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12 | Dennis Ackermann’s Feminist Theology of Praxis: Formed in Lament

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Abstract

Dennis Ackermann’s feminist theology of praxis was forged in lament. Steeped in the dehumanising apartheid system, she wrestled with collective and personal experiences of suffering, pain, and trauma. A review of her background demonstrates her practice as an engaged activist scholar who grounded her understanding of lament as an ancient practice, replete in the Hebrew Scriptures. Her depth of understanding of lament is brought to bear on her reflections of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and her links to a protest movement known as, The Black Sash, highlighting the context of the marginalized and traumatized. Her weighty deliberations about the loss of lament reveal significant theological, liturgical, pastoral, and political implications for the faith community. Calling for public lament, Ackermann’s insights prove instructive today for the faith community to engage in matters of justice in society.

Keywords: Dennis Ackermann, public lament, embodied spirituality, feminist praxis

Introduction

Denise M. Ackermann’s feminist theology of praxis was forged in lament. Soaked in the historic pathos of a brutal, dehumanising apartheid system, she wrestled with trauma, personal anguish, and communal pain in pathways of resistance. Rooting her theological pilgrimage in personal and collective experiences of suffering, Ackermann opted for an embodied spirituality in tension with the *status quo* of most faith communities (“Reconciliation” 59-60). Hers has been engaged activist scholarship immersed in the struggles of the marginalised and traumatised, struggling with the implications of the loss of lament for the faith community.

Ackermann's contributions reflecting on individual and communal lament speak to us today and provide guidance of how to move toward the dream of God for a just society.

This chapter takes a tour through Ackermann's theology of lament, recapturing its relevance for our times. First, what follows is a brief sketch of Ackermann's background and life's work, providing a glimpse into the formation of her theology of lament. Second, the chapter provides a brief look at how Ackermann drew her understanding from historic sources of antiquity and the Hebrew bible. Third, the ways Ackermann experienced the context of South Africa will be recounted to understand how it spawned the formation of her praxis of lament. Fourth, the implications of the absence of lament for the church and society will be considered. Finally, Ackermann's call for public lament will show how lament may be a necessary language for our times.

A Revered Ragbag Theologian[1]

Denise M. Ackermann came to theology late in life, producing extensive works on a variety of topics such as ethics, feminist liberation theology, spirituality, theological anthropology, freedom of religion, difference, violence against women and children, feminist hermeneutics, and the subject of this chapter, lament ("Found Wanting" 267). Ackermann's PhD was an extensive study of the Black Sash, a human rights organisation she was intimately acquainted with as part of her praxis in society (*Liberating Praxis*). During her time as an academic Ackermann crafted theological responses to the African context including apartheid, gender issues, the proceedings of the TRC, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and ecological crises (Taljaard, 41). Ackermann has a lifelong history in the Anglican church yet, she was steeped in the Reformed tradition and her faith was inclusive, ecumenical, and communal in scope (Smit, 169). Her theology was about "life, healing, justice, freedom, hope" and a passion for all of creation (170).

1 A Festschrift dedicated to Ackermann retrieves this affectionate term as a metaphor attributed to the honouree for her eclectic works, which like a collection of diverse colourful fabrics highlight her use of theological concepts for everyday use (Pillay et al., 6). The Festschrift, ends with an extensive list documenting a wide breadth of publications and presentations produced over the course of her career (Pillay et al., 267-268).

As a prolific theologian, Ackermann acted as a seasoned editor and mentor through the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter the Circle), where she helped to establish the Cape Town chapter in 1992 (Nadar "Feminist Theologies" 271, 277). Ackermann is described as a "feminist theologian of praxis" influenced by liberation theology with a passion for justice (Pillay et al., 6).[2] Ackermann describes her theological reflection as born from the "legacy of patriarchal traditions and biased interpretations of scripture" and attempts to "dismantle discriminating practices in the church" ("Found Wanting" 270). Her theology of praxis is marked by solidarity with those on the margins of power, acquainted with grief and the practice of lament, while exercising agency and resistance to death-dealing systems.

Immersed in concern for a fractured society and earth groaning from the grips of patriarchy, violence and injustice, Ackermann's feminist theology of praxis was born from cycles of action and reflection, grappling with oppressive societal and ecclesial ills ("A Voice" 80-81). In the company of others from the Circle, she challenged sexism, racism, and classism through a focus on praxis, theological innovation, social advocacy, and partnership with men to resist the repression of African women through inequality and discrimination (Nadar "Circles" 147-154).

Although she started as the only woman in a faculty of men at the University of the Western Cape (a historically black university) in an era of sexism, she garnered the respect of male colleagues over time, evidenced by the contributors to her Festschrift on the occasion of her 70th birthday (Pillay et al., 7).[3] Ackermann admitted to being influenced by respected feminist theologians such as Beverly Wildung Harrison, Rosemary Radford Reuther, Letty Russell, and Dorothée Solle ("Engaging Freedom" 36). Her theology was also shaped in dialogue with contemporary

[2] See more on Ackermann's description of a feminist theology of praxis in "Engaging Freedom: A Contextual Feminist Theology of Praxis," (32-49).

[3] Allan Boesak's *Farwell to Innocence* suggests the use of the term *black* reflects solidarity instead of division among an "*Apartheid*-inspired false consciousness between 'coloureds,' 'Indians,' and 'Bantu'" (or Black Africans), placing groups in competition for positions of favour in proximity to whiteness (139). He affirmed a natural synergy between Black Consciousness and Black Theology leading to a "*black* solidarity which encompasses all the different ethnic groups in the black community" as the oppressed seeking a "community of blackness" (139).

theologians, many of whom were part of the Circle (Nadar "Circles" 147-148).

To some extent, Ackermann was aware of her limitations in speaking to the black experience as a member of the privileged white minority ("Lamenting Tragedy" 214-215).[4] In a country where the black majority were unjustly relegated to a place of non-being through a long history of colonial and apartheid disenfranchisement of all *non-white* bodies, there would remain limits to Ackermann's ability to empathise. The rise of Black Consciousness and Black Theology in the 1980s recognized the need for the majority of South Africans to spurn systemic disdain, advocating for the dignity and worth of the black majority to govern and determine their future.

Ackermann recognised lament as a spontaneous response for the victims of white repression ("Lamenting Tragedy" 220). At the same time, she urged those who bore responsibility for enforcing massive suffering to come to awareness as a precursor to lament. According to Ackermann, such awareness would need to be embedded in memory, acceptance of accountability, repentance and reparations, without the guarantee of forgiveness for lament to be genuine (220). By highlighting the horrifying experiences of black people such as those brought to national consciousness by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Ackermann sought to reckon with the deadly legacy of white supremacy, calling the white minority to embrace processes seeking truth, accountability, and justice (220).

A Brief History of Lament

This section highlights key sources which influenced Ackermann's conceptualisation of public lament as a cathartic form necessary for the South African context. She draws from the ancient practice of lament as

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[4] One could argue Ackermann could have been more self-critical of her positionality or social location in her writings when addressing black pain and trauma, needing a greater emphasis on the inherent challenges of white superiority in the theological enterprise. See George J. van Wyngaard's exploration of the challenge to white theologians in "White Theology in Dialogue with Black Theology: Exploring the Contribution of Klippies Kritzinger" ("White Theology in Dialogue with Black Theology" 1-9) and "Responding to the Challenge of Black Theology: Liberating Ministry to the White Community 1988–1990" ("Responding to the Challenge of Black Theology" 1-9).

a starting point acknowledging the need for a public expression of injury. In recognising lament as an ancient practice with biblical roots, she lays a foundation for further critical reflection on the subject.

An Ancient Practice

Ackermann described lament from antiquity and biblical traditions, bringing it into conversation with contemporary issues ("Lamenting Tragedy" 221-231). She uncovers the role of lament in antiquity, which often included effusive outpourings of grief from personal disasters and societal tragedies (222). Lament was expressed "at the core of rituals for both individual and communal mourning," accompanied by music, dancing, wailing, recited poetry or dirges (229). "In communal laments, a professional class of mourners, usually women, perform the rituals which express grief and loss" (222). Such expressions included public dismay over the collapse and plunder of cult centres and cities, mourning the dead, literary and performative tragedies, and lament at funerals co-opted in service of the state (224).

Lament often provided a public outlet for women's sorrow. In a patriarchal society, lamenting gave women temporary control over rites of death, whereas midwives already had control over birth (Ackermann "Lamenting Tragedy" 224). The pre-eminence of women weeping and wailing in communal practices of lament, both as family members and professional mourners, was allowed and curtailed by the "state's ability and power to preserve order" (224).

A Biblical Tradition

Biblical studies scholar Kathleen O'Connor, known for in-depth exegetical studies of the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, describes lament as an impassioned supplicatory form of prayer:

> "Laments are prayers that erupt from wounds, burst out of unbearable pain, and bring it to language. Laments complain, shout, and protest. They take anger and despair before God and the community. They grieve. They argue. They find fault." (loc. 313)

Ackermann purports there is much to learn from ancient Israel's robust tradition of lament, reflected throughout the Hebrew Scriptures ("Lamenting Tragedy" 226):

> From the time of leaders like Moses and Joshua, through the lamentations on the fall of Jerusalem, to the lament of the people in exile in Second Isaiah, Israel spoke out in complaint against God. When Moses, Samson, Elijah, David, Jeremiah, Job or the psalmists raised their voices, they did so in different times, contexts and literary forms.

Ackermann often brings biblical stories of lament by women like Rachel or Tamar, into conversation with contemporary stories of suffering and trauma of women in Africa (*Tamar's Cry*). Biblical accounts of lament show layers of complexity beyond the expression of grief. Lament emerges from suffering and hope as an enigmatic disturbance encompassing the profane and the sacred, "awareness and memory, anger and relief, desires for vengeance, forgiveness and healing" (Ackermann "Lamenting Tragedy" 221).

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann contends the lament Psalms rise as insistent shrill complains about life, demanding current conditions are intolerable, obligating God to change things (*The Psalms* 105). Lament is part of genuine covenant interaction between people and God where "legitimate questions of justice in terms of social goods, social access, and social power" can be addressed (*The Psalms* 104).

Ackermann draws from ancient and biblical traditions of lament, to aid in giving language to memories of suffering and guilt before God, reflecting the stories immersed in the South African context ("Reconciliation" 61). Ultimately, Ackermann pulls from the grassroots life experiences of oppressed women and her history of wrestling with apartheid as a beneficiary of the legacy of white colonial settlers. As a result, she found the Black Sash, a human rights organisation mainly composed of white middle-class women resisting repression, and the Circle of Concerned African Women as sources of advocacy and inspiration as will be seen in the following section (Nadar "Circles" 153).

A Context of Lament: The Witness of the Black Sash and the TRC

The dreadful history of South Africa is a context which gives birth to lament. Ackermann describes the country as a wounded and impaired society "in dire need of healing from the enmeshed legacies of decades of racial oppression and exploitation" ("Take up" 137). Deplorable conditions created by embedded segregation and discrimination miserably

damaged the black majority and the privileged white minority. In response to the repression, Ackermann found hope in a small human rights movement, known as The Black Sash, mainly composed of white women who resisted the racist policies of the government through the apartheid era ("Lamenting Tragedy" 218). Adopting tactics centred on the donning of a symbol mourning injustice, they inspired Ackermann's reflections on lament:

> For well neigh forty years the women of the Black Sash engaged in the work of justice, in advice offices in different parts of our country, in acts of civil disobedience, in propagating and monitoring human rights and in protesting waves of racist laws and repressive political actions. Their name was derived from the public wearing of black sashes as a sign of mourning for injustice. The sight of white women standing with their sashes, eyes downcast, at times holding punchy placards, became a familiar sight during the years of the struggle for democracy. This public lament for injustice haunted the lives of the apartheid politicians, a visible demonstration of (one of a few) pockets of white resistance to racist policies (218).

When the oppressive system was finally overturned, the TRC resulted in fragments of revelation of generational trauma and pain inflicted by an oppressive regime. Disclosures and confessions revealed a glimpse of the massive injury caused during the era of the apartheid system, yet the work was incomplete. Repeatedly, Ackermann reflected on fragments of the horrific stories shared by survivors at the beginning of several of her writings, retelling the stories of deep pain, anger, courage and broken heartedness. Such personal testimonies formed the backdrop of her cries for lament ("Take up" 133-134; *Tamar's Cry*, 7; "Lamenting Tragedy" 213; "On Hearing" 47; "Engaging Freedom" 32; "A Voice" 75; "Reconciliation" 50-51).

Ackermann remained unsatisfied with the outcomes of the TRC to create the conditions for transformed people who had truly heard the depth of suffering and action required to lead to national healing ("Lamenting Tragedy" 219). While the victims of apartheid needed time to grieve and express their anguish, anger, and concern for retribution, perpetrators needed pathways out of destructive racist ideologies, including acts of confession, repentance, and restitution. This led Ackermann to conclude the work of the TRC was unfinished, requiring further actions toward justice and reconciliation:

> Healing is inseparable from justice-seeking. In a context with a history glutted with blatant injustices, doing justice is an inescapable priority. This raises the vexed question of perpetrators who are applying for amnesty to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As their atrocities are revealed, the relatives of victims experience afresh the trauma of loss and grief and, not surprisingly for some, feelings of anger and retribution. We are learning that justice is more elusive than we had thought and that the need for justice is, in this case, superseded by political compromise reached in our negotiated transition to democracy...The moral significance of the victims [sic] anger and the desire for retribution should not be trivialized or ignored (219-220).

Ackermann reflected on the legacy of inherent advantage born from structural inequality and white supremacy ("Take up" 137-138). She recognised the unfinished work as an invitation for the faith community. Ackermann felt strongly that the church, like the Black Sash, should be active in spurring accountability, creating space for acknowledgement, repentance, and healing practices to unfold. Such accountability should not be "limited to being faithful only to the values and vision of the community from which one comes...But accountability is ultimately tested in the reality of the well-being of all" ("On Hearing" 50).

Accountability is ground zero in reckoning with a legacy of oppression leading people to lament since accountability requires *awareness* (Ackermann "On Hearing" 50). Ackermann saw the TRC as an exercise to restore a culture of accountability by virtue of the truth being spoken and justice-seeking where human rights abusers were called to account ("A Voice" 91). Societal wounds were exposed at the TRC, but the forum was inadequate to supply long-term processes for healing from the loss and rupture of the social fabric. For Ackermann, the perpetrators of human rights abuses and the recipients of unjust privilege needed further "opportunity to confess and to repent", while victims needed more space to lament and tell "their stories of terror and pain" ("Lamenting Tragedy" 219).

Ackermann insists, there is more work to be done to create the conditions for transformation and lament serves as a gateway. Lament provides an occasion to raise voices and cries for justice and healing and Ackermann sought to connect her concern to concrete suffering of people on the ground ("Take up" 135). She extended "her profound imagination" concerning lament to the Eucharist in the context of HIV and AIDS and The

Body of Christ (Nadar "Circles" 151-152).[5] The call for lament went beyond personal concern to public engagement with pressing societal issues which would have detrimental implications for the church if left unattended.

Implications of the Absence of Lament

Before exploring the implications of the loss of lament, it is instructive to consider how the art of lament was curtailed in Western Christianity. As a result of this estrangement, Ackermann and others have identified theological, liturgical, pastoral, and political implications for the church and society.

The Loss of Lament in Western Christianity

Ackermann bemoans that "Western Christianity has lost its ability to lament" ("A Voice" 96). The disappearance of individual and communal lament appears to have resulted from a several interrelated issues, such as cultural norms of behaviour, concern for the maintenance of power and control, history, politics, gender, and theology (Ackermann "Take up" 145). Ackermann proposes lament may be foreign to modern Christians partly due to the influence of Greek Stoicism, which advocates for the bearing of suffering without complaining or lamenting ("On Hearing" 54).

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann attributes the loss of lament to the "self-confidence of the Enlightenment" (*Disruptive Grace,* loc 2425). It seemed Western Christianity became uninterested in the laments of the book of Psalms, even interpreting such voices as nonsensical. The result was "removing most Psalms of lament from the lectionary and the liturgy" in the modern church apart from Good Friday (*Disruptive Grace,* loc 2427). "Theological certitude plus cultural self-sufficiency together caused a disregard of one-third of the Psalter" (*Disruptive Grace,* loc 2430). Certainty about an all-powerful, all-knowing God who is in control of all

5 Ackermann draws attention to unity with Christ in the Eucharist, emphasizing when one suffers, all suffer, therefore the Body of Christ has HIV/AIDS requiring grace and neighbour care (Ackermann "Tamar's Cry" 314-316). Also, see, "Engaging Stigma: An Embodied Theological Response to HIV and AIDS Pandemic" (Ackermann, 385-395).

things appears to clash with a worshiper who questions and is unhappy about life.

Lament has largely been dismissed as a church practice, although untimely death due to grave. Ackermann implicates churches of the reformation, which have been suspicious of public and private penitential rites, leaving little space for the expression of lament ("Take up" 145). Many churches in South Africa are steeped in the reformed tradition. Reformers historically appeared to be defensive against rituals which might be perceived as authoritarian, magic, or leading to or relating to the expression of emotions that might get out of control (Ackermann "Take up" 145). This inquisitorial stance led to a rejection of rituals perceived to take away from the message of the resurrected Christ by too much focus on suffering, supporting a non-participatory sedate manner of worship (Ackermann "Take up" 146).

Instead of ritual, the interpretation of the Scriptures and understanding of an omnipotent God was deemed the focus of true worship, limiting the expression of emotion (Ackermann "Take up" 145-146). For mainline and contemporary churches, lament may have been displaced by heads "buried in excessive ritual and inept liberal and traditional theologies" or "a gospel of prosperity, triumphalism and positive thinking" (Ackermann "Take up" 146). In such worship traditions, the realities of suffering and injustice can be ignored.

There are important pieces missing when there is little room for lament in contemporary expressions of Western Christianity. Stoic acceptance of the *status quo* and curtailing expressions of emotion stifle lament. Ackermann decries such a loss as having "theological, liturgical, pastoral and political implications" in the context of South Africa, restricting the church's "role in the search for healing" (Ackermann "Take up" 146). Western Christianity remains a dominant force in South African society influencing theological reflection, ecclesial practices, and even political expressions. What follows is a brief look at some the implications of the loss of lament in these four significant areas.

Theological Implications

What happens when a theology of lament is absent? Theological reflection without lament fails to encompass the wholeness of the human experience. Historically in Israel's tradition, people refused to settle for

things as they were, beseeching God to transform intolerable circumstances as part of the covenant (Ackermann "Lamenting Tragedy" 226). Ackermann insists, "This is bold and risky theology but it is one which holds restlessness and hope, protest and praise in tension" (226).

Today we live in a world of displaced people, war, devastated communities, poverty, and abuse, which amplify questions about God's justice, presence, reliability, and power in a suffering world (Ackermann "Take up" 146). Without lament, how can people of faith understand God in the totality of their life experience? Old Testament scholar Kathleen O'Connor suggests the book of Lamentations expresses "pain, fury, and despair in an intense struggle for life", providing a comforting witness (loc 141). While honouring voices of pain, loss, and despair, lament "mirrors pain back to those who suffer and, in the process brings them out of isolation into community, even if only briefly" (loc 145).

There is much cause for lament, yet without it, questions about evil in the world and theodicy will be stifled (Brueggemann, *The Psalms,* 104). Instead, as Ackermann suggests, we settle for a God who is covered with a sugar-coated veneer of religious optimism whose "omnipotence will 'make everything right in the end'" ("Reconciliation" 62). Brueggemann warns of dire consequences of the loss of the lament Psalms as a viable source of inspiration in the functioning cannon of the church:

> In that loss, we may unwittingly endorse a "False Self" that can take no initiative toward an omnipotent God. We may also unwittingly endorse unjust systems about which no questions can properly be raised. In the absence of lament, we may be engaged in uncritical history-stifling praise. Both *psychological inauthenticity* and *social immobility* may be derived from the loss of these texts. If we care about authenticity and justice, the recovery of these texts is urgent. (*The Psalms,* 111)

Theological reflection without lament remains shallow, limiting the expression of personal and communal faith. Thus, the loss of lament is costly to personal and communal faith resulting in a loss of *genuine covenant interaction* (Brueggemann, *The Psalms,* 102). Ackermann insists this is a God whom we dare not approach with our genuine grief and with whom we are in a relationship of internal infantilism (Ackermann "Take up" 146). Such religious optimism prefers to sanitise God by removing God from the ugliness of evil, suffering, and justice, only reflecting a theology for the powerful.

Liturgical Implications

What happens when people engage in individual and corporate worship without lament? Concerns for justice can become a casualty in church worship. The absence of lament in liturgical use limits access to God regarding concerns for justice. "When the lament form is censured, justice questions cannot be asked and eventually become invisible and illegitimate...the throne seems to be only a place of praise" (Brueggemann, *The Psalms,* 107). For Ackermann, the continual focus on positive adoration impoverishes liturgies. In contrast, praise born from lament is hard won through "grappling with injustice and suffering" (Ackermann "Take up" 147). The articulation of profound doubt about God's presence in a world of suffering, wrestling with unanswered questions, and assaulting "divine silence with tears, petition and then praise, can birth worship "out of the depths" (147).

In addition, Ackermann suggests the lack of room for lament in worship may emanate from a disdain for the physical body in which we encounter God, indicative of Western Christianity ("Take up" 147). She suggests sombre hymns from another era and continent restrict the expression of embodied lament or exuberant praise ("Take up" 147). It may even have something to do with "male-dominated church structures and liturgies which have traditionally been unfriendly to change initiated by women" (Ackermann "On Hearing" 55). *Ritual hostility* toward the body in Western Christianity prevents people from worshipping with their whole bodies:

> We encounter God in the body. If the body, whether a joyous, dancing body or a weeping, crushed body is denied the liturgical space to be authentic in the moment, our encounter with God is either limited to being expressed privately or to less than truthful public worship. (Ackermann "Take up" 147)

Womanist scholar, Emile Townes, declares, "everything we do is mediated by our bodies," but conventional Christian theological formation has left us with a "body-spirit fracture" (136). As a result, this negative dualism separating the evil body and the transcendent spirit has left the Christian community in a dilemma when addressing matters of justice (136). The deficit of embodied lament in liturgical spaces translates to a regrettable distance from the community's suffering and lived reality.

Pastoral Implications

What happens when lament is absent in pastoral care? Personal and societal trauma remain unaddressed. For Ackermann, South Africa still needs healing from the deep-seated wounds that remain repressed yet bleed out in horrific ways. Ackermann insists,

> We need healing from the terrible wounds of racist and sexist practices. Healing cannot take place if the wounding is denied. Lament spells out the present condition unambivalently. Painful memories cannot be healed if they are suppressed. ("Take up" 148)

The repression and privatisation of pain limits pathways to meaningful pastoral care. Lament carries the ability to call up memories and vocalise them in communities of faith. As a result, "The locus of pain is shifted from the inner world of private suffering to the outer reality of the community of faith in a movement which is potentially cathartic" ("Take up" 148). Experiences of past traumas can lead to depression, but lament allows for grief and tears to counter numbness towards human suffering. Thus, "the loss of lament enfeebles the pastoral care of the church" (148).

There remains a pastoral need for individuals to bear witness to unresolved offences so that there is a communal hearing and sharing, which may lead to a measure of healing for victims. According to Ackermann, voicing and acknowledging pain and feelings of vengeance can be seen as an important step for those who may feel powerless ("Reconciliation" 61).

Lament may be about past events, but it can address the needs of the present moment, carrying weight for the future. In acknowledging the brokenness of the present linked to past injustice, mourning and healing can happen, and new relationships become possible in the future (61).

Political Implications

How does a loss of lament affect the witness of the community of faith in the political realm? Ackermann's deliberations about the deficiencies of the TRC show a gap in addressing the legacy of apartheid which was never adequately pursued by the church. Globally, legacies of political and economic empires rooted in colonialism, allowed powerful nations to leave behind conditions which decayed into wars, the deterioration of the environment, immeasurable human suffering, and continuous economic international exploitation. For Ackermann, the practice of lament

speaks to the credibility of the church, "which claims to be a home to the homeless, a voice to the voiceless, and the hope of the hopeless" ("Take up" 148). Brueggemann registers the cry of lament as the catalyst which "energizes the Exodus narrative" and "mobilizes Yahweh to action that begins the history of Israel" (Exodus 2:23-25) (*The Psalms,* 106).

During the years of the political struggle for freedom, black funerals erupted into "highly politicized occasions for expressing opposition to white minority rule." They also provided a "momentary outlet for the grief and anger of the oppressed (Ackermann "Lamenting Tragedy" 218). Expressions of communal lament can serve to make visible questions of justice and "have the legitimacy to challenge political and economic structures which are unjust and oppressive" (Ackermann "Take up" 148).

> Although lament is expressed communally, it comes from individual hearts which are weeping and raging, seeking a response from God. The very nature of lament is profoundly spiritual and profoundly political. Remorse, anger, the need for accountability and justice, combine as we contend with God. (Ackermann "A Voice" 96).

Continued lamentable conditions for the Black majority of South Africa should be challenged and changed, although "lamenting can be politically subversive and therefore dangerous" (Ackermann "Take up" 148). In focusing on lament, Ackermann calls the church to cry out, take up a taunt song or weep with Rachel. This represents a break from the *status quo* joining the majority of South Africans who are living under the weight of grave conditions of continuous deprivation.

The Call for Public Lament

In the aftermath of the TRC, Ackermann called for public liturgical acts of lament "in the interest of healing and reconciliation" ("Lamenting Tragedy" 218). Her multi-layered deliberations on the subject of lament and the potential for faith communities to play a role in national healing emanated from her reflections on the commission. She challenged the beneficiaries of the apartheid system to change their way of thinking:

> So why lament now? Indeed, some of us have over the years lamented the tragic consequences of apartheid. Now, however, in the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the time is ripe for public liturgical acts in the interest of healing and reconciliation. The starting point for us is simply this: we shall have to confess and to lament our

> unwillingness to deal lovingly with neighbours who are different. Too often we stigmatize the other and thus refuse to be in relationship with her or him.[6] (218)

Racial divisions inscribed during apartheid continue to mark social relations in South Africa. Acknowledging the cry for justice left unfulfilled in the wake of political compromise to ensure a peaceful transition, Ackermann boldly proposes public acts of lament as an opening to better human relations:

> I want to suggest that *public lament* for the injustice and the torments of the past is a potentially healing way of responding to the past. By stressing the *public* nature of lament, I am suggesting that such lament should be expressed communally as a liturgical act. It will have to be preceded by *public acts of repentance*. ("Lamenting Tragedy" 231).

Ackermann's call for structured public lament could lead to transformative action wrestling with the conflict and trauma of our time. "It [lament] instinctively creates a link between healing and mourning that makes new just relationships possible in the future" (*Tamar's Cry,* 33). It can be seen as a subversive forum to challenge the powers that be and God, advocating for just change:

> Lamenting is risky because it calls into question structures of power, it calls for justice, it pushes the boundaries of our relationships with one another and with God beyond the limits of acceptability. It is a refusal to settle for the way things are. It is reminding God that the human situation is not as it should be and that God as the partner in the covenant must act (*Tamar's Cry,* 33).

Thus, public lament is about encounter with God and engagement with broken human relations. It is "both an individual and a communal act" with present and future dimensions where "human relationships have gone awry" (Ackermann "Lamenting Tragedy" 220):

> Lament should be generous not grudging, explicit, not generalized, unafraid to contain petitions and confident that they will be heard. Above

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6 In using the terminology of *the other,* Ackermann sought to describe human perceptions of difference and problematise how these perceptions plague humanity. "To speak of the other, is to speak of space, boundaries, time, difference, our bodies, cultures, traditions, ideologies and beliefs" ("Lamenting Tragedy" 216). Also see, "*Becoming Fully Human: An Ethic of Relationship in Difference and Otherness"* (13-27).

> all lament is never for a purpose. It is never utilitarian. Lament is an existential wail which comes from the depths of the human soul. (220-221)

The content of lament cannot be prescribed, yet it requires mindful engagement of the heart and spirit in active hope.

Ackermann often advocates for the importance of storytelling, narrative and dialogue stimulated amongst people in relationships with one another (Nadar "Circles" 149).

> I suggest that public lament starts with the voices of women and marginalized and of oppressed people telling their stories, probably in small groups, daring to rage and wrangle with God, questioning doctrines of faith that glorify suffering, resisting further pain and calling on God to act, forgive or restore. These stories can be followed by acts of repentance and, when appropriate, forgiveness and reconciliation. (Ackermann "Take up" 149)

Ackermann importantly qualifies that processes of forgiveness and reconciliation can neither be expected or rushed. To hurry the expectation of forgiveness and reconciliation too quickly is likened to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *cheap grace*, expecting forgiveness without repentance (Ackermann "A Voice" 92). Therefore, "lamenting does not seek premature forgiveness" (Ackermann "Take up" 149). Translating acts of public lament into liturgies, both victims and perpetrators can raise their voices within the worship service. Ackermann urges "such acts have the potential to introduce a new and healing language into our spiritual and political arenas" (149).

Lament: A Language for Our Times[7]

The expression of Western Christianity in South Africa has suppressed voices of despair in favour of triumphant praise. The continued lived experience of the majority of South Africans, replete with suffering and injustice, begs the church to create safe spaces for people to give voice to lament. People need room for theological, liturgical, pastoral, and political expressions of lament to foster a more just society. This can happen more intentionally through the public telling and hearing of stories:

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[7] On 7 September 2004, Ackermann gave a talk entitled, "Lament: A Language for Our Times" at the Centre of Christian Spirituality.

> Telling our stories, hearing the stories of others, allows our stories to intersect. Sometimes they conflict, accuse and even diverge greatly; sometimes they attract, connect and confirm. As our stories touch one another, they change, and we too are changed. (Ackermann "Becoming Fully Human" 24)

In my research journey exploring a praxis-based approach to liberating theological education in the city of Cape Town, lament emerged as a faith practice which was "a way to identify and hold individual and communal woundedness" (Headley, 326). Various participants engaged in action and reflection in urban contexts reported the ways lament helped to humanise broken spaces "leading to fresh forms of resistance" (370). Ackermann describes a range of contexts and emotions where lament is practical for the faith community:

> To lament psychologically, culturally, socially as people of faith because of pain, loss, shame, guilt, disillusionment and disenchantment, is at the core of the contemporary struggle to forge new meaning in contemporary South Africa out of the legacies of the past. ("Take up" 149)

Though often speaking to the South African context, Ackermann acknowledges there are global crises creating a "universal need for healing":

> Wars, rape, plunder, displacement of people, famine, poverty, the systemic rape of the environment, these and more are the realities of the late twentieth century. We live in a broken world in need of repair. (Ackermann "Take up" 137).

Hers is a cry of lament leading to action, and resistance, embracing liberating praxis towards healing.

Recovering the practice of lament holds promise. It allows us to enter individual stories of pain, torture, and trauma, and it is necessarily a communal practice for our times. Ackermann has sought to call the Body of Christ and academia to come to the margins at the crossroads of multiple offenses and oppressions in broken contexts (Nadar "Circles"150). Ackermann insists, Lament is forged from the disproportionate suffering of the marginalised, with particular sensitivity to the plight of the victims of apartheid, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the poor, which too often prevail on the shoulders of women (Ackermann "Take up" 150).

The practice of lament causes us to attend to the broken body of Christ, sharing in the sufferings of those who are contending with God for consolation and justice. Ackermann calls for attentiveness to the brokenness of society and solidarity with communities facing constant cycles of abuse

and degradation in the face of death-dealing systems. She calls the church to face deep wounds created from legacies of discrimination, dispossession, oppression and stigma:

> The church which recovers the tradition and the vocabulary of lament will discover that it can express contemporary political, cultural and religious concerns very powerfully in its prayer, its liturgical rites and, above all in the celebration of communion (Ackermann, Take up a Taunt, 149).

Ackermann's reflections on lament may open pathways towards communal healing in a traumatising world. "Genuine lament guides us into a life-giving openness to the possibilities" instead of being stuck in the today and tomorrow of "narcotic selfishness and disinterest" (Townes 146). Lament has the power to break cycles of denial, amnesia, apathy, paralysis, and self-interest. Lament has the power to press people toward accountability, resistance, and the courage to act in the face of seemingly insurmountable suffering and injustice.

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