

Considering Matthew Shepard

Craig Hella Johnson

Libretto

Commissioned by Fran and Larry Collmann and Conspirare
Dedicated to Philip Overbaugh

PROLOGUE

Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass
Ordinary Boy
We Tell Each Other Stories

PASSION

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EPILOGUE

Meet Me Here
Thanks
All of Us
Reprise: This Chant of Life (Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass)

PROLOGUE

All.

*Yoodle—ooh, yoodle-ooh-hoo, so sings a lone cowboy,
Who with the wild roses wants you to be free.*

Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass

Cattle, horses, sky and grass
These are the things that sway and pass
Before our eyes and through our dreams
Through shiny, sparkly, golden gleams
Within our psyche that find and know
The value of this special glow
That only gleams for those who bleed
Their soul and heart and utter need
Into the mighty, throbbing Earth
From which springs life and death and birth.

I'm alive! I'm alive, I'm alive, golden. I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive . . .

These cattle, horses, grass, and sky
Dance and dance and never die
They circle through the realms of air
And ground and empty spaces where
A human being can join the song
Can circle, too, and not go wrong
Amidst the natural, pulsing forces
Of sky and grass and cows and horses.

I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive . . .

This chant of life cannot be heard
It must be felt, there is no word
To sing that could express the true
Significance of how we wind
Through all these hoops of Earth and mind
Through horses, cattle, sky and grass
And all these things that sway and pass.

Ordinary Boy

Let's talk about Matt—

Ordinary boy, ordinary boy, ordinary boy . . .

Born in December in Casper, Wyoming

Ordinary boy

to a father, Dennis
and a mother, Judy

Ordinary boy, ordinary boy

Then came a younger brother, Logan

Ordinary boy

His name was Matthew Wayne Shepard. And one day his name came to be known
around the world. But as his mother said:

Judy Shepard: You knew him as Matthew. To us he was Matt.

He went camping, he went fishing, even hunting for a moose
He read plays and he read stories and especially *Dr. Seuss*

He wrote poems with illustrations for the neighbors on the street
And he left them in each mailbox till he learned it was illegal

He made friends and he wore braces and his frame was rather small
He sang songs his father taught him

Frere Jacques . . .

Row Row Row Your Boat . . .

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star . . .

Judy: He was my son, my first-born, and more. He was my friend, my confidant, my
constant reminder of how good life can be—and . . . how hurtful. ^

How good life can be, how good life can be

Judy: *Matt's laugh, his wonderful hugs, his stories . . .*

Matt writes about himself in a notebook:

I am funny, sometimes forgetful and messy and lazy. I am not a lazy person though. I am
giving and understanding. And formal and polite. I am sensitive. I am honest. I am sincere.
And I am not a pest.

I am not a pest, I am not a pest . . .

I am my own person. I am warm.

I want my life to be happy and I want to be clearer about things. I want to feel good.

I love Wyoming . . .

I love Wyoming very much . . .

I love theatre
I love good friends
I love succeeding
I love pasta
I love jogging
I love walking and feeling good

I love Europe and driving and music and helping and smiling and Charlie and Jeopardy
I love movies and eating and positive people and pasta and driving and walking and jogging
and kissing and learning and airports and music and smiling and hugging and being myself
I love theatre! I love theatre!
And I love to be on stage!+

Such an ordinary boy living ordinary days
In an ordinary life so worth living
He felt ordinary yearning and ordinary fears
With an ordinary hope for belonging

He felt ordinary yearning and ordinary fears
With an ordinary hope for belonging
(Born to live this ordinary life)
Just an ordinary boy living ordinary days with extraordinary kindness
extraordinary laughter extraordinary shining
extraordinary light and joy
Joy and light.

I love, I love, I love . . .
Ordinary boy, ordinary boy

We Tell Each Other Stories

We tell each other stories so that we will remember
Try and find the meaning in the living of our days

Always telling stories, wanting to remember
Where and whom we came from
Who we are

Sometimes there's a story that's painful to remember
One that breaks the heart of us all
Still we tell the story
We're listening and confessing
What we have forgotten
In the story of us all

We tell each other stories so that we will remember

Trying to find the meaning . . .

*I am open to hear this story about a boy, an ordinary boy
Who never had expected his life would be this story,
(could be any boy)*

I am open to hear a story

*Open, listen.
All.*

PASSION

RECITATION I

***Laramie, southeastern Wyoming, between the Snowy Range and the Laramie Range.
Tuesday, October 6, 1998.***

The Fence (before)

Out and alone
on the endless empty prairie

the moon bathes me
the stars bless me

the sun warms me
the wind soothes me

still still still
I wonder

will I always be out here
exposed and alone?

will I ever know why
I was put (here) on this earth?

will somebody someday
stumble upon me?

will anyone remember me
after I'm gone?

Still, still, still . . . I wonder.

RECITATION II

Tuesday night. Matthew attended a meeting of the University of Wyoming's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association, then joined others for coffee at the College Inn. Around 10:30, he went to the Fireside Bar, where he later met Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Near midnight, they drove him to a remote area, tied him to a buck and rail fence, beat him horribly and left him to die in the cold of night.

The Fence (that night)

*Most noble evergreen with your roots in the sun:
you shine in the cloudless sky of a sphere no earthly eminence can grasp,
You blush like the dawn,
you burn like a flame of the sun. ^*

I held him all night long
He was heavy as a broken heart
Tears fell from his unblinking eyes
He was dead weight yet he kept breathing

He was heavy as a broken heart
His own heart wouldn't stop beating
The cold wind wouldn't stop blowing
His face streaked with moonlight and blood
I tightened my grip and held on

The cold wind wouldn't stop blowing
We were out on the prairie alone
I tightened my grip and held on
I saw what was done to this child

We were out on the prairie alone
Their truck was the last thing he saw
I saw what was done to this child
I cradled him just like a mother

Most noble evergreen, most noble evergreen, your roots in the sun . . .

Their truck was the last thing he saw
Tears fell from his unblinking eyes
I cradled him just like a mother
I held him all night long

Most noble evergreen . . .

RECITATION III

The next morning, Matthew was found by a cyclist, a fellow student, who at first thought he was a scarecrow. After several days in a coma and on life support, Matthew Shepard died on Monday, October 12, at 12:53 a.m. At the funeral, which took place on Friday, October 16, at St Mark's Episcopal Church in Casper, Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church protested outside.

A Protestor

God Hates Fags, Matt in Hell

–Signs held by anti-gay protestors at Matthew Shepard's funeral and the trials of his murderers

kreuzige, kreuzige! (translation: crucify, crucify)

A boy who takes a boy to bed?
Where I come from that's not polite
He asked for it, you got that right
The fires of Hell burn hot and red
The only good fag is a fag that's dead

A man and a woman, the Good Lord said
As sure as Eve took that first bite
The fires of Hell burn hot and red

kreuzige, kreuzige!

Beneath the Hunter's Moon he bled
That must have been a pretty sight
The fires of Hell burn hot and red

C'mon, kids, it's time for bed
Say your prayers, kiss Dad good night
A boy who takes a boy to bed?
The fires of Hell burn hot and red

crucify, crucify . . . the light

crucify the light . . .

Keep It Away From Me (The Wound of Love)

don't wanna look on this
never get near
flames too raw for me
grief too deep
keep it away from me
stay out of my heart
stay out of my hope
some son, somebody's pain
some child gone
child never mine
born to this trouble
don't wanna be born to this world
world where sometimes yes
world where mostly no
the wound of love^

smoke round my throat
rain down my soul

no heaven lies
keep them gone
keep them never
grief too deep, flames too raw
keep them away from me
 stay out of my heart
 stay out of my hope

don't try
any old story on me
no wing no song
no cry no comfort ye
no wound ever mine
close up the gates of night
 the wound of love
keep this all away from me
 the wound of love
 you take away
 the wounds of the world
keep it away from me

RECITATION IV

National media began to broadcast the story. As the news began to spread, many people across the country gathered together in candlelight vigils, moved to (silently) speak for life over death, love over hate, light over darkness.

Fire of the Ancient Heart

Cantor:

*"What have you done? Hark, thy brother's blood
cries to me from the ground." ^*

Choir:

Called by this candle
Led to the flame
Called to remember
Enter the flame

Cantor:

all our flames now
swaying and free
all our hearts now
moving as one
every living spirit
turned toward peace
all our tender
hopes awake

Choir:

*Called by this candle
Led to the flame
Called to remember
Enter the flame*

Fire: howl
Fire: broken
Fire: burst
Fire: rage
Fire: swell
Fire: shatter
Fire: wail

Fire

We all betray the ancient heart
Ev'ry one of us, all of us
His heart, my heart, your heart, one heart
"In each moment the fire rages, it will burn away a hundred veils."#
Burning Breaking Grasping Raging

*how do we keep these
flames in our hands?
how do we guard these
fears in our hearts?
how long to hold these
griefs in our songs?*

*remembering anger
weave it with hope
remembering exile
braid it with praise
longing past horror
longing past dread
dreaming of healing
past all our pain*

Fire: living in me
Fire: purify
Fire: now hold me
Fire: seize my heart

*(enter the flame, enter the flame
shatter my heart, shatter my heart
called to enter, burn a hundred veils)*

Called by this flame
Fire of my heart:
Break down all walls
Open all doors
Only this Love

"Eyes of flesh, eyes of fire"~

*Lumina, lumina, lumina
Open us,
All!*

(In each moment the fire rages, it will burn away a hundred veils.)

RECITATION V

Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson were arrested shortly after the attack and charged with murder, kidnapping, and aggravated robbery. The first of two trials began on October 26, 1999; both were convicted of the murder and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences.

We Are All Sons

*Stray birds of summer come to my window to sing and fly away.
And yellow leaves of autumn which have no songs flutter and fall there with a sigh.
Once we dreamt that we were strangers.
We wake up to find that we were dear to each other.^*

we are all sons of fathers and mothers
we are all sons

we are all rivers
the roar of waters, we are all sons

I Am Like You

I am like you

Aaron

and Russell

When I think of you (and honestly I don't like to think about you)
but sometimes I do,
I am so horrified, and just so angry and confused (and scared)
that you could do things to another boy—they were so cruel and
so undeserved, so dark and hard and full of (I don't know)

Late one night I had a glimpse
of something I recognized, just a tiny glimpse—
I don't even like to say this out loud,
it isn't even all that true—
but I wondered for a moment,
am I like you? (in any way)

(I pray the answer is no)
Am I like you?
I bet you once had hopes and dreams, too.

Some things we love get lost along the way,
That's just like me—get lost along the way—
I am like you, I get confused and I'm afraid
and I've been reckless, I've been restless, bored,
unthinking, listless, intoxicated,
I've come unhinged,
and made mistakes
and hurt people very much.

Sometimes I feel (in springtime, in early afternoon)
the sunshine warm on my face;
you feel this too (don't you?),
the sunshine warm on your face.

I am like you
(this troubles me)
I am like you
(just needed to say this)

Some things we love get lost along the way.

we are all sons of fathers and mothers
we are all sons

sometimes no home for us here on the earth
no place to lay our heads
we are all sons of fathers and mothers

if you could know for one moment
how it is to live in our bodies
within the world

if you could know

you ask too much of us
you ask too little

The Innocence

When I think of all the times the world was ours for dreaming,
When I think of all the times the earth seemed like our home-
Every heart alive with its own longing,
Every future we could ever hope to hold.

All the times our laughter rang in summer,
All the times the rivers sang our tune-
Was there already sadness in the sunlight?
Some stormy story waiting to be told?

*Where O where has the innocence gone?
Where O where has it gone?
Rains rolling down wash away my memory;
Where O where has it gone?*

When I think of all the joys, the wonders we remember
All the treasures we believed we'd never ever lose.
Too many days gone by without their meaning,
Too many darkened hours without their peace.

Where O where has the innocence gone?

*Where O where has it gone?
Vows we once swore, now it's just this letting go,
Where O where has it gone?*

RECITATION VI

In the days and weeks after Matthew's death, many people came to the fence to pay homage and pray and grieve.

The Fence (one week later)

I have seen people come out here with a pocketknife and take a piece of the fence, like a relic, like an icon. —Rev. Stephen M. Johnson, Unitarian minister

I keep still
I stand firm
I hold my ground
while they lay down

flowers and photos
prayers and poems
crystals and candles
sticks and stones

they come in herds
they stand and stare
they sit and sigh
they crouch and cry

some of them touch me
in unexpected ways
without asking permission
and then move on

but I don't mind
being a shrine
is better than being
the scene of the crime

RECITATION VII

Matthew's father made his statement to the court on November 5, 1999.

STARS

By the end of the beating, his body was just trying to survive. You left him out there by himself, but he wasn't alone. There were his lifelong friends with him—friends that he had grown up with. You're probably wondering who these friends were. First, he had the beautiful night sky with the same stars and moon that we used to look at through a telescope. Then, he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him one more time—one more cool, wonderful autumn day in Wyoming. His last day alive in Wyoming. His last day alive in the state that he always proudly called home. And through it all he was breathing in for the last time the smell of Wyoming sagebrush and the scent of pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind—the ever-present Wyoming wind—for the last time. He had one more friend with him. One he grew to

know through his time in Sunday school and as an acolyte at St. Mark's in Casper as well as through his visits to St. Matthew's in Laramie.

I feel better knowing he wasn't alone.

Stars
across
scattered
the
sky
in
blinking
dismay
unable
being
to help
light
years
away

RECITATION VIII

Matthew was left tied to the fence for almost eighteen hours.

In Need of Breath

Matt:

My heart

Is an unset jewel

Upon the tender night

Yearning for its dear old friend

The Moon.

When the Nameless One debuts again
Ten thousand facets of my being unfurl wings
And reveal such a radiance inside

I enter a realm divine—
I too begin to sweetly cast light,
Like a lamp,
I cast light
Through the streets of this
World.

My heart is an unset jewel
Upon existence
Waiting for the Friend's touch.

Tonight

Tonight
My heart is an unset ruby
Offered bowed and weeping to the Sky.
I am dying in these cold hours
For the resplendent glance of God.

My heart
Is an unset jewel
Upon the tender night

My heart is an unset ruby
Offered bowed and weeping to the Sky.

Gently Rest (Deer Lullaby)

Gently rest now, you the child of angels
Spirit shining, resting in creation
Universe is holding you so deeply
Gently rest now, you the child of angels

Deer beside you, hear your brother breathing
With you always in your starry shelter
Dreaming in the holy home of wonder
Universe is holding you so deeply
Light of every sun you felt around you
Blessing bringing our own hearts of longing
Spirit sleeping in the arms of ages
Gently rest now, you the child of angels

Universe now dreaming you so deeply
Spirit shining, home within creation
Dreaming in eternal light of wonder
Gently rest now, you the child of angels
Spirit sleeping in the arms of angels
Gently rest . . .

RECITATION IX

Sheriff's Deputy, Reggie Fluty, the first to report to the scene, told Judy Shepard that as she ran to the fence she saw a large doe lying near Matt—as if the deer had been keeping him company all through the night.

Deer Song

Deer:

A mist is over the mountain,
 The stars in their meadows upon the air,
Your people are waiting below them,
 And you know there's a gathering there.
All night I lay there beside you,
 I cradled your pain in my care,
We move through creation together,
 And we know there's a welcoming there.

Welcome, welcome, sounds the song,
 Calling, calling clear;
Always with us, evergreen heart,
 Where can we be but there?

Matthew:

I'll find all the love I have longed for,
 The home that's been calling my heart so long
So soon I'll be cleansed in those waters,
 My fevers forever be gone;
Where else on earth but these waters?
 No more, no more to be torn;
My own ones, my dearest, are waiting—
 And I'll weep to be where I belong.

Welcome, welcome, sounds the song,
 Calling, calling clear;
Always with me, evergreen heart,
 Where can I be but here?

RECITATION X

The fence has been torn down.

The Fence (after)/The Wind

prayed upon
frowned upon

revered
feared

adored
abhorred

despised

idolized

splintered
scarred

weathered
worn

broken down
broken up

ripped apart
ripped away

gone
but not forgotten

*The North Wind
carried his father's laugh
The South Wind
carried his mother's song
The East Wind
carried his brother's cheer
The West Wind
carried his lover's moan
The Winds of the World
wove together a prayer
to carry that hurt boy home*

prayed upon
frowned upon

revered
feared

North Wind, South Wind, East Wind, West Wind

(Splintered, scarred, weathered, worn, broken down, gone)

Winds of the World: carry him home.

Pilgrimage

The land was sold and a new fence now stands about fifty yards away. People still come to pay their respects. – Jim Osborn, friend of Matthew Shepard

I walk to the fence with beauty before me
The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want

I walk to the fence with beauty behind me
Yit'gadal v'yit' kadash (may his great name grow)

I walk to the fence with beauty above me

Om Mani Padme Ham (Om! the jewel in the lotus, hum!)

*I walk to the fence with beauty below me
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit*

*I reach the fence surrounded by beauty
wail of wind, cry of hawk*

*I leave the fence surrounded by beauty
sigh of sagebrush, hush of stone*

*(Beauty above me, beauty below me
By beauty surrounded)*

*Still, still, still, I wonder...
wail of wind, cry of hawk*

*Still, still, still, I wonder. . .
wail of wind, cry of hawk*

Still still still

EPILOGUE

Meet Me Here

*Meet me here
Won't you meet me here
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins
There's a balm in the silence
Like an understanding air
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins*

We've been walking through the darkness
On this long, hard climb
Carried ancestral sorrow
For too long a time
Will you lay down your burden
Lay it down, come with me
It will never be forgotten
Held in love, so tenderly

*Meet me here
Won't you meet me here
Where the old fence ends and the horizon begins
There's a joy in the singing
Like an understanding air
Where the fence ends and the horizon begins.*

Then we'll come to the mountain
We'll go bounding to see
That great circle of dancing
And we'll dance endlessly
And we'll dance with the all the children
Who've been lost along the way
We will welcome each other
Coming home, this glorious day

*We are home in the mountain
And we'll gently understand
That we've been friends forever
That we've never been alone
We'll sing on through any darkness
And our Song will be our sight
We can learn to offer praise again
Coming home to the light . . .*

Thanks

Choir: Thank you

Thank you, thank you

Hohou, hohou (Arahapo—thank you)

Yontonwe (Huron—thank you)

Hohou, Yontonwe . . .

Thank you

All Of Us

What could be the song?
Where begin again?
Who could meet us there?
Where might we begin?
From the shadows climb,
Rise to sing again;
Where could be the joy?
How do we begin?

Never our despair,
Never the least of us,
Never turn away,
Never hide our face;
Ordinary boy,
Only all of us,
Free us from our fear,
Only all of us.

What could be the song?
Where begin again?
Who could meet us there?
Where might we begin?
From the shadows climb,
Rise to sing again;
Where could be the joy?
How do we begin?

Never our despair,
Never the least of us,
Never turn away,
Never hide your face;
Ordinary boy,
Only all of us,
Free us from our fear.

Only in the Love,
Love that lifts us up,

Clear from out the heart
From the mountain's side,
Come creation come,
Strong as any stream;
How can we let go? How can we forgive?
How can we be dream?

Out of heaven, rain,
Rain to wash us free;
Rivers flowing on,
Ever to the sea;
Bind up every wound,
Every cause to grieve;
Always to forgive,
Only to believe.

[Chorale:]

*Most noble Light, Creation's face,
How should we live but joined in you,
Remain within your saving grace
Through all we say and do
And know we are the Love that moves
The sun and all the stars?+
O Love that dwells, O Love that burns
In every human heart.*

(Only in the Love, Love that lifts us up!)

*This evergreen, this heart, this soul,
Now moves us to remake our world,
Reminds us how we are to be
Your people born to dream;
How old this joy, how strong this call,
To sing your radiant care
With every voice, in cloudless hope
Of our belonging here.*

Only in the Love . . .
Only all of us . . .

(Heaven: Wash me . . .)

All of us, only all of us.

What could be the song?
Where do we begin?
Only in the Love, Love that lifts us up.

All Of Us

All.

Reprise: This Chant of Life (Cattle, Horses, Sky and Grass)

(This chant of life cannot be heard

It must be felt, there is no word

To sing that could express the true

Significance of how we wind

Through all these hoops of Earth and mind

Through horses, cattle, sky and grass

And all these things that sway and pass.)

Yoodle—ooh, yoodle-ooh-hoo, so sings a lone cowboy,

Who with the wild roses wants you to be free.

Considering Matthew Shepard

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“Introduction” from OCTOBER MOURNING: A SONG FOR MATTHEW SHEPARD by Lesléa Newman

On Tuesday, October 6, 1998, at approximately 11:45 p.m., twenty-one-year-old Matthew Shepard, a gay college student attending the University of Wyoming, was kidnapped from a bar by twenty-one-year old Aaron McKinney and twenty-one-year-old Russell Henderson. Pretending to be gay, the two men lured Matthew Shepard into their truck, drove him to the outskirts of Laramie, robbed him, beat him with a pistol, tied him to a buck-rail fence, and left him to die. The next day, at about 6:00 p.m. – eighteen hours after the attack – he was discovered and taken to a hospital. He never regained consciousness and died five days later, on Monday, October 12, with his family by his side.

One of the last things Matthew Shepard did that Tuesday night was attend a meeting of the University of Wyoming’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Association. The group was putting final touches on plans for Gay Awareness Week, scheduled to begin the following Sunday, October 11, coinciding with a National Coming Out Day. Planned campus activities included a film showing, an open poetry reading, and a keynote speaker.

That keynote speaker was me.

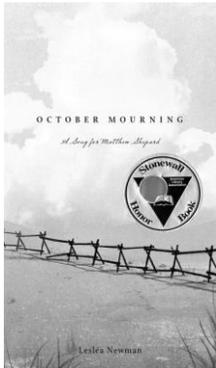
I never forgot what happened in Laramie, and around the tenth anniversary of Matthew Shepard’s death, I found myself thinking more and more about him. And so I began writing a series of poems, striving to create a work of art that explores the events surrounding Matthew Shepard’s murder in order to gain a better understanding of their impact on myself and the world.

What really happened at the fence that night? Only three people know the answer to that question. Two of them are imprisoned, convicted murderers whose stories often contradict each other (for example, in separate interviews both McKinney and Henderson have claimed that he alone tied Matthew Shepard to the fence). The other person who knows what really happened that night is dead. We will never know his side of the story.

This book is my side of the story.

While the poems in this book are inspired by actual events, they do not in any way represent the statements, thoughts, feelings, opinions, or attitudes of any actual person. The statements, thoughts, feelings, opinions, and attitudes conveyed belong to me. All monologues contained within the poems are figments of my imagination; no actual person spoke any of the words contained within the body of any poem. Those words are mine and mine alone. When the words of an actual person are used as a short epigraph for a poem, the source of that quote is cited at the back of the book in a section entitled "Notes," which contains citations and suggestions for further reading about the crime. The poems, which are meant to be read in sequential order as one whole work, are a work of poetic invention and imagination: a historical novel in verse. The poems are not an objective reporting of Matthew Shepard's murder and its aftermath; rather they are my own personal interpretation of them.

There is a bench on the campus of the University of Wyoming dedicated to Matthew Shepard, inscribed with the words *He continues to make a difference*. My hope is that readers of *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* will be inspired to make a difference and honor his legacy by erasing hate and replacing it with compassion, understanding, and love.



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Considering Matthew Shepard was developed with the support of Conspirare. Please visit conspirare.org to learn more about this project and learn more about the many individuals and organizations who support this work.

Conspirare, The Matthew Shepard Foundation, and KLRU-TV, Austin PBS are partnering to ensure that *Considering Matthew Shepard* reaches as many people as possible on the stage and screen. The Matthew Shepard Foundation has provided ongoing support in outreach and project development. Conspirare and KLRU-TV, Austin PBS are co-producing a *Considering Matthew Shepard* television special commemorating the 20th anniversary of Matthew Shepard's passing. KLRU profiled Craig Hella Johnson's creative process in their documentary series *Arts in Context* (available at artsincontext.org). The film will be accompanied by outreach and engagement programs.