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

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### **Abstract**

This dissertation 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 caregivers 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.