, p. 14)

For Howe, mediation upon the dead is not about gaining access to ghostly voices—Hope Atherton’s, Jonathan Edwards’s, Henry David Thoreau’s, Jean de Labadie’s, or those of other historical figures whose written language she channels in her work. Rather, the particular perspectives and fragments Howe accumulates from these figures are not only about telepathic communication and cultivating perceptions, but about the psychic influence of the dead and how strangers carry the dead through history. Throughout her writing, Howe points to “senses” and “visions” that transcend our expectations of ordinary human experience. Howe’s work depends upon her own perceptive capacities rather than the action of the spirits themselves. This is subtly but significantly different from claiming to actually access the voices of ghosts, as we saw Phillip do in *Zong!*.

By initiating her own orchestration of communication, Howe keeps creating new entities and presences out of the echoes of the past. One of the points literary critic W. S. Howard emphasizes in his critical writing about Susan Howe is that her poems, essays, prose poems, performances, and gallery installations are always changing; each presentation of her work involves some cutting, editing, and reconfiguring. There are also the dynamics involved in each of her work’s placement within context of a sequence of other works within each collection or performance. Howard (2016) writes, . . . “our ways of reading *Howe* are also forms of making and acts of rescue. Reading and writing, like quarrying, require precise cutting, recovery, and reconfiguring” (para. 8). What stands out to me in Howard’s work on Susan Howe is his emphasis on the reader’s involvement as part of the community making a new narrative. Death involves a

communal engagement of a permanent ending that all must participate in, with different levels of responsibility and decision making depending upon one's place in the social situation. This multiplicity of standpoints is organized, mediated, and resolved by various narrative structures. In one sense, death is a physical ending that stands ultimately outside anyone's power to prevent; in another sense death occurs when the community and people in various social relationships with one another and the dying party say, "It is over." Those "deaths" may not coincide—which in part is what grieving is all about. For this reason, I suggest assignments involving the archives can be a very enriching way to teach intercultural bereavement care.

Both Howe's and Philip's work show particular ways of living with the loss of a person's presence and how that also involves particular ways they leave them behind—or what of them and the relationship they really leave behind—and how they carry them in their memories and spirits as a part of the present and future. To a classroom studying intercultural bereavement care, these poets would offer a reflection on the ways that death means leaving behind and also means carrying with. Both have to be incorporated or the living are (prematurely) dead in some ways too. Further, in the context of hospital chaplaincy, from the archival poets and their critics we learn that death is something not only happening to the dying person, but it is also happening to the social network and to everyone in it.

Reading Howe's *Spontaneous Particulars* and Philip's *Zong!*, we might discuss different modes of hauntings and how contemporary poets attempt to articulate new modes of mourning rather than simply returning to old wounds. Part of helping with



dying is not just respectfully handling the families' and patients' medical wishes and dynamics about the physical dimension, but in a dignified way helping the system do its work of letting go and sending forth with honor and dignity. A quarter of learning about the archives while reading the poets who use them would assist us in understanding how diversity shapes any human experience with loss.

*The University of Denver Special Collections and Archives.* The University of Denver Special Collections and Archives curated by Kate Crowe houses many archives available to students, such as the "Circle of Sister/Circle of Friends Collection M128." This material is housed in six cardboard boxes whose contents consist of manila folders, personal papers, cassette tapes, VHS tapes, government documents, ration cards, travel tickets, inter-office memos, letters, passports, descriptions of achievement and other memoranda centered around a coalition of women (emphasizing: Sally Vinyard, Lily Adams, Jeannie "Sam" Christie with mention of Ann Cookley, Donna Jacobs, Pat Harrington, Barbara Meier) who served as civilians in Vietnam and throughout Southeast Asia. One of the women, Sally Vinyard, was instrumental in evacuating more than 25,000 South Vietnamese and US citizens as troops advanced on Saigon.

Several of these women lived through and responded to the terrible tragedy of "Operation Babylift." During the last month of the Vietnam War the US and other countries embarked on several airlifts out of South Vietnam for over ten thousand orphans. Concerned about the looming repercussions of the fall of DaNang and Saigon to the People's Army of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong), international social services organizations petitioned the US government to help evacuate

and find homes for infants and children living in South Vietnam orphanages. On April 3, 1975, President Gerald Ford authorized the mass evacuation airlift which became known as “Operation Babylift.” One day later, a US military transport aircraft flew the first mission of Operation Babylift departing from the Tan Son Nhut airstrip with about 250 orphans, 11 military personnel and 54 civilian workers who served the Defense Attaché Office DACS. Shortly after take-off, the failure of the rear loading ramp locks caused an explosion. The plane crashed, killing about 100 children, and 30 Defense Attaché Office personnel / military flight nurses.

Sally Vinyard is known as “the last woman out of Vietnam.” As a Defense Department civilian in Saigon, she was in charge of housing American and South Vietnamese refugees at an evacuation center near the airport. During South Vietnam’s April 1975 fall, she played a major role in “Operation Babylift.” Vinyard writes of her experiences as a civilian in a military setting and her connection to operation babylift.

Creating an assignment in a respectful way from the “Circle of Sister/Circle of Friends Collection M128,” we might witness the ripple effects of grief at the many losses endured by citizens and their support communities. While reading poet Yusef Komunyakka’s (1988) book “Dien Cai Dau,” we would discover particular social inequalities and systemic racism Komunyakka faced in the Vietnam War and how they infuse very difficult dynamics at every level of experience in our culture. Juxtaposing both would lead to questions relevant to bereavement care. For example: How might academic institutions and our family systems become places where anxiety and grief are not handled by distance or fusion but by opening conversations about death,

memorializing and lamenting? What are the stakes of privileging a story of loss rather than one of triumph? How does loss impact black subjectivity? How does slavery remain a spectral presence in black cultural memory and continue to shape black subjectivity and white assumptions about it? How would this impact your pastoral or spiritual care strategies emerging from your assessment of a bereaved family?

In a seminary class on poetic studies and intercultural bereavement care, becoming familiar with the archives, we might become more aware of the particular voices of lament, which gives us the practice to reflect and respond. Current models of spiritual assessment and treatment of bereaved families could be critically engaged. Over the quarter, we would discuss the archives in relation to specific pastoral and therapeutic situations. Each week we would engage a new theological theme. Personal reflection on one's own responses to the archives would be required and how the creative assignment may or may not influence one's helping style would be reported.

Immersing a classroom in archives, reading poets who use them, discussing theological themes and current models of spiritual assessment provide practical theologians with a noteworthy opportunity to become more aware of the complex ways in which history and circumstance have engaged the culture and families and have impacted how we've handled (well and not well) our losses. Then, a concrete action we might take would be to keep the difficult conversations about loss available and ongoing.

Moreover, as public theologians, we may glimpse ways to create public space for the deeper theological concerns when the press and other interested political parties have the public discourse in hand. A theology of remembering—"a tender care that nothing

be lost” —may set forth a more humane existence, which will change how people interpret the task of being religious.<sup>79</sup>

### **Limitations**

This project has limitations in different ways in my own field of practical theology and my cognate fields of the psychology of religion, hospital chaplaincy, and poetic studies. This project calls for a critique of the way(s) practical theology through public lamentation has enabled ideologies that sometimes oppress and exclude grieving persons; one limitation is in its reliance on gestures or speeches by public religious leaders to do so. This view ascribes a passive role to the audiences of public vigils. Other than my own description of the audience, the opinions and sentiments of the audience play no active role in my accounts. Therefore, the full range and impact of the public religious leaders’ messages are not fully explored but assumed.

Though the critique this project offers might be seen as an initial step of naming a potential problem, there are particular research considerations that would require evidence-based research or ethnographic research studies to determine the impacts of public religious leaders’ speeches on the public. Such a constructive theological endeavor would be best approached by interdisciplinary projects. The type of expansive theory of lamentation and its potential for disruption I am envisioning as part of the work of practical theology requires collaborative work amongst people with different expertise, experience, research skills, and theory-making skills. As sole author of this dissertation, I am responsible for the interdisciplinary work that runs the risk of the biases of my own

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<sup>79</sup> In *Process and Reality*, the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1978) uses the word “tender” to describe God’s relationship to the world. God has a “tender care that nothing be lost” (p. 346).

socio-cultural location, broad interpretations, and descriptive applications as opposed to a quantitative research analysis. My inquiry is unavoidably incomplete and aims at engendering more discussion about these concerns.

Perhaps, for many practical theologians, the poems in this dissertation are not as valuable to practical applications in the way a full interview would be. The first thing a dissertation writer/thinker has to do is figure out which sources are pertinent (and not), why they are pertinent, how they will be used, and how they are limited. This is the fundamental question of methodology.

This project uses poetry written since 1920 to explore ways poets pursue relationships with their deceased loved ones and to show that these poems neither conform to Freud's early model for mourning nor react directly against it unlike much literary criticism and psychological studies that are rooted in Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia." The poets I have discussed and especially poets like Susan Howe and M. NourbeSe Philip might too abstract and too driven by literary theory and criticism for scholars and practitioners in practical theology. Yet, I believe it is well worth our time to work through whatever our resistances to poetry could be, because poetry exists on cultural edges crucial to contemporary discourses on meaning.

Limited as it is, I hope this project encourages practical theologians to look at the field of poetic studies and its criticisms and enter the arena of theological construction. In the field of practical theology, there is great potential for more research and writing to be done about the implications of my work here for transformative arts-based

methodologies, for intercultural bereavement care, in addition to further work in identity politics and “queering” lamentation in the context of public practical theology.

### **Future Contributions**

**From theoetics to theoethics.** In the field of religious studies, the sub-field of theoetics is quickly gaining ground in terms of recent publications such as L. Callid Keefe-Perry (2014), Catherine Keller (2013, 2017), Peter Rollins (2015), Philip Garner (2017), Silas Krabbe (2016) and also in terms of presentations at academic conferences under the heading: Arts, Religion, and Culture. In a recent Presidential Address to the International Academy of Practical Theology, British practical theologian Heather Walton (2019) queried “what form might theoetics take within the field of practical theology and, further to engage with the construction of modes of theoetic making appropriate to the discipline” (p. 4)? I hope this dissertation can be seen a contribution to her question.

Historically, theoetics can be traced to the 1960s with the constructive work of Stanley Hopper, founder of the first graduate program in Theology and Literature at Drew University, and his student David L. Miller, a Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at University of South Carolina. In 1971, at an American Academy of Religion address, Hopper made the first publicized mention of the term “theoetics” with a plea for theologians to recognize that engaged religious discourse belongs “in the realm of mytho-poetic utterance” (Hopper, 1992, p. 225). By the turn of the twenty-first century, pastoral theologian Donald Capps (1993) and theologian Gordon Kaufman (2004), among others called for an understanding of

theology to be a human and constructive activity of the imagination. Pastoral theologian John Patton (2009) writes, “the cultivation of the imagination has not been given sufficient attention in pastoral theology” (p. 23). Kaufman’s (2004) theology of creativity can be seen at the core of intercultural spiritual care, one that speaks to the divine’s role in the practice of care as dynamic and creative. L. Graham’s (1992) work on contextual creativity in the context of psychosystems thought points to an inherent capacity for imaginative change. Donald Capps (1993) was one of the first pastoral theologians to propose that theologians ought to consider poetry as a source of vision and inspiration for the pastoral task and as a source of renewal for the field of pastoral theology itself. In his landmark work, *The Poet’s Gift* he understands poetry as a method of working through issues in community, because poetry attends to immediate experience.

Today, theopoetics is difficult to define because at least eleven different definitions co-exist such as: “an undefined land where one creates new theological language” or “a kind of writing that invites more writing” or “an entire way of thinking” or “existing in the gap between the spiritual and religious . . .” (Keefe-Perry, 2014, pp. 203-206) or as a sensibility that seeks “a poetry which employs language as agency and power” and “demands that it be read and re-read, and poked, and puzzled over as an event of its own . . .” (Cairns, 1999, p. 63). The magazine *CrossCurrents*, edited by Scott Holland, publishes many essays and articles with still more definitions of theopoetics. Interestingly, mostly white males are published in this sub-field of theopoetics. To discover this, one only has to browse through the last five years of *CrossCurrents*

magazines and conference schedules in religious studies and their descriptions devoted to theopoetics.

One of the few women in the theopoetics field, practical theologian Catherine Keller, a Professor of Constructive Theology at Drew University's Graduate Division of Religion, engages conceptually with theopoetics. She writes, "theopoetics is a subversion of traditional thought which affirms the logic of identity, essence, substance, noncontradiction, and exclusion. . . . Theopoetics begins not where theology ends, but where it becomes" (Keller, 2013, p. 185, 187). Keller further defines theopoetics as: "a negative theology that invites the construction of a language that is already always unsaying itself" (2013, p. 187). I am unsure what this means. In Chapter 1, I discussed Michelle Walsh's (2016) work and her move toward a material theopoetics. Theopoetics helped her imagine ways of assisting others to express trauma through play. The core of these rich writings seek to provide a theological space of practice or conversation that is ambiguous, multiple, embodied, and unbound to formulas or doctrines. Many of these theologians have a keen eye for blending creative perspectives to guide their thinking.

Based upon the above definitions, I understand theopoetics as a set of written expressions based in a thought that seeks to displace the theological habits of thinking, legislating, and the assessing of value and agency into categories. Theopoetics does not seek to displace a sense of the sacred that may or may not be moving in and with ordinary and extraordinary events of the world.

My concern is that without developing coalitions of diverse poets—who embody the scholarship of poetics as a field of theory and criticism—across the social sections to



work together, how can the field of theopoetics break down barriers and build common bonds, social capital, and power toward a liberative theology of social justice? Roberto Goizueta (1996), currently holding the Margaret O'Brien Flatley Chair in Catholic Theology at Boston College, cautions that without engaging social issues, theopoetics may degenerate into "narcissistic aestheticism" (p. 266). Furthermore, he writes, "Aestheticism, or absolute ambiguity, is seductive for the same reason that mass movements are seductive: they hold out to us the possibility of flight from the demands of human consciousness and historicity" (p. 266). In the books, chapters and articles I have read in the field of theopoetics, there exist compelling claims about "poetic imagination," "the poetic" and "poetic language," yet there is no consideration given to literary criticism and theory in poetic studies, nor an acknowledgement of poetic studies as a vital field in possession of serious scholarship—perhaps even the only art in possession of serious scholarship that clearly resists captivity by the elite.

It is not enough to speak of metaphorical language or to speak of "utilizing poetry, aesthetic language, and other arts as the approaches through which to convey reflections regarding the divine" (Krabbe, 2016, p. 5) without situating poetry in the context of its criticisms and theories. As a future project, this dissertation suggests that practical theologians in the field of theopoetics re-examine theopoetics as a vital field by expanding their theoretical foundations to a broader orientation that questions how poetry and "aesthetic language" are being (and have been) situated within a field of scholarship, history, theory, and criticism.

Furthermore, very few of these authors consider the ethical-social-relational imperatives demonstrated in how they are providing their support to the communities they serve. Who has power in the interaction? Who has the authority to tell a person's story? Who knows what a person might or might not need? As theopoetics is gaining significance in theological conversations, it will be necessary to negotiate ethical norms in theopoetic discussions and research or such research could result in reinforcing a certain worldview or in making naïve, universal claims.

Rebecca Chopp cautions of a danger in practical theology of overemphasizing particular human experiences over others. In "Practical Theology and Liberation," she argues that practical theology runs the risk of simplifying theology into two components: practice and tradition, thereby reinforcing a particular privileged worldview. Applying human experience to tradition, Chopp writes:

the fundamental rootedness of much of contemporary practical theology is the liberal project of Christianity, a project that engineers a basic identity between two abstract referents for interpretation – human experience and Christian tradition—and that expresses this unity as the meaningfulness, meaning, and truth of authentic existence, masking the compliancy of Christianity with what Johann Baptist Metz calls bourgeois existence. (1987, p. 121)

In response, Chopp suggests that practical theologians bring the poor and marginalized to the center of practical theological inquiry. I am not suggesting that theopoetics ought to ground itself in practical theology. However, I am pointing out that unlike feminism, postcolonial feminist practical theology, liberation theologies, etc., theopoetics does not negotiate ethical norms as part of its theological research or discussion.

## **Last Words**

For future work, I suggest the term *theopoethics* as a fuller word that re-envisions how ethical norms can be provided and how the field of poetic studies and its criticisms can be drawn upon to contribute to theopoethics's potential ethical norms and claims. One ethical norm could be: Theological language must resist the reinforcing tendencies of dominant positions. A second norm could be: Acts of justice must promote transformed persons and transformed social orders. A third norm could be: Methodology starts from a feminist postcolonial and/ or womanist analysis of poetic studies of the postcolonial condition and then articulates how power actually operates in society. A fourth norm might be: Respect for the other must include the collaborative-care relationship itself as generative and life-giving. Theopoethics as praxis in the context of ministry must not emphasize what a person does, but who a person is and becomes in the interaction with others.

By integrating the concept of theopoethics into intercultural spiritual care in the context of bereavement, chaplains would be aware of the daily mechanisms of power by which many are rendered invisible, hypervisible, or denied legitimacy. Following Chopp's (1987) move, this dissertation seeks to reposition all peoples and their psycho-spiritual-social testimonies from the margins of society to the center as they lament their memories and historical injustices in their particular ways. Theopoethics would seek to respond to the problem of foreclosing on one another's traumatic grief by exploring sustaining lamentation in the field of the poetic elegy as a sustained, embodied way of being that empowers people to discover their particular way of mourning losses, whether

mourning includes closure or not. This project has explored psychological research, therapeutic approaches to mourning, evidence-based research on religious/spiritual struggles and coping, and postcolonial feminist liberative research studies based in practical theology. Through these research projects, while the emphasis has been on certain factors that play a role in coping with traumatic grief, the role of intercultural spiritual bereavement practices in engaging traumatic dimensions of grief in their bodily complexity, existential longevity, historical implications, and arts-based methodologies has not made it to the foreground of public religious leaders' rhetoric.

I think it is important to have models of poets outside our various academic locations and conversations. Poets enlarge us and allow us to imagine a deeper set of concerns. Chances are most of us won't compose anything like the poets I've introduced in this dissertation, but we can be instructed by their form, scope, and nuance. Poets call us to a larger world, allow us to see our own limitations, and assist us in making our democracy more reflective of its religious diversity and of the cultural, ideological, and theological frames that our culture constructs regarding the ways we mourn. Turning to poetry and its criticisms, I believe there is a new way in practical theology for strengthening and expanding the role of the public theologian through theopoethics.

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