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The aesthetics of silence: Visual theopoetics in the aftermath of clerical child sexual abuse

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Abstract

This article builds on the growing field of trauma-informed theology by considering survivors' materially transformative creative output as a mode of non-verbal testimony to experiences that exceed the range of usual human experience.[1] Through a theological and aesthetic analysis of the LOUD fence movement in Ballarat, Australia, this article aims to demonstrate how material expressions and visual poetics can serve as legitimate forms of trauma testimony, offering survivors of clerical child sexual abuse alternative ways to bear witness when verbal testimony is impeded by institutional silencing and the psychological impacts of trauma. Drawing on South African theological perspectives on lament and aesthetic resistance, this analysis demonstrates how material expressions of trauma testimony resonate across contexts where institutional silence has impeded healing and reconciliation. The purpose of reconfiguring the action of *telling*[2] One's story should include visual poetics in theological discourse to provide a framework for understanding trauma testimony beyond verbal expression. Theopoetics honours the social imposition of silence[3] within the sphere of profound suffering while creating space for alternative forms of witness that can capture the fragmentary, somatic, and symbolic nature of trauma narratives that often exceed conventional linguistic and religious testimonial frameworks.

1 Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Violence to Political Terror*. (New York: Basic Books). 1997. 32

2 Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery*. 177.

3 Banks, A. (2023). *Broken Bodies, Broken Words: Feminist theology, trauma, and the arts*. [Doctoral Thesis, Charles Sturt University]. Charles Sturt University. 11.

Keywords

visual theopoetics; spiritual betrayal; material testimony; rituals of resistance; communities of memory

When buildings speak: the living legacy of institutional abuse

Standing at the gate of St Alipius Primary School in the regional Australian city of Ballarat, the sense of disconnect is palpable. The haunting of lost futures and testimonies continues to hang heavy in the air even eight years after the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse reported its findings in December 2017. The Royal Commission discovered that St Alipius, one of the four Ballarat schools run by the Christian Brothers in the 1970s, was, like its brother school, St Patrick's Catholic College, an epicentre of clerical child sexual abuse. It was noted that during this period, every male staff member at St Alipius, be they Christian Brother or Catholic priest, engaged in sexually abusing primary school-aged boys.[4] In the aftermath of the Royal Commission, there have been multiple calls from survivors and the broader Ballarat community to demolish the small schoolhouse[5] and the adjacent presbytery, both of which afforded the clerical paedophile ring unfettered access to young boys and replace the buildings with a permanent memorial site.[6] Instead, a childcare centre was established in the same buildings that witnessed the rape and the physical, psychological, and spiritual abuse of prepubescent boys. When asked to comment on the findings of the Royal Commission, the current Catholic Bishop of Ballarat, Paul Bird, acknowledged "that the history of child abuse in [the] diocese hangs over the community like a dark cloud".[7] Nevertheless. At the same time, the secular spaces of Ballarat

4 Change.org Petition: "Demolish the old St Alipius Boys School Building, the site of the worst child sexual abuse in Australia. [Online]. Available: https://www.change.org/p/bishop-paul-bird-demolish-the-old-st-alipius-boys-school-building-in-ballarat-site-of-the-worst-child-sexual-abuse-in-australia [Accessed: 24/12/2023].

5 Change.org Petition. [Accessed: 24/12/2023].

6 At the time of writing this article the Catholic Diocese of Ballarat has not acceded to this request.

7 Case Study 28. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. 2017. [Online]. Available: https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/

share public space with the Catholic Church. Hence, discourse between the public spheres of church and state on the suffering of victims often dissolves into an analysis of fault, guilt and sin, which has ultimately delayed restorative memorialisation practices.

In 2025, the fence lines of St Patrick's Secondary College, St Patrick's Cathedral, St Joseph's and St Alipius Primary Schools, like many other sites of abuse in Ballarat and surrounding parish schools, continue to be covered with ribbons of varying colours, lengths, and at different stages of decay. The eeriness imbued in the Catholic buildings of Ballarat is personified in the ribbons of the LOUD fence movement, which persist in pointing to all the unnamed victims and the legacy of shame, humiliation, and guilt that remains and continues to claw deep silent wounds into the community. It is this reflexive creative response to an institutional legacy of complicity and silence that this article will consider through the lens of theopoetics. Material theopoetics moves beyond testimonial language and functions symbolically, aiding our understanding of the transformative nature of transient memorials such as LOUD fence. This projective, creative, and symbolic process of tying ribbons to a fence offers an alternative to the ritualised narratives of forgiveness and redemption. This material response, understood within the conceptual framework of witnessing trauma, highlights the survivor's historical invisibility in a community's post-trauma imagination.

This article examines how the LOUD fence ribbons function as both protests and testimony, analysing how their fragile materiality reflects the complex interplay between trauma, institutional power, and the church's role in both creating and perpetuating silence around clerical abuse. The ritualised practice of tying ribbons to church fences embodies two key aspects of trauma: first, how this repeated physical action mirrors the persistent nature of post-traumatic stress symptoms, and second, how the ribbons themselves serve as both personal expressions of survivors' experiences and visible markers of their displacement from the ecclesial community. By examining the ribbons through Louis-Marie Chauvet's understanding of ritual as constructing identity and meaning, we see how

default/files/case_study_28_-_findings_report_-_catholic_church_authorities_in_ballarat_catholic_church_authorities_in_ballarat2.pdf p.439.

survivors use this practice to reclaim agency at sites of abuse. The article notes that "the power of ritual cannot be underestimated"[8] as it affects identity formation and meaningful connection to the world.

The repetitive nature of this ritual of tying ribbons to a church fence line serves multiple functions:

1. As a counter-liturgical practice: The act of tying ribbons subverts the sacred space that was previously a site of abuse and institutional silencing. The ribbons transform church boundaries into public testimony.
2. As an embodied trauma response: The need to constantly replace weathered ribbons mirrors the persistent nature of trauma symptoms that Judith Herman and Shelly Rambo describe as "pain that does not go away."[9]
3. As communal witness: The ribbons create "communities of memory"[10] – transforming private suffering into public testimony without requiring verbal articulation.
4. As theological resistance: By marking sacred spaces with secular symbols, survivors challenge the institutional church's control over testimony and truth-telling about abuse.

This practice is particularly significant given the article's discussion of the "double betrayal"[11] experienced by survivors of clerical abuse – betrayed both as children and in their relationship with God through the priest's claimed role as Christ's representative. The ribbon-tying ritual provides an alternative form of theological expression that bypasses traditional ecclesiastical authority while still maintaining a form of sacred witness. The ritualised nature of this practice also connects to what Rebecca Chopp

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8 Louis-Marie Chauvet (1995). *Symbol and Sacrament*. Translated by P. Madigan, SJ & M. Beaumont. Collegeville: Liturgical Press. 340.

9 Rambo, Shelly (2010). *Spirit and trauma: A theology of remaining.* Westminster John Knox Press. 2.

10 Alison Atkinson-Phillips (2019). *Survivor Memorials: Remembering Trauma and Loss in Contemporary Australia*. Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing. 91.

11 Doyle, Thomas P. (2009). "The spiritual trauma experienced by victims of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy." *Pastoral Psychology*, 58(3):239-260. 251

terms the "poetics of testimony"[12] – allowing survivors to communicate truth through means beyond conventional verbal or textual frameworks. This is especially important given how trauma disrupts linguistic expression and traditional testimonial forms. Rather than being merely repetitive protest actions, these ritual practices constitute a sophisticated theological response to trauma – one that honours both the persistent nature of trauma symptoms and the need for new forms of testimony when traditional religious frameworks have been compromised by abuse.[13]

A horrendous truth: Defining spiritual trauma and double betrayal

Theopoetics provides a crucial framework for understanding how survivors reclaim theological meaning in the aftermath of sexual and spiritual abuse. Marni Rosen Saltzman et al. defines sexual assault as a "forced or unwanted sexual activity perpetrated without consent. It represents a broader category of unwanted sexual contact that includes rape and sexual abuse."[14] The distinguishing feature of sexual abuse is that it is the "maltreatment of a child (underage minor), disadvantaged individuals, or disabled persons through any sexual activity involving a person of power."[15] American feminist theologian Shelly Rambo's definition of trauma as "pain that does not go away"[16] captures how trauma persists both in individual bodies and collective memory. This understanding is particularly relevant to child clerical abuse, where the Australian framework explicitly recognises spiritual/religious abuse alongside physical and psychological trauma. This broader definition acknowledges how religious authority can be weaponised

12 Rebecca S. Chopp (2001). "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." In, Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney & Kathryn Tanner. *Converging Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*. Oxford University Press. 56.

13 Löfgren, Agnes and Emily Hofstetter (2023). "Introversive Semiosis in Action: Depictions in Opera Rehearsals." *Social semiotics*, 33(3):601–620, 603.

14 Rosen Saltzman, Marni, Monique Matic, and Emily Marsden (2013). "Adlerian Art Therapy with Sexual Abuse and Assault Survivors." *Journal of Individual Psychology,* 69(3):223.

15 Rosen Saltzman, et., al. (2013). 223.

16 Rambo, Shelly. *Spirit and trauma*. 10.

through manipulation and coercive control, making it especially pertinent for understanding the complex nature of clerical abuse trauma.[17]

Spiritual abuse, also referred to as religious abuse or spiritual violence, is notoriously hard to define. At its most basic level, spiritual abuse is the employment of faith, religious practice, or beliefs to exert control.[18] The difficulty in identifying spiritual abuse for many is the lack of physical exploitation, as in many cases, victims are unsure of the indicative line between which behaviour constitutes abuse, and which does not. However, on the score of the situational vulnerability and unique trauma experienced when a priest sexually abuses a child or adolescent, Dr Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea noted in her statement to the U.S. Catholic Bishops in June 2002 that:

> The sexual violation of a child or adolescent by a priest is incest. It is a sexual and relational transgression perpetrated by *The*[19] father of the child's extended family, a man in whom the child is taught from birth to trust above everyone else in his life, to trust second only to God. Priest abuse *is* incest.[20]

Describing the sexual abuse of a child or an adolescent by a cleric as incest emphasises the depth of the sociocultural taboo and underscores how "the concept of God, the nature of the church and the identity of the priest mesh together to form a devastating source of trauma for the abuse victims."[21] Hence, broadening the scope of trauma studies to include spiritual abuse reveals how survivors struggle to distinguish between the religious beliefs they once held and those used to manipulate them. The enmeshment

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17 Australian Psychological Society, "Trauma". [Online]. Available: https://psychology.org.au/for-the-public/psychology-topics/trauma [Accessed: 4 April 2022]. In King FJ, Poobalan I. (2023). The Bronze Serpent: Abuse, Trauma and the Lifted Healer in the Wilderness. *Journal of Anglican Studies*. 1-21. doi:10.1017/S1740355323000165. 6.

18 Lisa Oakley. (2019). *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*. SPCK Publishing.

19 Emphasis added by Dr Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea. Trauma Treatment Centre. "The long-term impact of early sexual trauma." In *National Conference of Catholic Bishops*. 2002. 2

20 Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, Trauma Treatment Centre. "The long-term impact of early sexual trauma." In *National Conference of Catholic Bishops*. 2002. 2

21 Thomas P. Doyle (2009). "The spiritual trauma experienced by victims of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy." *Pastoral Psychology*, 58(3):239-260. 247.

of the priest's identity with that of Jesus Christ forms the basis for the Catholic priest's authority on earth as outlined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church's canonical legislation paragraph 1548.[22] In this sense, the victims of religious child sexual abuse not only experience the horror of sexual abuse but the resultant trauma symptoms are compounded by the enmeshment of the priest's identity with Jesus.

Commenting on the particular trauma landscape experienced by survivors of clerical child sexual assault, former Catholic priest Thomas Doyle observed that while the complex trauma begins with the sexual violation itself, it extends to a deep sense of betrayal not just by a trusted person but by the God personified in that person, effectively a double betrayal.[23] Therefore, not only does the priestly perpetrator have the power and authority to act in the place of the person of Christ, but they also mediate the victim's receipt of God's forgiveness and redemption. The priest also alienates the victim from the part of themselves brought into being through God. As such, child and/or adolescent victims of religious abuse become disassociated from their spiritual and religious peers, family members, and church community and, feel that they exist beyond the boundaries of Christian communion. Many survivors note that "perpetrators justified their behaviour in religious abuse by shaming victims and making them believe that perpetrators were only acting on or fulfilling "God's will."[24] This dogmatic entanglement of the priest's identity with Jesus[25] contributes to survivors experiencing ongoing distress and reoccurrences of psychological symptoms. Accordingly, this

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22 Pius XII, encyclical (1947). *Mediator Dei*: AAS, 39:548. https://www.catholiccrossreference.online/catechism/#!/search/1548-1551/fn/1548:23 [Accessed: 01/02/2024].

23 Doyle, Thomas P. (2009). "The spiritual trauma experienced by victims of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy." *Pastoral Psychology*, 58(3):239-260. 251

24 Birck, A. (2001). *Die Verarbeitung einer sexuellen Missbrauchserfahrung in der Kindheit: bei Frauen in der Psychotherapie [Doktorarbeit]*. Köln: Universitöt zu Köln. Schoon, Wiebke, and Peer Briken (2021). "Obstacles in the Process of Dealing with Child Sexual Abuse – Reports from Survivors Interviewed by the Independent Inquiry Into Child Sexual Abuse in Germany." *Frontiers in psychology* 12:619036. 6.

25 Not all Christian traditions consider the priest ontologically changed upon ordination, as is common in Roman Catholic and High Anglican traditions. John Zizioulas notes that Orthodox treatments of the priesthood avoid the enmeshment of the priest with Christ's identity because of the communal nature of being. Knight, D.H. (ed.). (2016). *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church*. Routledge.

double betrayal may influence or delay their seeking therapeutic, judicial or familial support.[26]

The theological implications of spiritual abuse require particular attention when considering how theopoetics can contribute to witnessing trauma theologically. Following Doyle's concept of double betrayal, the ribbons perform a specific theological function. Namely, they mark sites of betrayal while simultaneously creating new sacred spaces outside institutional control. This aligns with Chopp's assertion that marginalised voices often require new theological languages to express their experiences. The physical presence of ribbons on church fences represents what Rambo terms a "theology of remaining"[27] – bearing witness to both trauma and survival in the face of institutional silence.

The LOUD fence movement's emphasis on embodied, material testimony aligns with feminist theological approaches that privilege bodily knowledge and experiential truth. As Chopp argues, feminist theology must create space for testimonies that challenge dominant theological narratives. The ribbons represent what she terms a "poetics of resistance"[28] – creating new theological meanings through material practice rather than traditional doctrinal discourse. This feminist theological framework is particularly relevant to understanding how the ribbons function as protest and testimony, challenging patriarchal ecclesiastical power structures while creating alternative spiritual expression and healing spaces. Through this lens, the physical act of tying ribbons becomes not just a memorial but theological praxis – a way of doing theology that centres marginalised voices and embodied experience.

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26 Schoon, Wiebke, and Peer Briken (2021). "Obstacles in the Process of Dealing with Child Sexual Abuse – Reports from Survivors Interviewed by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in Germany." *Frontiers in psychology* 12:619036. 5.

27 Rambo, Shelly. *Spirit and trauma*.156.

28 Rebecca S. Chopp (2002). *The power to speak: Feminism, language, God*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. 37.

Trauma, testimony, and theopoetic witness

According to American psychiatrist Judith Herman, the aftermath of trauma unfolds in three stages: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and lastly, disclosure.[29] Herman suggests "that disclosure might be the first step in the healing process, [in] regain[ing] control and pav[ing] the way for meaning and integration of the abuse experiences."[30] However, for survivors of clerical child sexual abuse, the double betrayal of the priest can delay disclosure. This framework of trauma recovery intersects with Chopp's theopoetic approach in a crucial way. Where Herman identifies the need for disclosure, Chopp's poetics of testimony[31] provide alternative pathways when verbal disclosure is impeded. The LOUD fence movement exemplifies this intersection: the act of tying ribbons creates safety through anonymous expression, enables remembrance through a visible memorial, and achieves disclosure through non-verbal testimony. This alignment between the recovery from trauma and theopoetic expression is particularly significant for survivors of clerical abuse, whose trauma involves not only personal violation but spiritual displacement. The ribbons thus function as theological testimony – creating space for healing outside traditional ecclesiastical frameworks while maintaining a profound spiritual dimension.

The significance of these alternative pathways to disclosure becomes especially clear when considering the social barriers survivors face in telling their stories. Institutional resistance to hearing trauma testimonies compounds the internal challenges of articulating traumatic experiences. A significant challenge for trauma survivors is the social dimension of integrating an "incomprehensible experience into [their] understanding of self and the world."[32] Wiebke Schoon and Peer Briken explain that "negative social reactions from a trusted or formal source are associated with greater posttraumatic stress disorder/injury (PTSD) symptoms, the relationship

29 Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery*. 155.

30 Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery*. 51.

31 Rebecca S. Chopp (2001). "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." In Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney & Kathryn Tanner. *Converging Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*. Oxford University Press. 57.

32 Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery*. 50.

is mediated by maladaptive coping, and it reduces the likelihood that survivors will seek support."[33] Thus, the silence born from the symptoms of trauma framed within the social silence curated by negative responses to disclosure affects the survivor's perception of themselves and their inclusion within the boundaries of the broader socially curated cultural memory. This social dimension of trauma testimony is precisely what Chopp's theopoetic framework addresses by emphasising marginalised voices and alternative forms of witness.

The crisis of memory against forgetfulness, or more simply, the double invisibility of silence in the aftermath of trauma, means survivors are compelled to find alternative methods to reassemble their post-trauma identities and relationships and integrate their fragmented memories of frozen imagery and sensations into an organised and detailed verbal account oriented in time and historical context.[34] If, as Herman notes, it is "in the telling, the trauma story becomes testimony,"[35] how does one caught in the aftermath and double betrayal of clerical child sexual abuse testify if their words have historically been silenced? Rebecca Chopp notes that the poetics of testimony[36] "include poetry, theology, novels and other forms of literature [can] express unique events or experiences,"[37] such as silenced, marginalised and embodied trauma narratives.

Chopp's theopoetic framework is particularly relevant to clerical abuse cases as it provides a theological methodology that privileges marginalised voices and alternative forms of testimony. Her emphasis on poetics as a means of expressing unspeakable truths directly addresses the double silencing experienced by survivors of clerical abuse – both the trauma-induced inability to speak and the institutional suppression of testimony. The LOUD fence movement exemplifies what Chopp terms the "poetics

33 Birck, A. (2001). *Die Verarbeitung einer sexuellen Missbrauchserfahrung in der Kindheit: bei Frauen in der Psychotherapie [Doktorarbeit].* Köln: Universitöt zu Köln. Schoon, Wiebke, and Peer Briken. "Obstacles in the Process of Dealing with Child Sexual Abuse – Reports from Survivors Interviewed by the Independent Inquiry Into Child Sexual Abuse in Germany." *Frontiers in psychology* 12(2021):619036. 2

34 Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery.* 177.

35 Judith Herman. *Trauma and Recovery.* 177.

36 Rebecca S. Chopp. "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." 56.

37 Rebecca S. Chopp. "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." 56.

of testimony"[38] by creating a visual language that challenges traditional ecclesiastical power structures while maintaining a deeply spiritual dimension of witness. In the context of clerical abuse, this becomes particularly significant as survivors must navigate not only personal trauma but also spiritual trauma – the rupture of their relationship with God and the religious community. The LOUD fence movement models what Chopp identifies as the three key elements of theological testimony: witness (the physical presence of ribbons at sites of abuse), voice (the silent but visible statement of survival), and transformation (the reclaiming of sacred space).

The theoretical significance of using Chopp's framework extends beyond individual trauma testimony to fundamental questions about how communities remember, witness, and heal. The LOUD fence movement demonstrates three key aspects of theological testimony: First, it creates a counter-narrative to institutional power. The ribbons physically mark sites where ecclesiastical authority was abused while establishing new forms of sacred witness outside church control. Second, it illustrates an embodied truth – the physical act of tying ribbons becomes a form of bodily knowing and testimony that transcends verbal limitations. This is particularly significant given how trauma disrupts traditional narrative capacity. Third, it manifests what Chopp identifies as "communal resistance" – the collective nature of the ribbon-tying creates new forms of theological community and witness that challenge traditional hierarchical structures while maintaining spiritual significance. These theoretical elements help explain why the LOUD fence movement functions as more than a protest or memorial – it becomes a form of theological praxis that generates new ways of understanding how communities can witness and heal from profound spiritual trauma.

Beyond words: theopoetics and alternative forms of trauma testimony

The testimonial conundrum for the ribbons is that, as a society, we prize language, text, and speech above all other forms of communication. Thus, to render the "jarring witness, [the] chaos of disjoined and discrepant

38 Rebecca S. Chopp. "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." 56.

narrations"[39] as truth, we need a testimonial practice that attends to the voices/images that seek to describe and name their experience as they see it beyond the tyranny of text. From within the language vacuum of trauma, theopoetics provides an embodied testimonial framework that respects and protects the gap between the named and the unnameable.[40] In an essay first presented in 1997, Chopp addressed the growing awareness of interdisciplinary trauma studies and suggested poetics of testimony[41] as an alternative mode for theology. The purpose was to acknowledge "trauma [as an] assumed context [is one from] which theological work can be done."[42] Chopp's objective was to offer a theopoetic testimonial methodology to challenge religious testimonial models that employed statements of faith to exhume and hear truths to access silenced trauma narratives from marginalised individuals and communities.[43]

For Chopp, the images and stories that emerge in the aftermath of trauma, pain, and suffering offer a "genre of testimony [that allows people] to speak their truths about their experiences that would not be recognised within the arena of rational discourse."[44] Ashley Theuring concurs with Chopp's assessment and asserts that the language of theopoetics can "help communities respond to suffering and give us a language in the face of tragedy."[45] However, in the case of the LOUD fence ribbons, the primacy of the singular testimonial voice found in traditional verbal/textual testimonies has been scaled up to include hundreds of individual silenced trauma narratives. This social form of testimony points to the impossibility of finding the right magic words that "uncouple the traumatised from the traumatising event."[46]

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39 Rebecca S. Chopp. "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." 56.

40 Rebecca S. Chopp. "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." 64.

41 Rebecca S. Chopp. "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." 61.

42 Shelly, Rambo (2019). Theopoetics of Trauma, in Eric Boynton and Peter Capretto, *Trauma and Transcendence: Suffering and the Limits of Theory*. Fordham University Press. 225.

43 Shelly Rambo. Theopoetics of Trauma, 225.

44 Shelly Rambo. Theopoetics of Trauma, 225.

45 Ashley, Theuring 2014. "Holding hope and doubt: An interreligious theopoetic response to public tragedies." *Cross Currents* 64(4):549-565. 549.

46 Ted Morrissey. *Trauma Theory as an Approach to Analysing Literary Texts*. 2.

Considering the conceptual social prism survivors must navigate within their disoriented linguistic, cognitive, and emotional state in the aftermath of trauma, it is little wonder that child sexual abuse survivors respond to their trauma wounds aesthetically. Acknowledging that the ribbons of the LOUD fence movement have come to signify the public testimony of private pain and a community's recognition of "pre-existing power imbalance[s] and [the] need to challenge institutional and cultural structures of power and oppression,"[47] the ribbons serve as physical manifestations of memory and trauma. Through their material presence, they transform private suffering into public witness, creating tangible expressions of experiences that often defy verbal articulation. Furthermore, the ribbons of the LOUD fence hold open an interdiscursive dialogical space whereby the observer witness relates to the survivor's truth in the absence of the survivor's testimonial voice and on the grounds of institutional sites of historical religious abuse. Accordingly, the installation site and the ribbons become an act of public testimony and form "communities of memory"[48] for they mark out a "transitional space for the projection of interpersonal meaning-making and social investment."[49] The multi-directional projective symbology of the ribbons can, therefore, be read as an act of truth-telling and symbolic reparations while simultaneously pointing to once stigmatised and marginalised people moving from private silence to witnessed public citizenship. Thus, the ribbons attest to the survivor's helical journey through the healing processes of remembering traumatic events, mourning the loss of self, and reconnecting with family, friends, and the broader community.

This movement from silence to public witness resonates deeply with South African theological perspectives on trauma and testimony. Denise Ackermann's work on lament as both protest and prayer offers valuable insights for understanding how the LOUD fence functions as a communal lamentation. Just as Ackermann identified how lament created a language

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47 Michelle A.Walsh, (2014). *Prophetic pastoral care in the aftermath of trauma: Forging a constructive practical theology of lived religion from organised trauma response ministries*. Boston University. 43.

48 Alison Atkinson-Phillips. (2019). *Survivor Memorials: Remembering Trauma and Loss in Contemporary Australia*. UWA Publishing: Crawley Western Australia. 91.

49 Alison Atkinson-Phillips. *Survivor Memorials*. 44.

for suffering that refuses to be silenced[50] during apartheid, the ribbons create a visual language that refuses institutional silencing. Similarly, John de Gruchy's analysis of aesthetic responses to systemic injustice in post-apartheid South Africa[51] illuminates how visual symbols can function as theological witness and social transformation. His work on how communities use material symbols to reclaim sacred spaces previously associated with oppression provides a crucial framework for understanding the LOUD fence movement's transformation of church boundaries into sites of testimony. This parallel is particularly relevant as South African churches similarly grapple with clerical abuse cases, where survivors face comparable challenges of institutional silence and spiritual displacement. Like the memorial practices De Gruchy analyses, the ribbons testify to past trauma and are markers of ongoing struggles for justice and recognition within religious institutions.

Visual poetics and sacred resistance: From purple dye to loud fence ribbons

The LOUD fence ribbons create a powerful visual testimony through their aesthetic presence and symbolic meaning, like psalms of lament, they transform private sorrow into public witness while creating new possibilities for hope and healing. Their presence at sites of abuse serves dual purposes: they mark spaces of trauma while simultaneously reclaiming these spaces through collective acts of memory and witness. Like all symbols, the ribbons operate through multiple layers of meaning. As communal artefacts, they externalise trauma memories that are often too difficult to verbalise, creating a shared visual language of witness, and through survivors employing this medium to transform their experiences of fragmentation and silence into visible testimony. The physical properties of the ribbons – their movement, texture, and impermanence – mirror aspects of trauma experience while also suggesting possibilities for transformation. Through artistic elements like repetition, rhythm, and

50 Denise M. Ackermann, "Lamenting Tragedy From" The Other Side." *Sameness and Difference: Problems and Potentials in South African Civil Society* (2000):213-42. 220.

51 John W. De Gruchy (2002). *Christianity, art and transformation: Theological aesthetics in the struggle for justice.* Cambridge University Press.

contrast, the ribbons create a poetics of testimony,[52] in so doing, they move beyond passive memorials to a site imbued with active communal witness.

Approaching the ribbons allegorically through the motif of repetition, their temporal and transient materiality not only highlights the vulnerability and disempowered status of the victims of child sexual abuse, but their environmental fragility also requires them to be constantly replaced. This socio-ecological aspect of the ribbon's material nature requires their continual reinstatement at the physical site of the memorial. While the material emphasis of the ribbons reflects how endemic the violence perpetrated against children was in the Ballarat community, it is the ritualised aspect of survivors' repeatedly visiting and marking the boundary of the institution that was complicit in their abuse. Thus, the tying of ribbons on Catholic Church fence lines has become a ritualised practice to desacralize and reframe the perpetrator's abuse, hierarchical infringements and boundary violations.

Louis-Marie Chauvet wrote that the power of ritual cannot be underestimated,[53] as it profoundly affects one's identity formation and capacity to connect to the world meaningfully.[54] Chauvet noted that "ritual erects a barrier against the forces of death which relentlessly threatens to destroy a group's identity and their significance in the world."[55] Chauvet's sacramental theology provides crucial insights for understanding how the LOUD fence movement functions as ritual resistance to institutional power. For Chauvet, ritual is not merely a symbolic action but a fundamental way communities construct theological meaning and identity. His assertion that "ritual erects a barrier against the forces of death which relentlessly threatens to destroy a group's identity and their significance in the world"[56] takes on resonance in the context of clerical abuse, where institutional rituals have been weaponised as instruments of harm. The

52 Rebecca S. Chopp. *"Theology and the Poetics of Testimony."* 61.

53 Louis-Marie Chauvet. 1995. *Symbol and Sacrament.* Translated by P. Madigan, SJ & M. Beaumont. Collegeville: Liturgical Press. 340.

54 Karecki, M., 1997. *Religious ritual as a key to wholeness in mission. Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies,* 25(4):598-606. 598.

55 Louis-Marie Chauvet. 1995. *Symbol and Sacrament.* 340.

56 Louis-Marie Chauvet. 1995. *Symbol and Sacrament.* 340.

ribbons represent a counter-liturgical practice that subverts traditional ecclesiastical power while creating new forms of sacred witness. Through this lens, the repetitive act of tying ribbons becomes more than a memorial; it becomes a form of sacramental resistance that acknowledges trauma and creates new possibilities for survivor identity formation outside traditional church structures. This aligns with Chauvet's understanding of ritual as creating a "symbolic exchange"[57] – here, the exchange of silence for visible testimony, of institutional power for survivor agency, of sacred spaces of abuse for sites of witness.

The significance of the ribbons' impermanence becomes clear when considering survivors' active resistance to permanent institutional memorials. In 2016, when the Catholic Church proposed a permanent memorial in Armidale, New South Wales, survivors protested both its permanence and its secluded location. The Church's statement that they were "responding to the needs of their members"[58] while failing to consider survivors' needs exemplifies the ongoing tension between institutional and survivor-led approaches to testimony. The survivors' preference for transient, visible ribbons over fixed, hidden memorials demonstrates how the repetitive act of renewal serves as both ritual resistance and ongoing witness. This impermanence and need for regular reapplication mirrors the persistent nature of trauma while providing survivors with the agency through repeated acts of public testimony.

What is unique about the ritualistic tying of ribbons to a boundary fence is that they not only emphasise the limits of language, but the action of tying the ribbon draws on sensory and communal dimensions of reverential expression, which is mimetic of the Eucharist. Or, more simply, the Eucharist draws our senses and bodies into the act of worship, which leads to the participation of our broken selves in union with the Church in expressing the prayers being offered. Alternatively, the ribbons repeatedly draw survivors' bodies and senses to the fence where their hurt and pain are acknowledged rather than denied; here, they encounter the fragmented laments of other survivors in the unity of silent petitions offered in the perpetual search for hope and transformation. This is not, as Logan Jones

57 Louis-Marie Chauvet. 1995. *Symbol and Sacrament*. 340.

58 Alison Atkinson-Phillips. *Survivor Memorials*. 155.

writes, "a cheap hope that can be easily confused with optimism. Rather, it is a hope wrought in relationship and trust."[59] In the aftermath of trauma, particularly child sexual abuse, the basic nature of trust is in question with every new encounter.[60]

The South African anti-apartheid struggle provides another important parallel for understanding how visual testimony can respond to institutional power. The "Purple Shall Govern" movement of 1989[61] demonstrates a compelling parallel for understanding how the LOUD fence ribbons function as visual testimony in the aftermath of clerical abuse. In both cases, communities transformed markers of institutional power into symbols of resistance and witness, creating what Rebecca Chopp terms a "poetics of testimony"[62] that operates outside conventional ecclesiastical frameworks. The South African anti-apartheid protesters' appropriation of purple dye – originally used by police to mark dissidents for arrest – demonstrates how visual elements can be reclaimed to challenge institutional power. Similarly, the LOUD fence movement's transformation of church boundaries through the installation of ribbons represents a reclamation of sacred space. In both instances, the visual testimony serves multiple theological functions: it marks sites of institutional violence while simultaneously creating new spaces for witnesses outside traditional religious authority.

The LOUD fence movement shares significant theological and phenomenological parallels with South African practices of resistance and commemoration. Through what Chopp terms "new theological languages,"[63] both contexts demonstrate how material transformations of institutional boundaries can reconfigure spaces of trauma into sites of witness. Like the purple protest markings in South Africa, the ribbons exemplify Atkinson-Phillips' concept of "communities of memory,"[64] where individual acts of witness accumulate into collective testimony that transcends verbal

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59 Jones, L.C., 2007. The psalms of lament and the transformation of sorrow. *Journal of pastoral care & counselling*, 61(1-2):47-58. 49.

60 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*. 92.

61 Gatnarek, Heather Lynn (2005). "The People Shall Govern", Boston College. [Online]. Available: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/391.

62 Rebecca S. Chopp. "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." 61.

63 Rebecca S. Chopp. "Theology and the Poetics of Testimony." 61.

64 Alison Atkinson-Phillips. *Survivor Memorials*. 155.

articulation. This transformation of sacred space aligns with counter-liturgical practice, where survivors engage in theological resistance while maintaining forms of sacred witness outside institutional control. The temporal dimension of these practices – evident in the weathering and renewal of ribbons – reflects what Rambo identifies as trauma's persistent nature in both individual and collective experience. Significantly, both movements demonstrate a democratisation of witness that challenges hierarchical ecclesiastical authority structures. The accessibility of these material practices – anyone can tie a ribbon or apply purple dye – creates what de Gruchy terms "spaces of communal resistance"[65] that simultaneously honour individual trauma while building collective

Understanding these parallels helps illuminate how the LOUD fence movement functions as more than a protest or memorial. It constitutes a sophisticated theological response to trauma that honours both the persistent nature of spiritual injury and the need for new forms of testimony when traditional religious frameworks have been compromised by abuse. This testimony's visual and material nature creates space for redemptive remembering while challenging the institutional church's monopoly on sacred witness. This framework suggests that visual testimony documents past trauma and an ongoing theological resistance and renewal practice. The LOUD fence ribbons, like the purple markings of apartheid resistance, demonstrate how communities can bear witness to institutional violence while creating new possibilities for sacred meaning-making outside traditional ecclesiastical bounds.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how the LOUD fence movement represents a significant contribution to trauma-informed theology through its legitimisation of material expressions as valid forms of testimony. Drawing on both Chopp's theopoetic framework and Chauvet's sacramental theology, we see how these ribbons function not merely as protest symbols but as sophisticated theological responses to trauma. Through Chopp's lens, they challenge traditional ecclesiastical power structures while maintaining

65 John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, art and transformation*. 33.

profound spiritual significance. Through Chauvet's understanding of ritual as identity formation, they represent a form of sacramental resistance that creates new possibilities for theological meaning-making outside institutional structures. The ribbons' effectiveness as testimony operates on multiple levels: first, through their physical presence at sites of abuse, they transform spaces of silencing into sites of witness; second, through their need for constant renewal, they enact a form of ritual resistance that both acknowledges trauma and creates new possibilities for survivor agency; and third, through their public visibility, they challenge the institutional preference for hidden memorials and private reconciliation.

This analysis suggests broader implications for how the church might better respond to trauma testimony. As demonstrated through parallels with South African theological perspectives on trauma and testimony, particularly through Ackermann's work on lament and de Gruchy's analysis of aesthetic responses to systemic injustice, the need for alternative forms of witness extends beyond any single context. The LOUD fence movement offers a model for how visual poetics can create spaces for testimony that honour both the unspeakable nature of trauma and survivors' need to bear witness. By reconceptualising testimony beyond traditional verbal frameworks, this article contributes to the growing field of trauma-informed theology, demonstrating how material expressions can provide survivors with alternative pathways to bear witness when conventional testimonial forms prove inadequate or are actively suppressed.

Looking forward, this analysis of the LOUD fence movement through theopoetic and sacramental frameworks opens new possibilities for responding to clerical abuse. Future research might explore how theopoetics could inform pastoral responses to trauma, particularly in contexts where traditional theological language has been compromised by institutional abuse. There is also scope to examine how other survivor-led movements employ material testimony and how churches might better incorporate these alternative forms of witness into their processes of truth-telling and reconciliation. As churches globally continue to grapple with histories of abuse, the intersection of theopoetics, ritual studies, and trauma theory offers rich ground for developing more survivor-centred approaches to testimony, healing, and institutional transformation. This is particularly relevant for contexts where survivors face similar challenges of institutional

silence and spiritual displacement, suggesting the need for further cross-cultural analysis of how different communities create spaces for trauma testimony outside traditional ecclesiastical frameworks.

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