

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

A Dissertation Proposal

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Statement of the Problem

Contemporary western society has been described as death-denying by historian Ariès (1974) and pastoral theologians Mitchell and Anderson (1983), LaMothe (2013), and Coble (2016), among others. They argue that death has become medicalized, institutionalized, and shunned as a result at least in part of “the de-humanizing machine of corporate capitalism” (Coble, 2016, p. 7). Grief, too, has become medicalized, hidden, and denied. “The inability of human systems to mourn also makes it harder for individuals within those communities to grieve their own particular loss as well” (Anderson, 2010, p. 130). Even though religion provides certain ritual forms and meanings of grief, the public arena for mourning (e.g., in public memorial services and within institutions such as hospitals) often draws upon a neoliberal, death-and-grief discourse that promotes closure, acceptance, and moving on, especially when grief is traumatic. Moreover, therapeutic approaches to grief (e.g., Freud, 1957; Kübler-Ross, 1997; Rando, 1984) have become co-opted as a way to move people through grief without really engaging traumatic dimensions of grief in their physiological, emotional, and existential complexity and longevity (Levine, 2015). In this dissertation, I propose a practical theology of traumatic grief as a sustained, embodied way of being that empowers mourners, particularly through their testimony and witness through language.

This dissertation builds on Rebecca Chopp’s (2001) seminal proposal for a “poetics of testimony” and Larry K. Graham’s (2011) concept of “sustaining lamentation.” I argue that literary texts, especially poetry and more specifically, the contemporary elegy, offer an apt modality for naming meanings of traumatic grief that are ongoing. Literary texts deploy complex literary devices such as metaphor, symbolism, chronology, and fragments that evoke layered and complex meanings. As literary texts, poems inseparably link “what it means” and “how it

means” (Ciardi, 1975), offering a glimpse of how meaning “performs” itself in and through language. In addition, the “excess” of poetry—its affective, imaginative, musical and category breaking dimensions— can extend, expand, and exceed the limits of categorical, definitional language in ways that non-literary texts (such as conventional academic genres, rational discourse, and abstract language usage) do not. Chopp defines the “poetics of testimony” as “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). Furthermore, in *Sighted Singer*, poet and critic Allen Grossman discusses what makes poetry different from so-called natural language. He writes, “Poetic language is language gone strange” (1992, p. 306). Indeed, in contrast to natural language, poetic language works by the resonances of sound and contrasts of rhythm.

The music of language and deliberate leaps of felt experience are further deployed through linebreak, image, tone, diction, syntax, and stress which “strokes the line into sense” (Grossman, 1992, p. 373). Thus, an example of poetic language would be a change in rhythm as expressed through broken forms. 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:

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.

Here, the linebreaks and broken syntax shift the rhythm of natural language. Poetic language can align with lived experience, and as Chopp puts it, “as testimonies come closer to the event

themselves, the language becomes more and more fragmented” (Chopp, 2001, p. 63). Thus, poetic language describes those facets of experiences that are often hidden from view because they cannot be captured empirically or because ideologies conceal them or because they are confined within natural language.

Thus, contemporary elegies would be an apt modality to connect expressions of grief in public vigils with broader social, political, and theological worlds that “express unique events or experiences outside the representation of modern, rational discourse” (Chopp, 2001, p. 56). I build upon Chopp’s call for a poetics of testimony by proposing that contemporary poetry, especially the elegy, opens new possibilities by both performing itself as grief experience and being a reflection on it. Yet, an understanding of poetic studies, its criticisms, and its implications for the practice, theory, and creativity of grieving has yet to be explored in practical theology.

Thesis

I claim that contemporary elegies, as forms of the poetics of testimony, bear witness to traumatic grief in ways that sustain lamentation, such that sustaining lamentation becomes a ritual form of being present with traumatic grief in expressive ways that co-create contextual meanings of grief that theologically integrate trauma. This thesis will be developed through a method of practical theology—a cross-disciplinary method that brings poetic, theological, and psychological studies into dialogue with embodied (Levine, 2015) and communal experiences of traumatic grief in order to develop strategies for sustaining lamentation (Graham, 2011) as a mode of expression, experience, and connection.

Key Terms

Contemporary: An unfolding temporal experience. Contemporary elegies are poetic elegies that are attuned to how lamentation shapes a form of dynamic temporality.

Disenfranchised Grief: “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).

This term also describes the risks of prematurely resolving or “accepting” death. The disenfranchised aspects of grief become a family legacy that inter-generationally curtails the process of being fully present with and of making complex meanings out of grief.

Elegy: Literary critic Peter Sacks defines the 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’” (1985, p. 1). I argue that our neoliberal culture co-opted therapeutic paradigms of grief (Freud's catharsis approach and Kubler-Ross's stages) in order to ‘manage’ traumatic grief. The contemporary elegies I examine in this dissertation offer ways to sustain lamentation as a modality of living with the complexities of traumatic grief. Contemporary elegies are poems 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.

Lamentation: If an experience of time has been destabilized through traumatic loss, lamentation does the work of putting time back together again. It is a modality of expression, experience, and connection. Losses and gaps are “named and as a means of expressing and legitimating feelings of futility, pain and anger. . . . 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” (Graham, 2006, p. 4). In his research about the impacts of war on families, Graham writes, “Lamentation is a means of enduring irrevocable gaps, healing grievous losses, and reawakening hopes for a meaningful future . . .” (Graham, 2011, p. 9).

Poetics: Within poetic studies, poetics refers to “the systematic doctrine or theory of poetry” (Hirsch, 2014, p. 472). However, Chopp uses “poetics” as a broader term: “to refer to the general theory, of literature, of literariness, which is the sum of features that distinguish literary texts from nonliterary ones” (Hirsch, 2014, p. 473).

Poetic Studies: Poetic studies is a critical study of the relevance, function, form, and importance of poetry as a particular literary form in relationship to the world.

Poetics of Testimony: Chopp (2001) first used the term “poetics of testimony” for describing the ways that “poetry, theology, novels, and other forms of literature . . . express unique events or experiences outside the representation of rational discourse” (p. 56).

Public practical theology: “An historical and contemporary theology formulated in particular contexts in order to make sense of public events and create theological accountability in public arenas. An example is a memorial service or prayer vigil that makes sense of tragic death by taking into account personal, familial, community, and societal meanings concerning how and why this tragedy came about” (Doehring, 2015a, p. 190).

Sustaining Lamentation: Sustaining lamentation is a form of dynamic temporality that makes room for the past in the present through ritual, performative responses to traumatic grief. “It is a way of enduring anguish and becoming strong in the aftermath of adversity” (Graham, 2011, p. 9). Sustaining lamentation co-creates meanings, connects personal grief to ongoing tragedy, and conserves “the past, that teaches us about loving deeply, and builds compassion toward others who sorrow” (Anderson, 2010 p. 127). Such responses create communal support that is open at

any given moment to receive lamentations of others while allowing them to create their own path through a grieving landscape. I hope to build upon Graham's (2011) concept of "sustaining lamentation" to include the caregiver's role. From a caregiver's perspective, this communal support becomes a sustaining presence for lament and co-creates ongoing meanings that help people physiologically and emotionally connect with grief (Levine, 2015) and lament it. The ultimate purpose of this dissertation is to offer personal and communal strategies for sustaining lamentation in all its cultural, religious and racial diversity.

Traumatic Grief: Grief can be experienced as traumatic stress when it evokes intense fear, anger, shame, and guilt that become chronic. A grief-response to traumatic loss, one that is sudden and unexpected, often results from horrific or frightening circumstances (Drescher and Foy, 2010).

Scope

Through the development of my thesis I will construct a practical theology of sustaining lamentation (Graham, 2011) through the contemporary elegy that builds upon feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp's (2001) claims that the poetics of testimony "is fundamentally concerned with human and earthly survival and transformation" (p. 57) and "summons us to attend to the practice of language" (p. 63). Testimony is concerned with "those aspects of human life that cannot be addressed at all within our human registers and are currently unspeakable" (Walton, 2014a, p. 180). Often, traumatic grief is marked with 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. Poetry gives an expression to an unfolding temporality wherein traumatic memories erupt in the present. Poetry's writerly

component also highlights another way of apprehending, knowing, and being in the world.

Writing is a “way of approaching mourning as a necessary process to the restoration of selfhood” (Hecq, 2015, p. 190). Further, according to Whitehead, trauma expression relies on “a number of key stylistic features . . . these include the use of intertextuality, repetition, and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice” (Whitehead, 2004, p. 84). Poetry is an apt form that relationally participates with unresolved mourning, because it allows for a disruption of linear chronology, syntax, and diction. Poetry’s language exceeds conventional usages grammatically, imagistically, and emotionally. Specifically, contemporary elegies, *attempt* “to bear the unbearable into speech” (Walton, 2014, p. 180). Theorist Michelle Baleav posits that a trauma text provides, “a coherent view of reality that is necessarily reorganized through a painful process of reorientation” (Balaev, 2008, p. 163). If “unspeakable horror requests hearing, remembering and reshaping” (Chopp, 2001, p. 64), surely contemporary elegies can teach practical theologians the possibilities for the co-creation of new theological meanings able to bear the complexity of tragedy. (Please refer to the chapter outline for the actual poets and their books to be discussed as the dissertation expands on the idea of sustaining lamentation).

My dissertation engages certain questions. How do persons and communities witness and respond to an indescribable event? The goal of communal responses to traumatic grief “is to hear and understand the hurt as clearly and deeply as possible and convey that understanding to the griever as accurately as possible” (Anderson, 2010, p. 135). How do we honor what we’ve heard/ seen/ felt when those experiencing such events cannot use language (because the event is indescribable) to share with others?

Specifically, to build on Chopp’s (2001) poetics of testimony and Graham’s (2011) lamentation, I make the following argument throughout the chapters: 1) Literary testimonies are

situated in political and cultural contexts, which have the power to impose death-denying interpretations; 2) Contemporary poetry creates connections between various national, ethnic, gendered, economic and religious conversations; 3) The contemporary elegy is situated precisely at the intersection of “what it means” and “how it means” (Ciardi, 1975), offering a glimpse of how meaning “performs” itself in embodied (Levine, 2015) and communal ways through language and 4) It is harmful to try to “resolve” grief or to regard people as flawed when they don’t “resolve” it. 5) How can the contemporary elegy become a strategy for sustaining lamentation? What does sustaining lamentation through the contemporary elegy look like in healthcare and public arenas? In answering this question and as a white woman, I will draw upon my lived experience in poetry and as an ordained UCC minister in chaplaincy in the hospital and hospice context.

Understanding the contemporary elegy as the continual negotiation to “rethinking the vexed experience of grief in the modern world” (Ramazani, 1994, p. ix), we may “keep theology more fluid and more multi-dimensional—more spiritual—and may allow us a way to combine poetics, rhetoric, and hermeneutics in theology” (Chopp, 2001, p. 68).

Methodology

I develop my thesis through a method of practical theology—a cross-disciplinary method that brings poetic, theological, and psychological studies into dialogue with embodied (Levine, 2015) and communal experiences of traumatic grief in order to develop strategies for sustaining lamentation through the contemporary elegy. Practical theology is better suited than psychological, philosophical and poetic methods of study because the ultimate purpose of my thesis is to offer lamentation as a relational strategy for co-creating complex on-going meanings about suffering that help persons and communities live with traumatic grief in all of its embodied

(Levine, 2015), relational, and political complexity.

This dissertation is cross-disciplinary in nature; it engages contemporary poetic studies and practical theology in an integrative method. An approach to conversation partners outside the field of religion (poetic studies, psychology, and philosophy) can be described as a postmodern version of the revised correlative method “in order to do justice to the complexity of any given situation” (E. Graham, Walton, & Ward, 2005, p. 5).

The term correlative describes the dialogical, non-reductive ways of engaging various disciplines with lived experiences. In other words, no one discipline (like theology) 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 (e.g., redemptive beliefs about traumatic suffering). In order to do this, I will draw on poet and critic Allen Grossman’s work on poetic knowledge for relating poetry to culture. In *Sighted Singer*, Grossman speaks of poetry as a means we all possess to protect us against vanishing or closure “with the intention of putting poetry and poetic knowledge in service of human interests” (1992, p. 208).

Practical theology is often described as starting with the lived experience—in this case, traumatic grief. In this dissertation, I will begin with poetic ways of engaging traumatic grief as a way to honor both the complexity of traumatic grief and poetic ways of expressing traumatic grief. I plan to utilize the methodological approach as a form of constructive practical theology that begins with contemporary poetry and explores the relevance and meaning of language for people experiencing grief in the face of tragedy. Throughout the dissertation I will endeavor to write in an imaginative way about theory, practice, and creativity, in order to experiment with

and demonstrate how poetic language sustains lamentation in theoretic, artistic, and caring ways.

Significance of Research

If grief is pathologized and denied in most cultural settings in the United States and if complex meanings about traumatic grief have been curtailed by cultural norms, how can the contemporary elegy be used to support the personal, interpersonal, and communal processes of living with devastating loss? Surely, a cross-disciplinary process of dialogue that begins with the lived experience of traumatic grief as expressed through contemporary elegy might become the basis for constructing a practical theology of sustaining lamentation. A practical theology that begins with contemporary elegy could become a basis for continuity, hope, and change in response to intersecting social oppressions across our world's histories, in which various groups have struggled to witness and give an account of experiences too horrific for words.

When my dissertation work is completed, I will have explored a method of care theologically rooted in human experiences of grief. Drawing upon Graham's (2014) view of lamentation as a "tri-partite process of sharing anguish, interrogating causes, and reinvesting in hope" (p.471) and building upon Chopp's (2001) poetics of testimony, I hope to add that poetic language is a most appropriate medium for mediating the unspeakable in a way that does not foreclose human experience. The method of bringing poetry studies into dialogue with practical theology has the potential to co-create new paths in grief with hope, depth, and the mystery of loss.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 Traumatic Grief: Bearing Witness

This chapter will set up the project's method, thesis, context, and limitations. I introduce conceptual key terms: practical theology, sustaining lamentation (Graham, 2011), grief-work, traumatic grief (Drescher & Foy, 2010), unresolved mourning, disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989), ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999), poetics, the elegy, and the poetics of testimony (Chopp, 2011) theory. I discuss how to bring an intersectional perspective to traumatic grief by exploring

the ways that intersecting social oppressions shape the refusal to mourn traumatic grief. Philosopher Judith Butler and theologian Ryan LaMothe are helpful in understanding the role of systemic violence in the refusal to mourn. Poet and critic Allen Grossman is helpful to understand poetry as “a principle of power invoked by all of us against our vanishing” (1992, p. ix).

I begin to construct an intercultural public theology of sustained lamentation based on the work of theologians Wendy Farley, Larry Graham, and Carrie Doehring. Practical theology will be used as a cross-disciplinary method for bringing poetic, theological and psychological perspectives on traumatic grief into dialogue with lived experience into order to propose my thesis: that contemporary elegies, as forms of the poetics of testimony, bear witness to grief in ways that sustain lamentation, such that sustaining lamentation becomes a ritual form of being present with grief in expressive ways that co-create meanings able to bear the contextual meanings of traumatic grief and theologically integrate trauma. In elaborating and illustrating this thesis, I will draw upon my lived experience as a white poet and a chaplain, with past experiences working in the hospital and hospice context. What can the contemporary elegy teach us about bearing witness to traumatic grief?

Chapter 2 Collapse of the Life-death Divide : Contemporary Elegy

This chapter will discuss making the invisibility of death and dying visible as a first step in constructing a practical theology of sustaining lamentation. The strengths and weaknesses of the discourse on ‘grief-work’ and its stages will be assessed. Presently, clinicians Pauline Boss (her work on ambiguous loss) and Kenneth Doka (his work on disenfranchised grief) dominate the field of unresolved loss. Disenfranchised grief becomes disembodied and lives on in the body through traumatic stress responses (Levine, 2015). Our neo-liberal cultural has co-opted therapeutic ways of ‘moving through’ and ‘accepting’ grief (Freud, 1957 and Kubler-Ross, 1997) in order to deny trauma and death. The dominance of redemption (McAdams, 2013) as a way of ‘healing’ from trauma in the United States is another way neo-liberal cultural co-opted complex theologies of redemption and use them to deny death. I highlight problems of the theologies of redemption being used in ways that foreclose lamentation. Next, I introduce contemporary elegies that invite a wider accessibility to the experience of unresolved mourning. I discuss poems from poetry books by Kristin Prevallet, [*I, Afterlife*] : [*Essay in Mourning Time*]; Anne Carson’s *Nox* and Mary Jo Bang’s *Elegy: Poems* and their use of the occasion of grief as an impetus for seeking new ways of conceiving of the life-death divide. I use poems from these books to wonder about the question: How does mourning become—rather than recovery from grief (as framed by Freud)—an attempt at changing the mourner’s understanding of death?

Chapter 3 Fragmentation & Overcoming the Linearity of Time : Archives as Conduits

The work (“poetics of testimony”) of feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp (2001) takes the spotlight, while in the background, ethicist Maurice Blanchot and philosopher Julia Kristeva will be engaged in order to examine the “unspeakable” discourse of trauma and disaster. This chapter will explore the application of poems from Susan Howe’s *Singularities* and *That This* and M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* to the process of writing in the archives. Additionally, I will present creative pieces from the DU Library Special Collections that explicate poetry as co-creating meanings that can witness the complexity of loss. What are poetic ways to bear witness to

seemingly unrepresentable events?

Chapter 4 The White Silence of Poured Cream: Centuries of Privilege

This chapter looks at the contemporary elegy by people of color to discover the cultural ways that social oppressions intersect in unresolved mourning. I will look at poems by a Native American poet Gloria Bird in her *Full Moon on the Reservation*, Japanese-American poet Lawson Fusao Inada's *Legends from Camp*, Latino border-poet Benjamin Sáenz's *Elegies in Blue: A Book of Poems*, and African-American poet Camille Dungy's *Suck on the Marrow*—all of whom write about how their cultures have been silenced by atrocities on US soil. Carrie Doehring's work on intercultural care and inclusivity will be highlighted. What can these poems tell us about cultural and religious pluralism that demand constructive theological methods for engaging difference in all of its political complexities?

Chapter 5 Public Memorials: The Culture of Spectacle

Often when public leaders in communities try to put tragic events 'behind' them and 'move on', they prematurely use the language of healing and redemption in order to dismiss the ongoing realities of traumatic grief that do not go away. The chapter discusses the limitations of traditional forms of public lamentation, especially in public arenas in the immediate aftermath of catastrophic events. Pastoral theologian Larry Graham describes the political dimensions of catastrophic grief and the need for lamentation that takes into account these political realities. I turn to the work of poets Jenny Holzer's installation in the lobby of 7 WTC; C.D. Wright's *Rising, Falling, Hovering*; and Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, and discuss how their work problematizes the individualistic and grapples with the problem of second-hand exposure to trauma and loss. These writers tackle the problem of second-hand exposure to tragedy by interrogating their rights to participate in the grief of others. I examine how simulation and fantasy are reshaping national notions of tragedy. What can we learn from these poets about attending to the work of ongoing mourning in the public arena?

Chapter 6 Sustaining Lamentation: A Hermeneutical Way of Co-creating Meaning

This chapter builds on Rebecca Chopp's "poetics of testimony" and brings together theology and poetry through the articulation of the central concept of the dissertation: sustaining lamentation. Through certain poems from the above-mentioned books, I will have argued that 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.

This chapter will discuss broader implications, practices, and potential outcomes of this dissertation as well as account for its gaps. 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. Can poetry make conversations possible that most of us would never have the nerve or comfort level necessary to engage?

Statement of Bibliographic Method

Through bibliographic searches, I use Compass and databases accessed through the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology library systems, as well as databases extending beyond these institutions. Primary databases include: Academic Search Complete, ATLA Religion, Literature Resource Center, WorldCat, and Proquest. I will include the following supplemental databases: ABELL, JSTOR, Literature Criticism Online, MLA International Bibliography, Philosopher's Index, Project MUSE, Proquest Dissertation and Thesis Fulltext, PsycINFO, and The Columbia Granger's World of Poetry. I also use resources from my Master's and Doctoral texts and in-class lecture notes. The major topics for my research include: grief-work; intercultural and interreligious spiritual care; contemporary elegy; lamentation; pastoral theology; poetics; practical theology; trauma; and tragedy. Thus far, subject and keyword searches have included the following terms, alone and in combination:

intercultural, mourning, poetics; listening, theology, elegy; unresolved loss; unresolved mourning; spiritual care; practical theology as well as their truncated forms. Journals I have searched: *Contemporary Literature, Comparative Literature and Culture, CrossCurrents; Death Studies; Illness, Crisis and Loss; jacketmagazine.com, Journal of Black Psychology; Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology; Journal of Death and Dying; Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy; Journal of Loss and Trauma; Journal of Pastoral Care; Journal of Pastoral Psychotherapy; Journal of Pastoral Theology; Journal of Psychology and Theology; Journal of Religion in Psychotherapy; OMEGA; Pastoral Psychology*. I searched the ProQuest database *Dissertations and Theses* to determine whether there are similar projects that address my dissertation topic.

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