Lament-Informed Preaching for the Present Age

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In these days, individuals and communities are regularly experiencing the embodied realities of trauma and suffering. I suggest that, at its core, trauma disrupts a person's and community's sense of time and sense of narrative coherence.[1] This disruption results in an experience of disconnection or disassociation from one's self, communities, body, and even God. Another notable impact is the loss of language – the capacity to describe what has happened or even one's spiritual or emotional state. As essayist Elaine Scarry writes, "pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."[2] This is an especially challenging truth for preachers who are asked to "offer a Word" amid pain, trauma, and disorientation. Students, faith leaders, and pastors are eager to consider how they might adjust their preaching practice to respond to these urgent existential and disorienting experiences when such crises arise. While this is important and good work, I wonder if the present state of our world invites us to consider not only emergency preaching moments, but also reconsider our regular preaching practice in ways that are continuously attentive to embodied painful and traumatic realities.

Marked by its disorienting impact, many individuals and communities experience trauma due to escalating violence, war, climate change, ecological degradation, public health crises, traumatic death, and political and economic uncertainty. And, amid all these traumatic realities, individuals and communities also wrestle with experiences of stress and suffering such as loss, grief, addiction, critical diagnoses, caregiving responsibilities, and/or struggles to attain financial security. In such a world, people are often experiencing these traumatic and stressful realities in their bodies before they can bring it to language. Even more, such struggle or trauma is not erased or "healed" with a single sermon, counseling session, or even through the simple passage of time. Trauma, by definition, lingers; the experience of grief and anxiety is an ongoing

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1 See "Chapter 1: Understanding the Experience and Impact of Trauma" in Kimberly R. Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023).

2 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 172.

reality.[3] As such, contemporary communities might benefit from a preaching practice that is attentive to the ongoing, embodied realities of trauma, loss, uncertainty, and hurt alongside praise and thanksgiving. Put another way, our present preaching practices ought to engage Scripture in ways that are mindful of the full, embodied range of human experience.

For too long, preaching has been relegated to an intellectual exercise or a disembodied event. (And this has certainly been exacerbated by the requisite reality of virtual worship.) Fed by Enlightenment commitments, increased acclamation for intellectual rigor, a growing desire for academic legitimation, and commitment to historical critical exegetical methods, preaching in many mainline Christian communities has embraced an intellectualized form of preaching that seeks to simply relay information from preacher to listener, from one brain to another. Such preaching limits attentiveness to embodied everyday experiences. And, in those traditions that have cultivated or retained embodied engagements with preaching (such as evangelical circles and Black church traditions in the United States), the embodied engagement that is most practiced is that of praise or celebration.

Yet, when embodiment is limited or stifled in the preaching event, there is a loss in the proclamation's capacity to respond to the scope of human circumstances and experiences. As Thomas G. Long suggests in *The Witness of Preaching*, preaching is more than just words on a page, it is an *event*.[4] And this *event* of preaching – this shared, communal action of the preacher, listeners, and Spirit – doesn't just *say* something, it *does* something. As Long describes, "Sermons make demands upon the hearers, which is a way of saying that they provoke change in the hearers (even if the change is a deepening of something already present)."[5] Thus, if embodiment in preaching is suppressed or limited only to praise, the sermonic event does not have an opportunity to enact its transformative power in the fullness of the community's life and experience. A preaching practice that limits embodiment only to praise or serves solely as an intellectual exercise misses the opportunity for communities to be fully encountered or transformed by the Word.

1. Looking to Lament

Lament is defined by Kathleen Billman and Daniel Migliore as "that unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief,

[3] Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma*, 13.
[4] Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 17.
[5] Long, 127.

despair, and protest to God."[6] Lament engages the whole self and one's full experience. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests, "[i]t is the lament that preserves for us Israel's most powerful and eloquent statements of the effort both to survive and to be transformed as a people of faith."[7] Engaging in lament was, for our ancestors in the Scriptures and in faith, an honest engagement with God, with life, and with what it means to seek to be faithful amid uncertainty.

As explored in *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma*, I argue that lament is "not simply a literary genre or an artefact to be studied or observed. Lament is active."[8] Even more, lament "empowers and propels people to move beyond the words" and is generative in "giving voice, restoring agency, naming brokenness, and casting a vision for wholeness."[9] Such a generative practice might serve well to enliven our preaching, inviting us towards a preaching practice that is more than an intellectual exercise or an event whose aim is solely praise. As Billman and Migliore suggest, Rachel's lament (Jeremiah 31:15) and Mary's song (Luke 1:46–55) need one another. Rachel and Mary, taken together, "remind us that the danger of praise without lament is triumphalism and the danger of lament without praise is hopelessness."[10] Engaging lament alongside praise might reinvigorate the preaching event to be attentive to the whole of embodied human experiences, particularly in our current political, social, ecological, and economic climate.

In the remainder of this essay, I will explore the invitation and promise of lament-informed preaching towards the hope of cultivating a preaching practice that is attentive to the fully embodied lives of contemporary communities. In particular, I will consider the ways preaching might be guided by lament's invitation to be dialogical (2.), honest about the world (3.), multi-emotional and multi-vocal (4.), and invigorate eschatological imagination (5.).

2. Lament-Informed Preaching's Dialogical Invitation

A central feature of lament is its innately dialogical nature. The lamenting individual or community does not merely cry out into the void or mumble to themselves. The cries of lament are expressed out of a trust that there is someone to receive these complaints and supplications. As pastoral theologian Donald Capps suggests, the "deeper and more intense complaints of the grieving are

6 Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (United Church Press, 1999), 6.
7 Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, Kindle Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), Loc 835.
8 Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma*, 113.
9 Ibid.
10 Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 4.

not circumstantial but relational," asking questions such as, *Where are those who care?* or *Whom can I trust?*[11] Lament is offered as part of a conversation initiated by the lamenter with two customary dialogue partners – God and the community.

The first dialogue partner in lament is God. As Walter Brueggemann suggests, the faith of lament is one that "knows that honest facing of distress can be done effectively only in dialogue with God who acts in transforming ways."[12] Those who lament insist that God is listening and, in fact, that this practice of lament is a healthy part of a faithful covenant relationship with God. In the biblical text, many lament psalms directly address the Divine (e.g., Psalms 13, 22, 44, 73, and 86, to name a few). But even those texts such as Lamentations 1 that do not appear to directly address God assume the Divine is listening and receiving. And this cry is not simply to inform God of what has happened or detail the crushing experience of human struggle, but also insists that such pain, dysfunction, hurt, and trauma matter to God. As Billman and Migliore describe, "Those who cry out of the depths […] fight against the ideas of divine immutability and divine apathy. For what reason would one lament or protest to God if one believed that God cannot be affected or touched by such prayer?"[13] The lamenting party anticipates not only that God is listening and receiving their complaints, but that God will respond in some way. The practice of lament is not one-sided but insists that God is a part of the conversation.

God, however, is not the only dialogue partner in the practice of lament. The expression of lament insists that the community also be in dialogue with those lamenting. The lamenting party calls attention to what is wrong, often asking others to pay attention to or care about their plight or suffering. As Eugene Peterson explains: "When others join the sufferer, there is 'consensual validation' that the suffering means something. The community votes with its tears that there is suffering that is worth weeping over."[14] Through this validation, the community helps resist the isolating and dehumanizing effects of trauma and grief by receiving and affirming these expressions of lament. Beyond care and validation, the community is also asked to take seriously what is broken, unjust, or harmful in the community or society. For example, Psalm 10 calls out the wicked who "boast of the desires of their heart" and are "greedy for gain" at the expense of the oppressed (v. 3, NRSVUE). While the psalm begins with an address to God, inviting God into the conversation, this lament psalm also demands others to witness to the realities of oppression. Thus, the community

11 Donald Capps, *Biblical Approaches to Pastoral Counseling* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1981), 78.
12 Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith,* Loc 854.
13 Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 113.
14 Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1980), 115.

is invited to notice not only the hurt of the lamenter, but the systems and powers present that cause such hurt.

As in the dialogue with God, those in the community who receive the lament are also expected to respond in some way. The community is asked, first, to welcome in the lamenting person, engaging in the work of "rehabilitation of a member from a chaotic experience."[15] The community is invited to weep with as well as offer a space where the lamenter's chaotic and traumatic experience may find welcome. In addition, those who receive the laments of others are invited to respond alongside God in seeking justice and communal health. As Billman and Migliore write, "[W]hen Christians hear the cries and prayers of others for help, they know that a moral claim is laid upon them. The lament prayer prompts all – victim, perpetrator, and onlooker – to a new awareness of responsibility."[16] The lamenting party summons those now aware of the situation to respond, seeking justice and working with God to act for wholeness amid brokenness.

There is much to be learned from the dialogical nature of the practice of lament for our worship and for our preaching. Brueggemann's diagnosis of our resistance to dialogical engagement largely holds today: "The dialogic structure of faith is treated gingerly in much of the life of the church. If we are dialogic at all, we think it must be polite and positive and filled only with gratitude. […] But even more acutely, with our failure of nerve and our refusal to presume upon our partner in dialogue, we are seduced into nondialogic forms of faith, as though we were the only ones there."[17] With the elevation of the pulpit over the people and the emphasis on intellectual preaching or praise-only engagement with the sermon, the sermon event has often become a one-way street – from pulpit to pew.

However, what would it mean, particularly in this trauma-soaked time, to engage in preaching that follows the model of lament, seeking to cultivate dialogue and inspire response? Such lament-informed preaching might take seriously the gathered congregation receiving the sermon, thinking critically about what they are bringing into the space and what is happening in the community and the world. Lament-informed preaching would tap into the questions and responses of the community, allowing people to hear their own joys and concerns reflected back to them in conversation with Scripture.

Dialogically rich, lament-informed preaching would also invite people towards response. Such preaching would be attentive not only to what idea or theological concept people carry with them into the world after worship, but also what they do together in the worship space. This would lead to preaching that invited and modeled embodied prayer, lament, gratitude, or acknowledgment.

15 Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith,* Loc 1139.
16 Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 118.
17 Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith,* Loc 849.

In the actual construction of the sermon, it is the difference between saying, "So it is OK to ask God hard questions" versus saying, "So, now let's come to God with our questions" (and leading the people through a litany or recitation of questions).

Such dialogical preaching would also take seriously the presence of God as a participant in the sermon, recognizing that the dialogue being had is not just between the preacher and faithful community, but also with God. Lament-informed preaching recognizes that God hears and speaks within the preaching event, not only to the preacher but also to the gathered congregation. Such preaching might acknowledge God's presence directly and make space for the movement of the Spirit in practices of silence, guided listening, or simply illuminating how God might be speaking to the community through the biblical text.

3. Lament-Informed Preaching's Invitation toward Honesty

One of the powerful gifts of lament is the way it invites the lamenter to speak honestly about the world, including the unruly realities of pain, grief, and dashed expectations. Psalms and texts of lament cry out, without reservation, before God and the community, about what is lost and broken. As Walter Brueggemann reflects, in their practice of lament, "Israel unflinchingly saw and affirmed that life as it comes, along with joys, is beset by hurt, betrayal, loneliness, disease, threat, anxiety, bewilderment, anger, hatred, and anguish."[18] The practice of lament is willing to give voice to these realities, without falling prey to the temptation to sugarcoat language or soften the blow.

While such honesty is certainly evidenced in many lament psalms, such as naming a sense of God's absence (e.g., Psalm 13) or the experience of physical anguish (e.g., Psalm 22), one excellent example of forthright lament in Scripture comes from the mouth of the prophet Habakkuk. At the beginning of the book, Habakkuk cries out to God:

> O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
> and you will not listen?
> Or cry to you "Violence!"
> and you will not save?
> Why do you make me see wrongdoing
> and look at trouble?
> Destruction and violence are before me;
> strife and contention arise.
> So the law becomes slack,
> and justice never prevails.

[18] Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith,* Loc 839.

The wicked surround the righteous;
therefore judgment comes forth perverted. (Habakkuk 1:2–4, NRSVUE)

Habakkuk's complaint is neither timid nor muted. He calls God to task, insisting that this is God's business and God should pay attention to all that is happening. He points to the prevalence of violence, destruction, and wrongdoing. And, even more, he diagnoses that the very foundations of the social order – law, justice, and judgment – are broken or in jeopardy.

Laments, like those Habakkuk offers, are not evidence of a lack of faith, but a "bruised faith, a longing faith, a faith emptied of nearness."[19] Such honest naming and cries of lament give voice, form, and language to those who are longing to find God or seeking some sense of order in the chaos, disruption, and uncertainty. And the practice of lament insists that such realities should not be discounted or overlooked. Lament invites brutal honesty, an insistence that the world is not as it should be and that such a reality is unacceptable and intolerable.[20]

Such brutal honesty may be experienced as uncomfortable in a society that uplifts niceness as a virtue and views much of life through social media filters. Indeed, the laments found in Scripture can be downright harsh or even embarrassing to contemporary hearers. To read of a community's anguish that would lead to a desire to bash babies' heads against stones (as in Psalm 137) or to hear of people's physical anguish of wasting away from within (as in Psalm 31) seems to cross a line of respectability or even piety.[21] However, this honest naming is holy language – language that is a part of our biblical canon including and despite its brutality and lack of restraint.

Lament-informed preaching, likewise, ought to refuse to shy away from an honest assessment and naming of what is broken, hurting, or unjust in the church, community, and world. Such preaching does not refuse to contend with challenging stories in Scripture nor the harsh realities of everyday life. Preaching that is lament-informed is willing to engage those parts of Scripture where violence, sexual assault, oppression, and disregard for humanity appear and ask the congregation to wrestle honestly with them in light of historical and present conditions. At the same time, lament-informed preaching is willing to name clearly and boldly what is broken and hurting in the contemporary community and the world. As Luke Powery posits: "In preaching lament, one does not back away from dealing with tough issues in the 'light of day' but names them directly and firmly within the listening community."[22]

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19 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 71.

20 Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith,* Loc 1222.

21 While we certainly must condemn the murder of anyone, particularly infants, the intensity of the sentiment is worthy of note and models well the depth of honesty lament offers.

22 Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech. Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), 120.

Honest naming of pain and hurt in the preaching event offers four notable gifts to the listening community. First, it welcomes truthfulness into the faith community, suggesting that such honesty is not beyond the care of the community or the grace of God. This is an act of hospitality and blessing for those who have long been taught that they are to bring only their "best" to church, equating faithfulness with happiness or perfection, even if only worn as a veil in the sanctuary. Second, such honesty offers people language to utilize as they wrestle with their own disorientation and brokenness. As named earlier, one of the features of traumatic loss, grief, and disorientation is the way it steals language. Offering preaching that names frankly what is broken, hurting, or chaotic in the world might give individuals and communities language to borrow until they can find their own language again. Third, such honest naming can help restore agency when people feel helpless or overwhelmed by the painful realities of the world, resisting both silencing and apathy. As I suggest in *Fractured Ground*, "[v]oicing pain in complaint and protest – giving words to one's fractured experience – resists the collapse into apathy that can so easily happen when people feel isolated or powerless. In being encouraged to come before God not just with praise, but also with pain and brokenness, the lamenting party is assured that God honors their experience, subjectivity, and full humanity."[23] Finally, such honest naming resists the urge for quick platitudes or trite theological bandages over wounds that need more sustained care and time.

4. Lament as Invitation to Multiple Emotions and Multiple Voices

The practice of lament is one that does not ask the speaker to specify one clear emotion or idea, nor does lament require smooth transitions that make sense of one thought or feeling in relation to another. Laments in Scripture jump from one emotion, voice, or mode to the next – complaint, supplication, confession, assurance of God's presence, revenge, or praise – with very little in way of transition from one idea to the next. Instead, the practice of lament can hold many emotions, voices, and realities together at once without letting one silence the other. In faithful lament, praise, or trust in God's presence in the past does not erase the pain of the present moment. Likewise, the sense that the community is abandoned to violence and ruin does not eliminate what they know to be true about God's *hesed* – God's steadfast love. As Patrick Miller suggests, lament is marked by the "distinctive conjoining of question and trust, of protest and acceptance, of fear and confidence."[24] The lamenting party can

[23] Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma*, 114.
[24] Patrick Miller, "Heaven's Prisoners: The Lament as Christian Prayer," in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 19.

hold all these realities together and allow them to interact, bounce off one another, and coexist.

The reality of our contemporary lives and our biblical texts is that they are filled with emotional complexity and multiple voices. We see this evidenced well in the Book of Lamentations. This book, which is believed to be constructed in response to the Babylonian invasion and downfall of Jerusalem in 587/586 BCE, is full of high emotion, hyperbolic language, poetic utterances, and lingering ambiguities.[25] As Gina Hens-Piazza notes, "the poetry of Lamentations […] registers and witnesses to this monumental disaster through the cries and emotional outpourings of those on the ground."[26] There are multiple voices that collide and interweave with one another, including a narrator, Daughter Zion (a personification of the devastated city), the community as a whole, and even a "strong man." And there is little in way of indication when the text shifts from one voice to the other. While there is some order given in the acrostic form of each of the chapters, this form does not override the chaos of intersecting voices and emotions.

In the same way, lament-informed preaching might invite such multi-vocality and complexity of emotion. Whether called a "thesis" or "focus", preaching professors have long insisted on one clear claim at the heart of a given sermon. While this tool is certainly helpful for preachers to clarify their sermon construction and form, this insistence on one clear idea may stifle the possibility for preachers to acknowledge the multiple experiences or simultaneous emotions in a community. Preaching that can acknowledge multiple experiences at once – grief and joy, anger and hope, a longing for justice and guilt, confession and expectation – allows all of these realities to be blessed as part of the life of faith. Such preaching may acknowledge multiple characters in a biblical story, noting those who are often villainized or pushed to the sidelines of the text. In addition, lament-informed preaching might uplift the voices of those within and beyond the community, particularly those whose experiences differ from the communal norm. A lament-informed preaching practice that holds multiple voices and emotions together might welcome a variety of preaching voices in the pulpit or uplift testimonies that are not simple narratives of triumph over challenge but hold the entanglements of real life. Lament-informed preachers might also be willing to engage narratives (biblical, communal, or personal), stories, or examples in their sermons that do not have easy resolutions or fairy-tale plotlines.[27] Such storytelling models for the listening congregation how the Holy One may be present and at work amid the complexities of life.

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25 Gina Hens-Piazza, *Lamentations*, ed. Barbara E. Reid and Carol J. Dempsey, Wisdom Commentary (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017).

26 Hens-Piazza, *Lamentations*, xxix.

27 While biblical laments are typically articulated in the literary genre of poetry, such poems can carry within them narratives about what has happened. Likewise, narratives may contain elements of lament, such as in the story of the Road to Emmaus in Luke 24 when Cleopas

5. Lament as Inviting and Modeling Eschatological Imagination

Between the communal experiences of violence, escalating war, political division, ecological degradation, public health crises, and the personal realities of illness, loss, death, and financial struggle, it is easy for people to become overwhelmed and lose the capacity to imagine a different future. Lament, however, in its dialogical stance, honesty, and multivocality, shapes and invites a renewal of eschatological imagination. Such imagination does not ignore the present hurt but honors that hurt while recognizing God's redeeming power that is moving towards us and, indeed, already present. Lament sits in this eschatological tension between the now and the not yet – the realities of brokenness and hope, death and resurrection, despair and promise. Lament invites honest rage that insists that God cannot be finished yet.

In an anecdote at the beginning of her book of laments written after the death of her son, Ann Weems reflects:

> One day [Walter Brueggemann] called and said I certainly didn't have to answer his question if I didn't want to, but he was working on Jeremiah and wanted to ask me, Will Rachel be comforted? I remember answering with little hesitation: No. No, Rachel will not be comforted. Not here, not now, not in the sense of being ultimately comforted. Of course, those people who are surrounding me with compassion are doing the work of angels, and I bid them come, but Rachel will be comforted only when God wipes the tears from her eyes.[28]

Weems is honest about the agonizing pain of the present reality – for her and for the weeping Rachel. However, there is not complete hopelessness or resignation. There is, instead, an imagination for what God is yet doing and an insistence that God can and will act. Weems models lament's power to honor the incompleteness of comfort on this side, but the promise of full comfort and redemption in the eschatological future. Weems' experience brings to life what Billman and Migliore observe:

> By refusing to concede that the present state of affairs is the last word, and by recalling the mighty acts of God in the past, those who lament prepare the way for new hope and new praise. [...] Rightly understood, the act of lament, far from being the antithesis of hope and praise, is their necessary companion in a world full of suffering and injustice. Those who lament dare to name the brokenness of reality rather than denying it; they refuse to pretend that it is other than it is; they want nothing to do with empty consolations. At the same time, they refuse to resign themselves to the given.[29]

There is an honesty in lament about what *is* and what *should* be – the reality of our present existence and what God intends for creation. Lament is honest

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and his companion lamented the death of Jesus saying: "But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel" (v. 21a).

28 Weems, *Psalms of Lament*, 16.

29 Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 125–126.

about present suffering, but anticipates future wholeness, glimpses of which are already coming towards us. This is why, I am convinced, psalmists and lamenting voices in many of our biblical texts can hold vivid articulations of pain and suffering alongside confessions of faith and assurances that God will respond. Such a juxtaposition is a leaning into the reality of eschatological imagination – a vision that can hold the present reality with honesty and integrity while trusting in the ways God's redeeming work is already coming towards us and yet to be fulfilled.

Lament-informed preaching might intentionally cultivate such eschatological imagination through attentiveness to (1) present pain and struggle, (2) God's work in the past as told in Scripture and communal story, (3) traces of God's presence in current circumstances, and (4) a consistent recitation of God's promise to "make all things new" (Revelation 21:5). Such eschatological imagination is not an escapist vision of some painless future utopia nor is it something we can fully achieve or claim in the present moment. Instead, a faithful eschatological imagination cultivates honesty about the present with a recognition that these realities exist in the shadow of the cross and in the light of resurrection power.

Conclusion

In a world bombarded by social, political, ecological, and personal tragedies, struggles, and uncertainties, our preaching practices need to shift to respond faithfully and to foster transformative encounters with God's Word. The dialogical nature, honest truth-telling, multi-emotional/multi-vocal, and eschatological orientation of lament offer a productive model for preaching in the present age. Through lament-informed proclamation, preachers and communities might cultivate preaching that invites a full range of embodiment that is authentic to the multiplicity and range of lived experience.