Being a Feminist Public Theologian in South Africa Today[1]

On Wounds, Scars and Healing in the Book of Jeremiah and Beyond

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1. Introduction

In his essay *After Ten Years*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflects in 1942, in the context of being »silent witnesses of evil deeds« that caused many of his peers to become mistrusting or even cynical, on the question »Are we still of any use?«[2] In his contemplation of how to live and work and write in trying times he writes as follow:

> »We will need not geniuses, cynics, people who have contempt for others, or cunning tacticians, but plain, uncomplicated, honest [simple, straightforward[3]] people. Will our inner strength to resist against what has been forced upon us have remained strong enough and our honesty with ourselves blunt enough, to find our way back to simplicity and honesty [straightforwardness]?« (Bonhoeffer 2010, 52)[4]

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2 The Seventh Bonhoeffer conference in South Africa that was held in January 1996 took as its theme this question of Bonhoeffer: »Are we still of any use?« A collection of essays from this conference is gathered in the volume Gruchy 1997.

3 The original German reads as follow: »Nicht Genies, nicht Zyniker, nicht Menschenverächter, nicht raffinierte Taktiker, sondern schlichte, einfache, gerade Menschen werden wir brauchen.« (Bonhoeffer 1998, 38). The phrase »schlichte, einfache, gerade Menschen,« could also be translated as »plain, simple, straightforward people,« which, in this article, is brought into conversation with the reference to »simple and straightforward« with which Dirk J. Smit characterizes the work of Denise Ackermann.

4 John de Gruchy writes how this essay in 1942 was a Christmas gift to his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi and his close friends, Hans Ostert and Eberhard Bethge. He reflects on the

I have first heard the reference of »simple and straightforward« from my former professor and colleague, Dirk J. Smit who now is Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. In his contribution to a volume that honours the life and legacy of one of the mothers of feminist theology in South Africa, Prof Denise Ackermann, Smit (2009, 157-158) uses this designation in order to capture Prof Ackermann's role as South Africa's foremost feminist theologian.[5] Indeed Prof Ackermann during some very trying times in South Africa's history persistently spoke truth to power, and without ever growing cynical demonstrated great courage in the face of many trials and tribulations facing our country. In light of Shelly Rambo's definition of a post-traumatic public theology as »hold[ing] up hope in the public square amidst the ›injustice and the precariousness of life,‹« (Rambo 2016, 17) one indeed can describe Prof Ackermann as a feminist public theologian par excellence.[6]

The examples of these great theologians who in their respective ways embody public theology serve as inspiration for this essay that seeks to reflect on the nature and significance of a feminist public theology that is closely associated with the question asked by Bonhoeffer: »Are we still of any use?« (Bonhoeffer 2010, 52)[7] This question is with me as I contemplate my own role as feminist biblical theologian in my own immediate context at Stellenbosch University taking seriously our location on the African context and part of the global community: In what way can I and

purpose of this essay: »They were now exhausted by a process which went against everything for which they had previously stood. Was it possible then, that they could still be of any use in the reconstruction of German and Europe once the present nightmare had ended.« (Gruchy 1997, 2)

5 Dirk J. Smit (2009) uses this designation in terms of Calvin's use of the term *brevitas et facilitas* in the spirit of making accessible theological truths to a broader audience that aligns with Denise Ackermann's decision to use the genre of letters as a vehicle for her theological reflections in her book *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (2003). However, I would want to contend that Bonhoeffer's use of this term also applies to Ackermann in another way that speaks of her ability to offer a clear witness amidst trying times.

6 Dirk J. Smit writes that even though Denise Ackermann has been quite sceptical about the term »public theology,« she nevertheless aligned herself with its goals of working for justice and the flourishing for people. Moreover, it is telling that several others have characterized her as such (Smit 2017, 68, 89). See also the unpublished doctoral dissertation of Ronel Bezuidenhout (2007, cited in Smit 2017, 73).

7 Interestingly enough, in her response to the papers delivered at the 1996 Bonhoeffer conference in South Africa, Denise Ackermann identified a key problem with this question when she asked »*Who* are we?« She goes on to offer a sharp critique of the ›malestream‹ nature of the conference which continues to see a paucity of female voices, as well as little attention to the ongoing scourge of violence against women in South Africa. Ackermann's response is represented in the afterward to the collection of essays from this conference (Botman 1997, 367-368).

other feminist theologians continue to offer a theological witness in the midst of the manifold challenges facing us in our context?

In this essay, I will seek to identify three key characteristics of a feminist public theologian that I consider to be imperative for the unique challenges facing us today both locally and globally. In this regard, I will add my voice to the conversation already started by feminist public theologians such as Esther McIntosh, Heather Walton, Heather Thomson and Julia Pitman. And finally, as a feminist biblical interpreter, I will draw on some examples from the fascinating Book of Jeremiah that emerged out of a very traumatizing context of war and displacement in order to reflect on my own vocation as feminist public theologian in the world today.

2. Outlining the Task and Function of the Feminist Public Theologian

2.1 Light Shining in Darkness

In the introduction to a collection of essays on posttraumatic public theology, Shelly Rambo defines the core characteristic of a public theologian doing theology in a posttraumatic world to serve as a »constructive visionary,« engaged in the business of meaning-making (Rambo 2016, 2-3). One could thus say that the public theologian is living in the world as it is but is called to imagine the world to be otherwise, thus helping people to see beyond their current circumstances marred by the effects of violence and injustice. In this regard, I propose that a first central characteristic of the feminist public theologian as a »constructive visionary« is to help people see light in places of darkness.[8] In this regard, womanist biblical scholar, Mitzi Smith, describes how the African American activist Fannie Lou Hamer always sang the song *This Little Light of Mine* throughout the difficult years she and others around her were struggling to challenge unjust structures—even during the time she found herself in jail. According to Smith, this song constituted for Hammer a »counter narrative confronting the racist ideology that there was nothing good in black people, nothing but darkness.« (Smith 2015, 113) The image of light shining in the darkness is compelling as it both acknowledges the reality of the darkness, but nevertheless without ceasing, invokes the counter reality of light that keeps on shining in the dark.

8 In a wonderful article on methodology and public theology, Dirk J. Smit outlines six characteristics of public theology using the work of the Chairperson of the Board of the Evangelical Church in Germany and eminent public theologian, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, as a test case. According to Smit, public theology is biblical-theological, multilingual, knowledgeable, orientating, prophetic and inter-contextual. The notion of »light shining in darkness« adheres to the »orientating« nature of public theology that according to Smit is offering guidance and direction in terms of difficult situations (Smit 2017, 82-84).

This image of light shining in the dark moreover encapsulates the feminist public theologian's quest of striving to overcome injustice. Smith writes how *This Little Light of Mine* has become a theme song for womanist biblical scholars in their quest to »shine a light on injustice« in the biblical text, and in society »declar[ing] truths that can lighten and enlighten the paths of the most marginalized.« This womanist biblical interpreters' prophetic role is poetically captured by Smith when she writes how these scholars

> »[P]rophetically lower their pens to paper and fingers to keyboards, raise their voices, and lift their feet to write and right, to teach and to preach, and to sing ›truth to power‹ with a goal toward transformation and the dismantling of oppressions and oppressive structures, towards revolutionary change.« (Smith 2015, 113)

When it comes to contemplating the nature and significance of a feminist public theology, I have found the growing body of work by womanist biblical interpreters as evidenced above to be greatly helpful for considering my own sense of vocation. These public theologians have — over many years of struggling to make a way out of no way — developed some great insights and skills that may help others to consider own public role that extends from mere scholarship the sake of scholarship. These sisters in the wilderness who have individually and collectively sought not only to survive but also to thrive, indeed have led the way in challenging injustice both in the text and the world (cf. Williams 1993; Weems 1988; Byron and Lovelace 2016). Moreover, womanist biblical interpreters have had a lot of practice of developing a biblical hermeneutic that not only is attentive to the marginalized voices in the text, but also finds ways to counter those biblical texts that condone slavery as well as patriarchy, racism, classism, sexism, and imperialism—hence reading »against the grain and between the lines of the biblical text.« (Smith 2015, 117)[9] Probably the most valuable factor for developing a feminist public theology in South Africa is the womanist biblical interpreters' insistence that one cannot view gender in isolation but must always regard it in terms of class and race.

It is thus important for a feminist public theologian — inspired by the example of these womanist biblical interpreters, and also embodied by Denise Ackermann cited in the introduction — to maintain a sense of »vision over visibility,« to cite

9 Smith writes as follow about Womanist biblical scholars' relationship to the biblical text: »Because the biblical text is sacred to black women and their communities, they authoritatively mine and recover texts and characters that have been white-washed, demonized, silenced, and obfuscated by patriarchal, imperial or colonial, androcentric, misogynistic, and elitist male authors and contexts . . . This act of biblical excavation helps womanist biblical scholars to speak about, to and out of black women's lived realities in dialogue with the biblical text while maintaining a sacred relationship with the text.« (Smith 2015, 115)

the song of the well-known theologian and rock group U2. The feminist public theologian is hence called to name the reality of the darkness, but also to see beyond it; and, in a counter movement, to bring about compassion, justice, resistance, and resilience where there is none. It is in the context of the manifold situations that can be described as post-traumatic to help people to hold on to hope amidst the reality of injustice and the precariousness of life (Rambo 2016, 17).

A great example of this type of constructive visionary using her tools as a postcolonial feminist biblical interpreter to imagine the world to be otherwise, Prof Musa Dube offered the following charge to the graduating class of 2017 in the spirit of the prophet Ezekiel who was called to proclaim life in the valley of dry bones during her acceptance speech when she was recently awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Stellenbosch University:

> »I wish to congratulate all of you the 2017 class of graduates—for the degrees that you have earned from various disciplines and specialties. The world awaits and needs you. Go out there and light the world, where forces of death are persistently rising to rob individuals and communities of their God-given life. The graves of poverty, gender inequality, racial discrimination, ethnic strife, global warming, violence, global class, HIV/AIDS, national corruption, neo-liberalism, human trafficking, stigma and discrimination etc, await your work of resurrection.« (Ezekiel 2017, 37)[10]

This inspiring example of feminist public theology in action clearly shows how Theology has powerful resources to make a contribution in the public realm, to offer a vision of life amidst death that serves as a counter narrative that may serve as a source of healing and hope.

2.2 Uncovering Wounds

A second important task of the feminist public theologian that is closely associated with the notion of naming the darkness is to recognize the reality of the deep

10 The event of Prof Dube's honorary doctorate as well as her acceptance speech is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7mfzflX7ng. Prof Musa Dube is Professor of the New Testament in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana, and one of the leading voices in postcolonial biblical interpretation. Her monograph, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, is widely regarded as ground-breaking in terms of method and substance and can be said to have set the parameters of postcolonial biblical interpretation (Dube 2000). Prof Dube is moreover an ardent advocate for the concerns of African women highlighting the ongoing suffering too many women on this continent have experienced in the form of violence and abuse, poverty, war, globalization, and also HIV and AIDS (Dube 2009).

wounds and the scars caused by systemic racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia, which, if left unattended, may fester, and return with a vengeance. In this regard, feminist psychologists Maria Root and Laura Brown have come up with the notion of insidious trauma to describe the ongoing and never-ending experiences of suffering and dehumanization an individual or group may experience due to one's gender, race, and class (Root 1992, 230, 240-241; Brown 1995, 110-111). According to Root, the wounds caused by these traumatizing experiences are often to be found below the surface since society, and often even the victims themselves, may not even recognize the damage caused by these ongoing experiences of micro and macro aggression (Root 1992, 240).

A helpful way of explaining this inability to recognize the potentially traumatizing reality of such individuals or groups is the example of »the crooked room« used by Shelly Rambo to speak about »the long-term effects of systemic racism,« which also may be applied to other forms of insidious trauma (Rambo 2017, 85-86). The image of the crooked room is Melissa Harris-Penny's way of helping people to understand something of black women's experience in the USA. According to Harris-Penny, the suffering African American women have endured, and continue to endure, by living in a society that is saturated by harmful stereotypes and distortions of reality, can be likened to the hidden wounds created by the experience of having to live in a room that is crooked. This analogy has its roots in a psychological experiment that demonstrated that people who are required to sit on crooked chairs in a crooked room eventually began to believe their situation to be normal. As Harris-Penny reminds us, to continually try »to stand upright in a room made crooked;« (Harris-Penny 2011, 35) thus, having to live in a skewed context where one is bombarded with greatly demeaning images of oneself and one's group may cause long-lasting psychological damage to black women—as also to other women, minorities and all individuals who find themselves in a situation of insidious trauma (cf. also Rambo 2017, 85-86).[11] Nevertheless, one does find some brave souls who are willing to challenge the architecture, recognizing it for what it is: a distortion of reality, hence, a crooked room.

11 Especially the prophetic dimension of public theology as outlined by Smit (2017, 84-85). My thanks also go to my colleague Dion Forster who has pointed me to Smit's article and other conversation partners with regards to feminist public theology. In his engagement with my paper, Forster makes the following poignant observation regarding the prophetic orientation of true public theologies: »Public theologies are not ›caught‹ or ›bound‹ in their realities, they speak of, and act for, a truer reality, a prophetic reality! So, while it is orientating (as mentioned above), it is also deeply prophetic. If one relates this to Hauerwas' notion (see his Gifford lectures entitled *With the grain of the universe*), he suggests that true living, is lived ›with the grain of the universe,‹ not against it. That is not only prophetic in the sense of proclaiming what could be, it is prophetic in living rightly in a world that has gone wrong—standing straight in a crooked room!,« personal conversation, 13 May 2018.

Examples of the damaging effects of insidious trauma abound. Shelly Rambo, for instance, shows how the »racialized violence in the age of Ferguson« is rooted in the deep wounds of the United States' troubling history with race and its inability to adequately deal with the deep wounds caused by racism. Rambo (2017, 73) writes that precisely because these injustices have not been adequately attended to in the past, the deep wounds caused by systemic racism »remain[s] untended below the surface of the collective skin.«[12] Referencing an essay Willie Jennings wrote in the wake of Ferguson (cf. the killing of Trayvon Martin by police officer George Zimmerman who subsequently was acquitted), Rambo warns that »the unhealed wounds of the past persist and surface in the present« — often by erupting in anger and with force (Rambo 2017, 73; Jennings 2013).[13] These wounds, if and when they surface, »are often unrecognizable and misunderstood« — a case and point that traumatic experiences »do not respect lines between past, present and future, that histories of suffering persist in the present, operating powerfully below the surface of conscious life.« (Rambo 2017, 145).

This is also quite evident in South Africa when the often festering wounds caused by Apartheid erupt once more with reference to the deeply dehumanizing effects of ongoing poverty (Lee 1998, 5-12).[14] For instance, Nkosi Gola with great passion and anger in what he terms »shit theology« shows the crude infringements of basic human rights with only 300 toilets for thousands of inhabitants in the informal settlements of Gugulethu and Khayelitsha where numerous women and children were being raped and murdered while they were going to relieve themselves at night. (Gola 2017)[15]

A feminist public theology is thus concerned with facing the world with all its crookedness and helping to name the wounds below the surface regarded as the first step in changing the reality (Walton 2010, 30).[16] In a class exploring the inter-

12 Rambo notes that »hiddenness« in this context exhibits a double meaning: »Wounds are out of sight and they are intentionally covered over. It is handed down from one generation to the next but ›its pain has never openly been admitted.‹« (Rambo 2017, 72)

13 Willie Jennings' quote cited by Rambo is as follow: »It touched a nerve in what Wendell Berry called the hidden wound—that raw, throbbing one that never grows skin thick enough to keep it from puncturing and bleeding at the slightest touch. The deep wound of our racial history has never passed—no one in America lives without it.« (Rambo 2017, 73)

14 See also the notion of »slow violence« that has been used to describe poverty and particularly as it impacts on the environment (Nixon 2013).

15 Nkosi Gola and Zukile Ngqeza are reported to have said the following at the 2017 Justice conference: »Let's theologise shit. This guy looks into shit and he sees Jesus. Could it be that Jesus exists in shit? If Jesus is the least of these and the least of these are living in shit in the townships, then Jesus in South Africa is in deep shit.« See also the link between inequality and basic sanitation (Conradie 2014).

16 See also Heather Walton's description of the task of critique as a central aspect of the »everyday work of the feminist theologian« as well as her use of the work of Denise Ackermann on

section of gender, health, and theology, which is taught to all our Master of Divinity students at Stellenbosch University preparing for ministry and to our MTh Gender and Health students, we, for instance, name the reality of how poverty is truly sexist (Moghadam 2005; Masenya 2004), how HIV/AIDS can be said to be a gendered pandemic (Dube 2002; Haddad 2002), and how violence affects particular women, the poor and minorities in distinct ways (Maluleke/Nadar 2002; Phiri 2002).

This act of uncovering or surfacing hidden wounds is often a treacherous task and involves—according to Rambo »confrontation and engagement.« (Rambo 2017, 84) It takes courage to say it as it is. Mitzi Smith also encourages womanist biblical scholars to »engage in prophetic truth-telling at the risk of annoying the powerbrokers, at the risk of being demonized.« Moreover, this act of naming the wounds should also go deeper than merely focusing on one level of injustice. An intersectional understanding of gender requires that one not only challenges the systemic nature of sexism, but also considers how it intersects with systemic racism and the devastating effects of poverty that includes attention to factors such as globalization, colonization and capitalism that collectively cause those who are most vulnerable to suffer even more (Smith 2015, 114-115).[17]

In this regard, Smit argues that Denise Ackermann's theology is profoundly concerned with the wounds of the world. Inspired by the work of Jürgen Moltmann, Smit writes how Ackermann believes that

> »[T]heology springs from divine passion, from the open wound of God in one's life and in the tormented men, women and children of this world. Her theology speaks of Tamar's cry, it calls for tears and lament. Her theology is about human beings and their dignity, concrete human beings, women and children, with bodies, and faces, and their dignity denied. Her theology is about life, healing, justice, freedom, hope.« (Smit 2017, 169-170)

According to Smit, for Ackerman, the message is indeed »simple.« (Smit 2017, 170) And straightforward, I would say.

2.3 Binding Up Wounds

A third important task of the feminist public theologian that is deeply rooted in the ability to imagine the world to be otherwise, is to actively engage in what Rambo calls »wound work,« i.e., going beyond merely surfacing the wounds, but also

naming »complicity and pain« as source for her work on lament in the South African context (Walton 2010, 30, 34).

17 Smith warns, for instance, how »capitalism survives and thrives on the backs of a constructed, perpetual underclass of undereducated, underpaid, and underemployed laborers.« (Smith 2015, 114-115)

attending to the wounds by means of touching, cleaning, and applying balm with the distinct purpose of healing (Rambo 2017, 92).[18]

In this regard, one could say that the feminist public theologian is to journey with those in pain, to hear the other into speech — thus, in an act of shared vulnerability to acknowledge the other's reality.[19] Founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, who is considered the Mother of African Women's Theology, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, emphasizes compassion as the source of solidarity when she argues that »hurting with those who hurt, and rejoicing with those who are enjoying life, is an important aspect of women's theology.« (Oduyoye 2001, 37)[20] In a South African context, Denise Ackermann sets a profound example by calling the people of this traumatized country to lament the deep wounds left by HIV/AIDS; by the atrocities of the cruel Apartheid regime; by the great inequality between the rich and the poor that seems to be growing bigger by the day.[21]

The image of touching wounds is a powerful image for capturing the notion of compassionate solidary that, I propose, ought to be central to a feminist public theology. Rambo writes how the notion of the »healing ministry of touch and being touched« as exemplified in Jesus' numerous acts of moving closer and touching the wounds of the most undesirables—the lepers and the woman who bled all the time—is a bold act of once more »reinscribing value« to what had been consistently and blatantly devalued. To touch the wounds caused by racism, sexism, homophobia, and poverty is thus rooted in what Rambo describes as »a vision of fierce care« that affirms the inherent goodness of bodies (Rambo 2017, 101-102, 105). The touching of wounds thus signals an unwavering commitment to life itself in contexts of ongoing dehumanization and devaluation.

The feminist public theologian's vocation of tending to hidden wounds, open wounds and infected wounds requires moreover that she uses some of the best

18 Heather Thomson's contribution that speaks of »the therapeutic role of public theology—compassion for the weak and vulnerable, healing for the wounded, help for those who are suffering.« (Thomson 2008, 274)

19 In her book *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* Martha Nussbaum highlights the importance of finding common ground amongst individuals and groups that is rooted in an understanding of shared vulnerability. This includes imagining another's feelings, fears, joys, hopes, and frustrations that forms the basis for cultivating compassion. (Nussbaum 2013, 3)

20 Oduyoye puts it as follow: »Mothering is an obligation of all in the community whether they are women or men. It is doing to others what God does to, with and for us out of God's compassion.« (Oduyoye 2002, 37-38)

21 Based on her work regarding lament and healing in the South African context, in my contribution to her *Festschrift*, I characterize Ackermann as the foremost keener calling on the people of South Africa to join in lament. I write the following: »Like the keeners of old, she led us in weeping and wailing regarding the atrocities of apartheid, and encouraged us to come together in public spaces to remember, to lament, and to work toward reconciliation and healing.« (Claassens 2009, 194)

theological resources at her disposal not only to help people make sense of the pain caused by the insidious trauma of racism, sexism, poverty, but also to align with the first task of the feminist public theologian outlined above as to keep reminding people that the world must and should look »differently from the site of ruins.« It is to help individuals and groups to cultivate »new capacities for imagining life,« drawing on values such as compassion, justice, resistance, and resilience (Rambo 2017, 99).

The feminist public theologian thus also is to call upon others to weep with those who weep, to care for and bind up the deep wounds that rob quality of life for millions, but also to actively work to eradicate the wound producing circumstances. The wound work done by the feminist public theologian, the caring and comforting, should never though be disassociated from asking why people are having wounds in the first place.

Nevertheless, the reality is that despite the feminist public theologian's best efforts, many of the wounds caused by the life-denying forces of poverty, HIV/AIDS, racism, sexism, and homophobia cited above are so deep that they may never go away. However, the hope is that through the healing that comes through attentive, caring touch that involves cleaning and applying antibacterial ointment that prevents further infection that the wounds may eventually turn into scars. As Rambo reminds us, »the scar marks suffering and healing but does so not by inscribing the memory of suffering but by leaving a mark.« (Rambo 2017, 52)

3. Wound Work in the Book of Jeremiah

Given my own work as a feminist biblical interpreter, I have found that biblical texts offer a fruitful space where the uncovering and healing of wounds may occur. Actually, the Book of Jeremiah is an excellent example of a prophet who is taking on a public theological role, i.e., naming the darkness that was said to constitute a central aspect of a feminist public theology. Reading these texts from Jeremiah may serve the function of creating space for contemporary readers to consider the deep wounds caused by structural violence both in the text, but also in our own contexts: the hidden wounds of gender, race, and class, which, if left unattended, may fester, and return with a vengeance. But at the same time, we also find how central to Jeremiah's prophetic witness is the challenge to remember otherwise, thus in an often very dark book, to offer glimpses of light shining in the darkness.

In this regard, Kathleen O'Connor describes how the prophet Jeremiah following the devastating Babylonian invasion from the ruins helped the people to face the reality of their wounded past and present, but also to engage in the act of meaning making that is essential if they were going to start the process of healing. She writes:

> »Jeremiah does the life-saving work of a preacher-poet-theologian. He looks at his people's situation, he lives among them and sees their world; he names it, and re-frames it by imaginatively re-inventing traditions they share. This interpretive work rebuilds them into a people.« (O'Connor 2010, 41)

In the rest of this article, I will introduce a few examples from this ancient book, preoccupied with coming to terms with its violent past that align with the threefold task of the feminist public theologian outlined above.

3.1 Uncovering Wounds in Jeremiah

With regard to naming the darkness, descriptions of violence abound especially in the first part of the Book of Jeremiah. For instance, in what has been called the *War Poems* in Jer 4:5-6:30, the sights and sounds of military invasion by the Babylonian Empire are captured in harrowing fashion (O'Connor 2010, 41-46). For instance, in Jer 5:6, the enemy from the North is described in terms of a lion, wolf, and leopard who devour everything in their way. In Jer 5:17, the verb »to eat up« is used to depict the utter devastation that is likened to a monster who devours the people's food, their animals, their property, and their loved ones (Claassens 2018).

However, beyond the devastating effects of imperial violence portrayed in this book, there are also several other levels of violence that should be recognized as well. For instance, the pervasive notion of structural violence that is deeply embedded in this text and its context can be said to be just as damaging. For instance, it is important to recognize amidst the harrowing descriptions of imperial violence also the wounds caused by violence associated with aspects such as class, gender, and ethnicity. Even though seemingly less overt, these forms of structural violence are responsible for inflicting wounds of their own that are festering just below the surface, and if not attended to, likely to threaten the health of the entire community (cf. Claassens 2018).

For instance, in Jer 6:7, the theme of sickness and wounds is quite distinctly linked to the notion of injustice that in this text is portrayed also in terms of violence and destruction:

> **7** As a well keeps its water fresh,
> so she keeps fresh her wickedness;
> violence and destruction are heard within her;
> sickness and wounds are ever before me.

Similar also to other prophetic texts such as Isa 5:7; 10:2 and Amos 5:11-12; 8:6, one finds particularly in Jeremiah 5-6 how the slow violence of poverty and injustice have caused considerable harm to the people. In Jeremiah 5:1, the speaker notes

how a fervent search throughout the streets and squares of Jerusalem has yielded not a single person who acts in justice.

Moreover, throughout Jeremiah one also finds some very troubling images that employ violence against a female body in order to portray the reality and effects of imperial invasion. One of the most disturbing examples is to be found in Jer 13:22 when the metaphor of rape is used to describe the violent acts of breaking down the City's walls, entering the City and her buildings (Claassens 2017, 616)[22]:

> And if you say in your heart,
> ›Why have these things come upon me?‹
> it is for the greatness of your iniquity
> that your skirts are lifted up,
> and you are violated.

Employing a hermeneutics of trauma, Kathleen O'Connor describes the rhetorical function of this metaphor as follows:

> »The rape of Zion revisits memories of frightful violence and painful history through a narrowed window, as a drama of violence against one vulnerable figure who stands in for the whole people. Rape is what happened to them; it is their lives rendered symbolically, their fragmented memories drawn into a narrative, into new speech for a speech-destroying disaster.« (O'Connor 2010, 46)

3.2 Binding Up Wounds in Jeremiah

It was argued in the first part of this article that a feminist public theologian should also go beyond uncovering the hidden wounds caused by class, gender, and race. Another central aspect of the feminist public theologian's work is to find ways to attend to the wounds caused by violence. In this regard, Carolyn Sharp identifies two strategies for responding to the manifold descriptions of violence in the Book of Jeremiah that align with the task of binding up the wounds that was outlined as an important part of the feminist public theologian's vocation. Concerning the first strategy of »lament,« Sharp writes as follow: »I define ›lament‹ as socio-political protest that names woundedness and loss, making visible the vulnerability of cultural systems of meaning-making and declining to be complicit in the erasure of pain and brokenness from communal memory.« (Sharp 2013, 155)

22 See my explanation of this metaphor: »The reference to ›your skirts lifted up‹ in the biblical text is euphemistic speech for sexual assault, which together with the Hebrew term (›to suffer violence‹), is typically used to describe rape. In this regard, it is important to note that the two verbs used (›uncover‹) and (›to see‹) used in this context, also appear in other contexts of sexual violence e.g., Isa 47:31; Ezek 16:36, 37; 23:29 and Nah 3:5.« (Claassens 2017, 616)

There are numerous instances of lament in the Book of Jeremiah; of the traumatized prophet seeing the pain of his people and standing in solidarity with them. For instance, in the classic text upon which the African American Spiritual, »There is a Balm in Gilead,« is based, we read the following show of solidarity in Jeremiah 8:21-22:

21 For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.
22 Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of my poor people
not been restored?

The Hebrew in vers 21 literally means »brokenness,« thus it is the brokenness of the people that causes the prophet to be broken as well. The Prophet is wounded because of the wounds of the people. Moreover, in Jeremiah 6:26 the prophet calls upon his »poor people« to lament as one would do when one's only child has died:

26 O my poor people, put on sackcloth,
and roll in ashes;
make mourning as for an only child,
most bitter lamentation:
for suddenly the destroyer
will come upon us.

It is also telling that the prophet includes himself in what is happening to the people when he emphasizes how the »destroyer will come upon *us*,« so serving as a profound example of solidarity and compassion (Kalmanofsky 2008, 126).

A second strategy highlighted by Sharp concerns the act of »transgression« that forms a central aspect of the feminist biblical interpreter who embraces a public theological role is the commitment of reading otherwise or reading against the grain of the text. She writes: »I define ›transgression‹ as the privileging of creative interventions, ancient and contemporary, that resist or reframe destructive social norms.« (Sharp 2013, 155)

This act of challenging harmful manifestations of violence and in particular the norms and values that undergird such wound-inflicting actions by individuals and groups is vitally important if one is to move beyond uncovering the wounds and start the often long and difficult process of healing. Concerning the act of uncovering the wounds caused by structural violence based on factors such as inequality and societal injustice in the Book of Jeremiah, this would mean asking some uncomfortable questions such as: How does one go about recognizing the slow violence of poverty and injustice, while at the same time refrain from uncritically participating in the text's distinct viewpoint that Israel is to blame for her

own destruction? How does one honestly deal with the wounds of economic and social injustice that specifically affect women and children and the infirm, while acknowledging as well that there may be innocent sufferers amongst those who have fallen victim to the traumatizing effects of imperial violence?

These questions are particularly pressing in my own South African context of where one is constantly faced with one of the greatest divides between rich and poor in the world. One sees this vividly illustrated in the stunning photo of my hometown Stellenbosch that captures »unequal scenes« from around the world. This aerial shot shows the corrugated tin shacks of the township Kayamandi right next to the university town of Stellenbosch that is in the heart of the wine industry, and the center of technological innovation, with some of the wealthiest of the wealthy living in the most valuable real estate in the entire country.[23]

The challenge for the feminist public theologian is, amidst the complexities and ambiguities in the text and our respective contexts, to remain focused on condemning and resisting all forms of violence. This includes both the slow violence of systemic injustice and inequality, but also the governing interpretations in the text and by its interpreters that somehow justifies the gross display of imperial violence.

Moreover, in terms of the disturbing instances of the use of gender-based violence as a rhetorical strategy to speak about the trauma that had befallen the people, as a feminist public theologian, it is indeed crucial to resist *all* forms of sexual violence against female bodies at all costs—in texts as well as in our respective contexts. Even though — as O'Connor writes concerning the use of sexual violence in Jeremiah 4-6—»Jeremiah's war poems restore the capacity to speak the unspeakable,« (O'Connor 2010, 46)[24] there are just too many real bodies, broken, abused, violated bodies all around that urge upon us as feminist public theologians to also speak out against what seemingly is considered to be »normal« in the text and the context from which it stems.[25]

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23 See: http://unequalscenes.com/stellenbosch-kayamundi
Cf. the spelling error in the URL. The correct name of the township outside of Stellenbosch is Kayamandi.

24 This statement forms part of a larger argument that trauma and disaster studies help us to understand how the metaphor of sexual violence, as well as the ensuing idea that Godself is responsible for the violation in an act of punishment that the people brought upon themselves, is a survival strategy to help people come to terms with the disaster. As O'Connor writes concerning questions, such as »Why did this happen to us,« or »Who is to blame,« that »wrong answers and partial explanations are better for victims than no explanation.« (O'Connor 2010, 8)

25 Several feminist biblical interpreters have resisted the violence against women on the page as well as in our respective contexts (for exemple Bowen 2006).

Finally, in the spirit of the light shining in the darkness that was listed as the first task of the feminist public theologian, one should note the instances in the Book of Jeremiah that amidst the darkness speak of hope and healing. To mention but one example from the *Little Book of Consolation* (Jeremiah 30-33), in Jeremiah 30:8, Godself proclaims that God will restore the health of the people, thereby healing the incurable wounds (Jeremiah 30:17) of Judah for whom no balm and no healing has existed (Jer 30:13; cf. Jer 8:21-22). This glimmer of hope for restoration and healing is followed, however, by a return to reality in Jeremiah 34 that captures the sheer depths of the trauma in which Judah is trapped, and that cannot magically be undone. However, the hope of healing and peace held up by the prophet may inspire people to face their reality with new vigour, so as to name what should be fixed, to mend what is broken, and to strive to embrace values such as justice, equality, human dignity, compassion and love.

4. Conclusion

We end where we began. Hence, I want to return to the question that I asked in the beginning of this article: »Are we still of any use?« In teaching my classes on biblical prophets—including also the Book of Jeremiah—on gender, postcolonial and queer biblical interpretation of the Old Testament, I must say I find great significance in teaching the next generation of pastors and church and societal leaders to read biblical texts differently. And also, to live differently. For I am a firm believer that the critical hermeneutical skills associated with feminist, postcolonial and queer biblical interpretation help us not only to see things in texts, but to look differently at our context. The way we read is indeed closely associated with the way we live.

Ultimately, my own commitment is to continue teaching students to become the simple, plain and straightforward people envisioned by Bonhoeffer and also embodied in individuals like Denise Ackermann, Musa Dube and Mercy Oduyuye in my context, who have a clear vocation to strive for human dignity, justice, mercy, and compassion in the respective public contexts in which we live and work.[26] It is moreover to speak and write and teach in various ways that adhere to the feminist public theologian's commitment to bring light in places of darkness. We thus continue to acknowledge the darkness but never cease to spread the light.

26 See also Russel Botman's interpretation of Bonhoeffer's question: »To whom ought we to be of use?« Botman reflects on his own position as a black person in a post-apartheid society and the numerous competing interests and demands from many quarters in society. He writes: »Commitments can easily become more parochial, institutional, and individualistic. How do we discern the voices worth following at this time in the history of the world and of South Africa.« (Botman 1997, 371)

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