MOURNING LOSS: COMMUNITY AND CONSOLATION IN 20TH CENTURY ELEGY

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INTRODUCTION

The term “elegy” itself “derives from the Greek elegiac couplets, traditionally accompanied by a flute” (Sacks 2), and after the 16th century, has come to mean “mortal loss and consolation” (Sacks 3). Eventually considered a “European form,” as the elegy was adopted and written primarily by the English, it was eventually “passed on via Spenser and Milton to the English-speaking whites of subsequent periods” (Ramazani 135). No longer a strict form comprised of elegiac couplets, the elegy of today is written by Europeans and Americans alike, and a number of critics have examined its modern implications.

Scholars have attempted to define the elegy’s original conventions so that we can better understand how elegies conform to, dismiss, or borrow in part from the tradition’s standards. Recent understanding of the elegy has been formed in some (large) part by Peter Sacks’ identification of the elegy’s conventions, which he explores in The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats (1985). By identifying and interpreting the conventions, which include “traditional pastoral contextualization, the myth of the vegetation deity, the use of repetition and refrains, the use of reiterated questions, the outbreak of vengeful anger or cursing, the procession of mourners, the movement from grief to consolation, and the traditional images of resurrection” (2), Sacks provides a framework to examine the various approaches of mourning loss. He suggests that these conventions become more than just a means for understanding and defining the elegy; they serve as a place where
the elegist can create community in the tradition of exploring mourning. By following the conventions and being a part of a community, the elegist can console more than himself, the bereaved, and his immediate circle. He can console even those not personally tied to the loss.

My essay stands to contend against and correct one of Sacks’ contentions: that following the conventions of the elegy will extend to a greater community of shared mourning and consolation. Because the term “convention” is derived from the Latin verb “convenire,” meaning “coming together,” a sense of community is in the very basis of a conventional form. A reader can recognize that these poems serve the purpose of mourning the dead as previous elegies have done, and the reader can anticipate that certain devices will be used that have been previously employed in poems in the tradition. Therefore, I will argue that the “coming together” root of “convention” indicates how practitioners of the genre can come together, not necessarily how readers of the genre will come together to form a community of mourning. Thus these conventional elegies have a specific insufficiency: they do not elicit a greater community of caring and/or mourning by simply following the traditions of the form. Of course, many conventional elegies do create these emotions for the reader, but the elegy creates this connection through powerful imagery or poignant language, through an emotional solicitation for caring by the reader or subject matter in which a reader can identify connections in his personal life. All elegies will affect people differently, but elegies that solicit a shared interest
with an audience, that strike an emotional chord with them, will generate a community of concern. Nowadays, people will “come together” around a poem not because they are drawn to the familiar tropes of the convention, but because they are emotionally connected and invested in the poem. This essay will provide a counter to Sacks’ claim that conventional elegies promote shared community and consolation more than other elegies that depart from the tradition. A community of grief and consolation can form around elegies of all types, regardless of following the form’s conventions.

This essay will examine the process also of mourning and consolation in the elegiac tradition and how this process connects to the building of a community of mourning. I will briefly examine how the critics have used Freudian psychoanalysis to explore the resolution associated with solace and the melancholia associated with inconsolability. While some scholars such as Peter Sacks have argued that reaching consolation is a requirement of a “successful” elegy, other scholars such as Jahan Ramazani have suggested otherwise. Sacks argues that consolation and acceptance are necessary components of the process of grief, while Ramazani suggests that the powerful emotions evoked in the elegy should not be quickly overcome with consolation and acceptance. I will side with Ramazani’s position, arguing that the modern elegy can be successful even if the speaker remains inconsolable by examining elegies where the speaker’s melancholia only enhances the work of mourning. I will enter the discussion by examining melancholia in terms of the
political war poem. When an elegist has a political agenda, inconsolability can become politically progressive rather than just a demonstration that grief is not readily overcome. The elegist can use his melancholia (or in some cases, his anger) to draw attention to the issue and build a coalition – indeed, a community – of support. For example, a community of families of war victims may particularly identify with Wilfred Owen’s melancholic war poetry that not only speaks to the atrocities of war, but questions the very purpose of losing innocent lives in battle. This community may use the elegist’s feelings of inconsolability to connect to their own feelings of sadness, frustration, and even outrage.

I will also examine the transition from the traditional English to the modern American elegy, as the form crosses the Atlantic and moves from Sacks’ sense of poetic conventions to a physical sense of convention, or “coming together.” Edgar Lee Master’s *Spoon River Anthology* (1916) offers a physical sense of community, where a group of dead Midwesterners collectively mourn their lived experiences. I will study how the reader is invited to grieve with this community of mourners and whether he chooses to mourn with them, thus forming a greater community of interest, caring, and mourning beyond the established community of the dead. Elucidating the relationship between speaker and reader, mourner and observer will help us determine what enables an elegy to successfully build a greater community.

Finally, I will look at the American AIDS elegies written by Paul Monette, Thom Gunn, and Mark Doty that not only solicit a community of mourners, but a
community of political activists. Whether politically, ethically, or personally motivated, these elegies have desired to form communities of recognition and activism for the disease that ravaged the homosexual population during the eighties and nineties. Some of these elegists have solicited community more successfully than others, and I will explore the differences in their approaches and their outcomes.

“We love disasters that have nothing to do with us,” articulates Mark Doty in his collection of elegies, *My Alexandria* (1993). Doty speaks to the matrix of voyeurism and pleasure that humans experience when they confront tragedy and loss. Being drawn to experiences not their own becomes a first gesture that initiates community; readers of elegies want to participate with the mourner and they rely on the elegist to capture the emotions of the tragedy so that they may participate genuinely. The reader may have several responses to the tragedy; they may pity the mourner’s experience, by feeling sorrow for their suffering. They may feel sympathetic to the mourner’s experience, wherein whatever affects the mourner similarly affects the reader who is participating. Or they may feel detached from the mourner’s experience because they cannot find an emotional connection that builds genuine empathy. Nevertheless, readers are drawn to disasters and by participating in the mourning without going through the intense pain of proximity, the reader initiates a first bid for community. I will examine how the elegist makes another
gesture for community as I study English and American elegies of the twentieth century.
CHAPTER I – Convention, Consolation, and Community

In his comprehensive survey of the English elegy, Peter Sacks uses European models to demonstrate how the elegy can contain grief. He uses his defined list of conventions, which I identified in this introduction, as his methodology for examining English poetry. He shows that by using at least one or more of the conventions, elegies can find community in the genre, and therefore, can find community in the work of mourning.

Sacks concludes his book by making a series of points about the American elegy, which he determines has regrettably departed from the generic form. Considering the number of elegies published each year, he suggests that one might conclude that “these poems would seem to represent a distinctly elegiac age.” But Sacks sees a problem with this particular group of elegies; he asks, “how many elegies console more readers than the poet, the particular bereaved, and their immediate circle?” (325). Suggesting that this is a problem unique to the American elegy, Sacks argues that its departure from the form makes it particularly isolating: “Often, these poems are too narrowly based, too private in their expression of grief and too idiosyncratic in their use of anecdote, description, or recollection” (326).

While he argues that American elegies are “too private,” Sacks fails to recognize that elegies from all traditions are frequently private in their expression of grief, including the very English elegies he examines in his study. Mourning for a loved one is often a highly personal act; while the reader may want to be included in the
process of mourning, he may feel isolated from the very act of grieving for someone he most likely did not know or for a circumstance that he most likely has not experienced. How can a reader possibly understand how it feels to lose a child when he has not felt that grief? How can he know what it is like to bury a parent who is taken too soon? Sacks’ other complaints that the American form is “too narrowly based” and “too idiosyncratic” also speak to the elegy’s private form, one where the reader is given access to the private and personal moments between the mourner and the lost one. Because the elegy is so private, its scope may feel narrow (that is, it addresses a specific relationship) and the exploration of the relationship between the mourner and the dead may have its own idiosyncrasies. Sacks fails to recognize that regardless of what tradition the elegy follows, the elegy may feel too narrow, personal, and idiosyncratic for some readers, while it may feel appropriately scoped and emotionally captivating for other readers.

Sacks next posits that American elegies “connect neither to the recognizable motifs and elements of the work of mourning nor to the myths and ceremonies associated with that work” (326). Not all American elegies utilize recognizable motifs and elements of the work of mourning, but some do, such as Masters’ Spoon River Anthology. This work of mythological poetry of mourning provides a counter to Sacks’ argument that traditional ceremonies and myths did not fully cross the Atlantic. Composed of monologues spoken by the dead in a Midwestern cemetery, Spoon River reflects a community of collective mourning. As the reader is invited to
hear the confessions of the dead, a community of both sharing and listening to mourning occurs. Masters’ project indicates that some traditions of the elegy continue in the American elegy, despite Sacks’ argument otherwise.

Finally, Sacks argues that in the American elegy “both the mourners and the dead have been somehow exiled from the old precincts of the elegy,” and the elegist is therefore “explicitly on the margins, dislocated, vagrant, or expelled” from the tradition. He continues: “the unfamiliar placement, or rather displacement, of the American elegist reflects not merely an exclusion from the traditional settings of grief but also a marked distance from the comforts of community itself” (313). For Sacks, a first issue for the American elegist is his “vagrant” identity; in order to escape this vagrancy, the elegist must seek a community of the elegiac form. Because the American elegist does not seek community in following the precincts of the genre, Sacks argues that he is on the margins, excluded from the comforts of community. I see Sacks’ understanding of the comfort that results from community to be shortsighted. While a group of elegists who utilize similar conventions can form a community that is grounded in the genre, these elegists do not necessarily experience any additional “comfort” in their shared identity or their community. Comfort results from going through the process of mourning the dead and arriving at personal understanding, which may lead to peace and consolation. Traditional elegies do not necessarily provide additional comfort beyond their very sense of conventional community. By examining a traditional English poem that Sacks uses
in his analysis, I will demonstrate that following the genre tradition does not necessarily translate to greater comfort and consolation.

Sacks uses Thomas Hardy’s “The Going,” a poem from his Poems of 1912-1913, to demonstrate how it presents the “highly particularized world” (235) of Hardy mourning the loss of his wife, both to death and mental illness. While Sacks admits that Hardy’s elegy is personal and even isolating, Sacks argues that it is ultimately redeemed from its position of vagrancy by using conventions that establish generic community. Hardy uses such conventional features like repeating the circumstances of his wife’s death, and questioning and interrogating her loss, as Sacks sees it, to rescue his poem from isolation and to bring generic continuity. Sacks claims that Hardy enacts familiar tasks such as “proving the reality of loss, confronting guilt and anger, recollecting and then severing attachments to the dead, establishing substitutive figures for the lost object of love” (235), the latter serving as a proto-community of substitutive figures that helps him manage his loss. According to Sacks’ logic, by using conventions, the poem should not only obtain generic community, but find a greater community of consolation.

I will show that it is not the generic continuity that enables “The Going” to find a community of people who care, but the concept of a volatile, yet in some ways, still loving relationship between man and wife that ultimately attracts an audience. Through Hardy’s powerful imagery, poignant language, and emotional
solicitations to both his dead wife and to the reader, the elegy petitions an interest with the audience.

The opening stanza begins with an elegiac question, which not only uses a convention but demonstrates the poet’s emotion: “Why did you give no hint that night” (1) that it would ultimately be your last? The emotional questioning continues in the third stanza when the speaker thinks he sees his wife in daily life: “Why do you make me leave the house / And think for a breath it is you I see” (15-16). The repetition of “why” places his wife in the present tense, suggesting that she is alive. But knowing that she does not live in the present, but only in the past, provides another interpretation of this persistent “why”; it indicates a response that many people have after the death of a close one. It serves to draw the reader into the poem as we reflect on our own losses, including times we have questioned mortality and death with our own versions of “why.”

The poem explores the emotional turmoil of being left behind, a common response to death. We sense first the speaker’s frustration and then his hurt when the wife “calmly,” even “indifferent[ly]” (3) departs to a place where the speaker ultimately cannot “follow” (5). His frustration and hurt continues in the second stanza when she did not “bid good-bye / Or lip [him] the softest call” (8-9). Forever changed, the speaker realizes her “great going . . . altered all” (13, 14), demonstrating how death can turn the world on its head.
In the fourth stanza, the speaker begins revisiting the hopeful years of the marriage, a feeling that the reader can share as we attempt to rewrite what has happened: “You were the swan-necked one . . . [who] would muse and eye me, / while Life unrolled us its very best” (24, 27-28). But in the fifth stanza, the speaker acknowledges that the hopeful years of the marriage quickly ended; he tries to understand why the marriage went desperately wrong as he uses another elegiac question: “Why, then, latterly did we not speak” (29). Here the speaker is reworking his living relationship with his wife although he knows she is dead; but he remains befuddled by a marriage that started out so well and ended so badly. Finally in the last stanza, the speaker realizes that “All's past amend, / Unchangeable” (36-37). He depicts himself like a “dead man” (38), as if being tipped off a boat and buried at sea. The speaker “sink[s] down” into the sea, as well as the depths of his mourning. The speaker is inconsolable, and his feelings of his own death indicate that he does not want to continue living when his wife is not alive. The speaker’s inconsolable mourning suggests a progression of sorts; although he recognizes that his marriage was flawed, it is still worthy of his grief.

Hardy’s poem invites his reader to experience the full span of emotions with his speaker. Hardy may find the “comfort of community” in his genre not by using all of the conventions from Sacks’ list, but by writing a successful poem of

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1 These include traditional pastoral contextualization, the myth of the vegetation deity, the use of repetition and refrains, the use of reiterated questions, the outbreak of vengeful anger or cursing, the procession of mourners, the movement from grief to consolation, and the traditional images of resurrection (Sacks 2).
mourning that is thoughtful, articulate, and moving. It is no wonder that “The Going” has been so well-received by generations of readers because the poem enlists this community of caring and mourning by taking readers on an emotional journey that moves from love and marriage to loss, frustration, and melancholia. Hardy does not need to use several of the elegy’s conventions to enlist a community of consolation. His words and the emotions that they create are powerful enough to attract and move readers.

In “Rewriting the Elegy,” an essay in Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS, Carol Muske-Dukes claims: “The elegy itself is changing. It has always been a competent traditional vessel to hold grief and praise for the dead. Now it seems to overflow, shatter, reform” (9-10). Muske-Dukes’ suggestion that the elegy can no longer contain grief points to a general shift in the modern elegiac tradition. While the standard of the elegiac tradition involved arriving at a place of solace, the modern elegy has shifted the trend toward remaining inconsolable at the conclusion of the poem. Scholars such as Peter Sacks and Jahan Ramazani have provided alternative interpretations of how to view consolation and have debated whether it is necessary for a successful elegy to demonstrate consolation. By using the major elegy scholars’ interpretation of consolation to understand melancholia, I will focus on the rhetorical power of melancholic poems. These poems can use the elegist’s inconsolability to make a message, one that can demonstrate the seriousness
of the mourner’s grief – that it will not be overcome by poetic salves when injustices
occur, such as Owen’s war elegies – or one that can solicit a coalition of action and
support.

For Sacks, reaching consolation is a necessary attribute of successful
mourning. He uses the Freudian model of overcoming grief, which involves
installing a substitute for the lost person, to understand how we can conquer the
melancholia associated with loss. In Hardy’s *Poems of 1912-1913*, for example, the
poet often withdraws his affection for the world around him, but then reattaches that
“affection to a self that is nevertheless identified with the lost object” (Sacks 252).
In “The Going,” the speaker uses a substitute for his lost wife. His use of “you”
becomes not only a way of addressing his dead wife, but a verbal surrogate for the
actual person. When the speaker says “I am but a dead man” (38), he is reattaching
his affection for the lost one on to himself; he becomes a substitute for the lost one,
and according to Freud and Sacks, he can overcome his grief by enlisting such a
substitute. Although it may seem contradictory that the speaker can use himself as a
substitute for the person that is lost, he is refocusing his grief on something tangible.
He may feel like a dead man, but in reality, he is not. The speaker is coping with his
loss by deflecting his grief through substitution.

In *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994),
Jahan Ramazani argues that resisting consolation is a fundamental aspect of the 20th
century poem because the modern world of “genocide and technological war,
ecocide and mass starvation . . . have helped to make poetic salves for even personal loss seem easy” (226). He claims that Sacks’ model is not adequate for understanding the catastrophes – both global and personal – of the modern world. He suggests that poetic responses to death “cannot afford to be simply compensatory, lest the elegy become ideological pap – a repository of sentimental palliatives” (226). Therefore, Ramazani uses two “modes of mourning – the normative (i.e. restitutive, idealizing) and the melancholic (i.e. violent, recalcitrant)” – to examine the elegy (xi). As many modern elegies remain melancholic, they successfully “revolt against consolation in its religious, literary, psychiatric, and political forms” (226). Melancholia not only serves as a departure from the norm, but a revolt against ideological institutions.

I would argue that in both personal and political elegies, by remaining melancholic the mourner demonstrates that the seriousness of his grief will not be overcome. In the more personal elegy, such as Hardy’s “The Going,” remaining inconsolable demonstrates both the poet’s anguish at being left behind and his befuddlement over what went wrong in the marriage, two issues that may take years for him to accept. Remaining inconsolable serves the poem by portraying realistic negative emotions that are not easily overcome.

In political poems, melancholia can lend itself to political progressiveness as the elegist can use his inconsolability to draw attention to his issue. For example, in Owen’s “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” the poet has a political motive as he is writing his
war elegy about a young soldier who unromantically dies from gassing. He uses powerful language to capture the intensity of this fatal moment:

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling, Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time; But someone still was yelling out and stumbling And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime . . . Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light, As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning (9-16).

Owen then addresses a broader community, by using the second person “you.” Specifically speaking to Jessie Pope, a popular writer who glorified the war with rhetoric of “high zest” (Owen 25), Owen also addresses an audience of people who are, or who will be, affected by war. Owen appeals to his audience as he places the reader right alongside him, walking behind the wagon that carries the soldier’s body:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace Behind the wagon that we flung him in, And watch the white eyes writhing in his face, His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin; If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, – My friend, you would not tell with such high zest To children ardent for some desperate glory, The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori (17-28).

Owen uses the political message – it is a lie that “it is sweet and proper to die for one’s country” – to emphasize his refusal to heroically depict what happens in
war for an audience. He is using his bitter and melancholic perspective to keep – as Patricia Rae suggests – “the past steadfastly alive for the political work of the present” (3). By not forgetting the past, Owen is performing political work that continues in times of war even eighty years later. Today, a website dedicated to abolishing war “immediately, completely, forever” uses Owen’s poem as its title (dulceetdecorumest.org). Anti-war activists have quoted Owen in protest rallies and in opinion articles (Gronquist). Due to his honest portrayal of war, Owen’s message can provide a place of understanding for multiple generations of war protestors. His inconsolability provides a sounding board for anti-war activism of today.

As I have argued above, the success of an elegy is not determined by whether the poet reaches consolation, but by whether the poet has been able to explore the process of mourning. While the tradition of the elegy was marked by consolation, remaining melancholic can make the personal poem even more devastating, as in the case of Hardy, or it can bring added attention to the political poem, as in the case of Owen. Not reaching solace by the conclusion of the poem can enhance the work of mourning by providing a realistic response to loss. While the five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – are often cited when people experience a loss, the final stage of “acceptance” may take years, even a lifetime to be reached. A speaker’s melancholia only demonstrates this reality.
CHAPTER II – PHYSICAL CONVENTION AND A COMMUNITY OF MOURNING: EDGAR LEE MASTER’S SPOON RIVER ANTHOLOGY

As we transition from the traditional English elegy to the modern American elegy, the form shifts from Sacks’ sense of poetic conventions to a physical sense of convention, or “coming together.” Masters’ Spoon River Anthology develops a different kind of community of shared knowledge and feeling in the United States than what Sacks assumed in the European tradition. Composed of monologues spoken by the dead in a Midwestern cemetery, Spoon River reflects an established town that becomes a community of collective mourning. The collection of poetry is based on two towns where Masters grew up: Petersburg and Lewiston, where “everyone knew everyone else and the ramifications of family relationships, the multitudinous drama of neighborhood gossip, the ups and downs, successes and failures of the people” (Hallwas 3). Masters combined these two towns into the fictitious community of Spoon River, where he “wrote the life of man everywhere, or at least everywhere in America” (3). I will use Spoon River to examine how this American elegy develops a sense of physical convention, demonstrating the “coming together” of this community. I will also study how the reader is invited to grieve with this community of mourners and whether he chooses to mourn with them, thus forming a greater community of interest, caring, and mourning beyond the established community of the dead.
While the poems can stand on their own as personal elegies, *Spoon River* has a purposeful communal quality. The voices are operating as a group; the dead share the intention to reveal the secrets and circumstances of their lives. This confessional poetry works like a sequence, as the reader moves from the dead to the dead in a Dantean fashion, hearing private confessions that were too difficult or controversial to speak in life. These poems can be seen as dramatic monologues, where the villagers are speaking to the other citizens of Spoon River. As they confess their secrets to those who “misunderstood, disregarded, or opposed them” (Hallwas 70), the villagers clarify their actions, often seeking redemption or forgiveness. Although the dead address their fellow citizens, there is no evidence in the collection that the dead are actually listening. Such a lack of response indicates that even if the dead can hear each other, it is too late to do anything, to react, to change, to respond. While it is operating as a community of voices, *Spoon River* does not share in the benefits of community.

Although we can see that the dead are grieving, the “voice of the dead” is different from the mourner’s voice we have heard in previous elegies. In other elegies, the mourner is lamenting the loss of another, while in *Spoon River* the dead are mourning their own lives. By talking about the emotional experiences of their lives, these dead personas replace the traditional mourner and shift the site of grieving toward themselves. Death has not silenced them, but now it is up to the
reader to listen with understanding and to sympathize. In “Mrs. Meyers,” she encourages the reader, or the “passers-by,” to learn from her life experiences:

Passers-by, an ancient admonition to you:
If your ways would be ways of pleasantness,
And all your pathways peace,
Love God and keep his commandments (8-11).

The speaker uses the repetition of “you” and “your” as a bid to include, invite, and even warn the reader. This interpersonal “you” betokens the basis of community where the reader enters a position of action, where he is the only one who can possibly respond to her request. The reader is a kind of visitor in the community; he can respond and react to the community he sees. Thus the reader is invited into this community, but he must choose to care, to react, to change, to respond in order to become part of a greater community of caring and mourning.

For a greater community to emerge, the reader needs to have an investment in the issues at hand. Many people may identify with some of the issues found in Spoon River, such as loss, betrayal, and regret, but merely recognizing the issues is different from truly identifying with emotional experiences and feeling personally affected or touched by them. Because the collection explores issues (secretive lives, lost relationships) and emotions (frustration, struggle, anger, sorrow) in which people can find connections in their own lives, Spoon River draws an audience that is more interested in the true-to-life quality of these poems, than the mournful aspect of the poem. While Spoon River reaches an outside community of invested readers, it does not access an outside community of support or shared grieving.
The poems fantastical quality – that which defies the “true-to-life” quality of being based on real stories or events, like we have seen in Hardy and Owen’s elegies – limits the formation of a greater community of caring and grieving. By speaking from the dead, these characters lose their “real” quality. Even real-life characters like “Ann Rutledge,” alleged lover of Abraham Lincoln, tell their stories with a sense of fiction:

Out of me unworthy and unknown
The vibrations of deathless music;
"With malice toward none, with charity for all."
Out of me the forgiveness of millions toward millions,
And the beneficent face of a nation
Shining with justice and truth (1-6).

Although the reader finds interest in her experience and perhaps wants to believe that she is the original and unrecognized muse of Lincoln, as well as the woman that made him the leader that he became, the reader cannot accept her claim as factual. The ability to be emotionally invested in her story in the way that we can be emotionally invested in Hardy’s portrayal of his relationship is ultimately limited by its fictional quality.

Another issue that hinders these poems is that they are not autobiographical, or written from personal, lived experience. Nearly all elegies are written by a poet after experiencing personal loss or a loss that has had a profound affect on him. Writing the poem becomes a way that the poet can deal with the loss and explore his mourning. Because Masters is not writing autobiographically, the poems cannot create the same emotional pathos that many elegies can. We may feel empathy and
sympathy for these personas, but we are aware that the poet is always behind the curtain, manipulating the poem. For example, the reader feels a greater investment in Hardy’s elegy than in Ann Rutledge’s poem because he authored his experience in a way that Rutledge could not. Because elegies can impact us more when we are hearing the voice of a real person who personally experienced these emotions, *Spoon River* cannot create the same kind of community of outside readers who will share in the mourning like other elegies.

*Spoon River* manages as a bridge to American community in the modern elegy. This community that was formed and assumed in the American tradition of the elegy leads to other opportunities for community for later American elegists. As we examine these other poets who are rooted in the American AIDS tradition, we will see how a community formed by invested readers, who may or may not have previous personal experience with AIDS, is possible.
CHAPTER III – A COMMUNITY OF ACTIVISM: THE AIDS ELEGY

In order for a communal elegy to be possible, mourning needs to extend beyond the immediate border of the poem. While there are various levels of grief, people will mourn for another when they feel personally affected or touched by the loss, and if they consider the loss to be worthy of grief. In the “Violence, Mourning, and Politics” chapter of Precarious Life (2004), Judith Butler explores the idea of “what makes for a grievable life” (20). Prompted by cataclysmic September 11, Butler’s work on mourning surrounding this terrible day can be used to better understand the operation of communal mourning in the elegy.

More so regarding September 11 than any other day in recent memory, the country collectively mourned a variety of losses: the innocent lives that were lost, the false security that Americans had enjoyed, and the country that was forever changed. Memorials, moments of silence, news reports, and personal stories of heroes and victims alike contributed to America’s mourning. Because all Americans were touched in some way by this tragedy, a community of mourning formed both naturally out of grief and through cultural action. This community was evident by the flags displayed on front lawns and on automobile bumpers, forwarded emails with pictures and stories, candlelight vigils, and the constant chatter among friends and strangers alike about that awful day.

Butler complicates the idea of the community of mourning that surrounded September 11 by positing that there is a “hierarchy of grief,” where certain lives are
considered more “grievable,” or somehow more worthy of mourning, than others. She specifically compares the heterosexual and homosexual lives that were lost on that terrible day to explore this hierarchy of grief. Butler points out that “the queer lives that vanished on September 11 were not publicly welcomed into the idea of national identity built in the obituary pages, and their closest relations were only belatedly and selectively (the marital norm holding sway once again) made eligible for benefits” (35). The catastrophe demonstrated how the full measure and details of the lives of gay victims did not receive public iteration; the problems of visibility and acceptance that they had in life also brought correlated problems in death. Because conventional methods were not fully accommodating – as gay victims were not fully represented and remembered as others were – the same kind of communal mourning could not occur for them. But how is it possible for communal mourning to occur around homosexual lives? By using the AIDS elegies of the late eighties and early nineties, we can see how poets have solicited communal mourning for homosexual lives and how others have responded to their call.

Paul Monette’s *Love Alone: 18 Elegies for Rog* (1988), Thom Gunn’s *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992), and Mark Doty’s *My Alexandria* (1993) pay tribute to friends and lovers who are dying or who have died from AIDS. While they approach the elegy with different forms, Monette, Gunn, and Doty perform the work of grieving for a group of people who for decades were marginalized by the dominant culture. While these AIDS-era poetic projects have worked to recognize
homosexuals, has an outside community joined in the mourning of their losses as well? By exploring their personal experiences with grief in the public realm of the published elegy, Monette, Gunn, and Doty extend the circle of those who are affected by AIDS, not only reaching the greater homosexual community, but other communities who are not intrinsically tied to homosexuals or the AIDS disease. But whether this greater community recognizes these victims of AIDS is essential to determine. When AIDS began striking the gay population, many people rejected the victims because AIDS was considered a “gay-man’s disease.” For example, in 1995, North Carolina Republican Senator Jesse Helms refused to offer more Federal funding to AIDS victims, claiming that homosexuals contracted the disease through their “deliberate, disgusting, revolting conduct” (*New York Times*). Although nowadays people have demonstrated more compassion to the gay population and victims of AIDS, it is worth considering how people have recognized these losses on private and public scales.

In *Modernism and Mourning* (2007), Patricia Rae offers a three-tiered system of recognizing loss: “publicly mourned loss, publicly recognized but privately mourned loss, and disavowed loss. In the first two instances, public recognition of death not only acknowledges the loss of the person but also affirms the previous presence of the person as a subject who was valued and will be missed. The third category . . . remains virtually invisible in mainstream public discourse” (52).

According to Rae’s categories, loss becomes communal when it is publicly mourned;
loss does not become communal when it is merely publicly recognized but privately mourned. But I would argue that public mourning does not necessarily equate to communal mourning. Communal mourning extends beyond public mourning to reach a group of people who collectively mourn. But public mourning can occur without necessarily developing into communal mourning. For example, over 4,000 American soldiers have died in Iraq since the beginning of the war in 2003. After reaching this grim milestone, President Bush publicly “mourned” the loss of these men and women at a media conference after a briefing on United States diplomatic strategy around the world. Speaking at the State Department on March 24, 2008, Bush stated: “On this day of reflection, I offer our deepest sympathies to their families. I hope their families know that citizens pray for their comfort and their strength, whether they were the first one who lost their life in Iraq or recently lost their life in Iraq” (Associated Press). President Bush’s public statement of mourning may not even qualify as public mourning, but only a display of such. Such mourning for these 4,000 lives feels superficial when the President has the power to end the war – one that the majority of the country is against – and he continues sending troops in harm’s way. He may mourn these victims in private, but this public display of mourning is more focused on the grieving “ceremony” than on the actual grief. Increasing frustrations about the war, lack of evidence about the reasons for entering the war, and dissatisfaction with President Bush’s management of troop deployment has limited a community of mourning’s ability to focus on the lives that have been
lost. Public displays of mourning do not translate to collective mourning as we question the efficacy of our efforts in Iraq.

President Bush is using the fallen hero rhetoric that Owen refuted in his war elegy. Owen demonstrated a similar frustration with the war as today’s Americans have by challenging previous notions about how the war hero should be viewed. By not idealizing the poisoned soldier’s death (we learn of “the blood / Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, / Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues” (21-24)), Owen demonstrates that those who glorify the war with rhetoric of “high zest” (Owen 25) often ignore what really happens in war.

How are Rae’s three-tiered categories on recognizing loss – publicly mourned loss, publicly recognized but privately mourned loss, and disavowed loss – useful as we think about the AIDS victim? Although the early victims of AIDS were forced into the third category by people who understood AIDS to be a “gay disease,” the disease was publicly recognized in San Francisco beginning in the eighties. For example, the “San Francisco AIDS Foundation” was founded in 1982 in San Francisco’s Castro district as “an emergency response to a quickly emerging health crisis,” its purpose being to “disseminate critical information to gay men who were being diagnosed with a rare and frightening cancer.” This response by large parts in the city demonstrated a public recognition for victims of this disease, in line with Rae’s first tier of recognizing loss. Such public recognition for the dead
acknowledged the loss of the person and affirmed “the previous presence of the person as a subject who was valued” (Rae 52). More recently, social progress, awareness, and a focus on the actual AIDS deaths in the media have brought a greater amount of attention to these lives. What was once primarily a community of homosexuals, the AIDS community of today includes all forms of sexuality, gender, and race.

Despite the growing community and the shifting stigma against gays and persons with AIDS, a thin line remains between public and communal mourning. Although Butler suggests that “we’re undone by each other” (23), people not intimately connected with AIDS are not often “undone” by the loss of a victim of the disease. They may be aware of the disease as it has come under the public eye, but may not choose to collectively mourn with the AIDS community. For example, many people would recognize the Red Ribbon as a symbol of support for those living with, and who have died from, HIV and AIDS. The Ribbon, which was adopted in 1993 as a “global symbol for solidarity with HIV positive and people living with AIDS,” has become a significant cultural practice that seeks to connect forms of public mourning. While AIDS is publicly recognized through the Red Ribbon, it does not often represent nor create communal mourning; often the Red Ribbon remains only a public cultural symbol that people identify, but they require a more personal connection with the AIDS disease, which can often occur through poetry, in order to mourn.
Monette’s, Gunn’s, and Doty’s AIDS-era poetic projects have taken different approaches to addressing this issue of public and communal mourning. Some of these poets are more explicit with the public and communal intention of their work while others allow their poetry to do their talking and their political work. In his preface to *Love Alone*, written about his lover Roger Horowitz or “Rog” and his battle with AIDS, Paul Monette claims that he wants his poetry to affect more than just himself. While he does not use the word “communal,” he essentially wants his poetry to help people recognize that we are connected to one another in the fight against AIDS. He reaches out to more than one community of grieving, both as an offering of political and emotional support, as he urgently expresses his desires in his preface: “May [my collection] fuel the fire of those on the front lines who mean to prevail, and of their friends who stand in the fire with them. We will not be bowed down or erased by this. I learned too well what it means to be a people, learned in the joy of my best friend what all the meaningless pain and horror cannot take away – that all there is is love. Pity us not” (xiii). Monette is talking to several communities: first, to those within the AIDS community who are not only battling the disease itself but battling the stigma of the disease; and second, to the homophobic community that wants to forget about the disease and forget about those who have been lost. Some in this community may pity him, but he does not want that either. When he claims “we will not be bowed down or erased by this,” he is referring to both the obliterating effects of the disease and the outside forces that are
trying to forget the people who have died – degrading these victims to lives that will not be mourned.

With regards to his form, Monette makes a response that also enlists the sharing of the AIDS experience with a larger community of people. He wants his readers to feel like they are walking in an AIDS victim’s shoes: “I don’t mean [my poems] to be impregnable, although I admit I want them to allow no escape, like a hospital room, or indeed a mortal illness” (xii). Embracing the criticism that his elegies are too raw and unfiltered, Monette explains “Raw [is] just how AIDS has left me” (West xviii) and he wants others to experience that “rawness” that he experienced in his private life. By demonstrating in form the inescapability of the disease, Monette desires that both those connected and unconnected to AIDS will feels its effects and its horrors, similarly to Owen’s desire to force his audience to battle in the trenches with him. Owen tells his reader: “If in some smothering dreams you too could pace / Behind the wagon we flung [the soldier] in” (17-18), and then shows the reader exactly what he would experience if he could battle in the trenches. Monette seeks to create his own version of “if you too could stand next to me” and battle this disease, but his particular challenge is to reach those not in the homosexual community who may think they do not belong to such a community and therefore cannot sympathize with him.

Monette seems to be creating the very elegy Sacks disparaged in his critique of the American elegy, one where the elegist is “explicitly on the margins,
dislocated, vagrant, or expelled” (313). While Monette feels isolated in his grief, he asks the reader to experience the private elements of his mourning with him, a possibility that Sacks does not address. Monette desires a scenario where both isolation and community are possible. He wants his work to pull the reader into the depths of despair, so that he too can experience the vagrancy of battling the disease, and ultimately join in the battle with him and form a community of warriors: “May [my collection] fuel the fire of those on the front lines who mean to prevail, and of their friends who stand in the fire with them” (xiii). But Monette’s focus on creating “no escape” from walking in the AIDS victim’s shoes offers a different kind of community, one of restriction rather than invitation. The reader must mourn with the speaker, not because the poetic words invite the reader to care but because his words allow the reader no refuge from experiencing this disease.

Clearly Monette is seeking a community, so is he successful? In his poem “No Goodbyes,” the poet presents an intimate portrayal about his partner’s final days and days after his death. At some moments, Monette and his partner seem like an “ordinary” couple in their love until we are reminded of the disease that is taking Rog’s life. At other moments, the speaker is left staggered and exasperated as his lover is taken by the disease. Despite Monette’s lofty goals in his preface, I would argue that “No Goodbyes” does not enlist a greater community. The poem is so private that it challenges his stated intentions for an audience, or “those on the front lines who mean to prevail, and of their friends who stand in the fire with them”
But there is no prevailing here for Monette’s reader, only standing in the fire and experiencing the flames of anguish and hopelessness.

In the first lines, the speaker presents a relationship that is perhaps like any other healthy, loving relationship: “I kissed your temple stroked / your hair and sniffed it it smelled so clean” (1-2), but then we are immediately reminded that his lover is ill: “we'd / washed it Saturday night when the fever broke” (2-3). Monette makes a similar move as Hardy when he presents his relationship as healthy and loving in “The Going”: “You were the swan-necked one . . . [who] would muse and eye me, / while Life unrolled us its very best’ (24-28), but then the speaker recalls that this relationship was in fact “ill” when he wonders: “Why, then, latterly did we not speak” (29).

Monette remembers the simple ritual of covering his lover’s bald spot, as he tilted his head “like a parrot” (12) until one night Monette can only repeat “I love you little friend here I am my / sweetest pea over and over” (15-16). Toward the end of the poem, Monette refers to his lover as “mine” (29) and uses a metaphor to demonstrate their connection: “I do / all the negotiating while he does battle / we are war and peace in a single bed” (30-32), but he knows that no matter how hard he tries to wage war with his words, he will lose the battle to death. Exasperated, he says, “it can't it can't / be yet not this just let me brush his hair” (33-34), trying to rely on the former, everyday acts of love they performed.
Like Hardy’s “The Going,” Monette’s “No Goodbyes” often combines images of life and death by transitioning back and forth between the past – when the other was alive – to the present – when the other is dead. First the speaker is in the past, remembering the simple pleasure of breathing his lover’s hair: “I’d breathe your hair / when I came to bed late it was such pure you” (5-6); second he moves to the present, where he nuzzles his lover’s brush “because [he’s] in there” (7-8) (and therefore, no longer here); finally the speaker transitions back to the past when he recalls how the dog behaved when they returned from a hospital stay: “he skipped / and whimpered when Dad put on the red / sweater” (9-11).

There are moments when the speaker is left staggered and exasperated as his lover turns from “stable” at “3 PM” (23). He tries to stall the inevitable: “WAIT WAIT I AM / THE SENTRY HERE” (25-26) but he cannot guard against death. He uses the former physical actions of his love, but they are not strong enough: “oh why don’t all these kisses rouse you” (36-37). He refuses to say goodbye: “I won’t won’t / say it all I will say is goodnight” (37-38). And he wants the final “dream” of his lover to be of him: “please let your final dream be / a man not quite your size losing the whole / world but still here combing combing / singing your secret names till the night's gone” (41-44). The “singing your secret names” emphasizes the intimacy of the couple and the privacy of this moment; only Monette and his lover knows their “secret names,” demonstrating the private qualities that the reader cannot access.
Monette uses a Freudian substitution for the lost person in his poem. Focusing repeatedly on the act of brushing his lover’s hair becomes a way for Monette to substitute his grief for a simple action he once performed often. As we saw earlier in Hardy’s “The Going,” the poet is reattaching “affection to a self that is nevertheless identified with the lost object” (Sacks 252). Although his preface indicates that he wants his poem “to allow no escape, like a hospital room, or indeed a mortal illness” (Monette xii), this form of substitution becomes a way out of total identification with the dying. In addition, substituting the dead for another object provides the reader with the means to experience this loss. The reader can sympathize with the need to perform an action over and over that was experienced in life.

As I have explored the personal experiences between Monette and his partner, it is evident that the poem has difficulty in allowing others to completely identify with this personal world and to take political action with Monette. Some may mourn with Monette, but this mourning may not lend itself to the political action Monette solicits in his preface because his work feels so hopeless, almost impossible to “prevail.” Although his preface concludes by telling the reader, “Pity us not,” we cannot help but feel pity, as in compassion or understanding of his suffering. While we pity and mourn his experience, we do not necessarily feel politicized to do something about the disease that took Rog.
Thom Gunn also wants to enlist a community of reaction and political activism through his collection *The Man With Night Sweats*. He focuses on exploring his experience with AIDS and the homosexual community, but he does not limit it to just a private portrayal of lovers like Monette. By extending his project beyond a homosexual partner, Gunn is able to increase the possibility that others will feel a connection to at least one of these lives and will feel motivated to act on their behalf. By focusing on relationships, friendships, and good acquaintances without naming the disease that is killing them, Gunn presents his personas as more than just persons with AIDS. In “To the Dead Owner of a Gym” and “To a Dead Graduate Student,” Gunn portrays his victims as people with ambition and goals. While one “gained muscle every week / with sharper definition” (75), the other exercised his “tough impatient mind” (79). By demonstrating that these lives are worthy of grief, Gunn moves those affected by AIDS from the cultural margins to the center and positions his poetry to affect more than just the homosexual community.

Gunn’s “Lament” has a more intimate tone as it explores ideas about both the life and death of his friend. The pairing of lines such as “Your dying was a difficult enterprise” with “You tried to stay the man that you had been” (61) suggests that his life is worthy of recognition in the face of death. The speaker remembers there was more to his friend’s life than “pills, shot, X-ray, / or test” (61). He recalls the following fond memories:

I think back to the scented summer night
We talked between our sleeping bags, below
A molten field of stars five years ago:
I was so tickled by your mind’s light touch
I couldn’t sleep, you made me laugh too much,
Though I was tired and begged you to leave off (62-63).

The scene is perhaps one that many people can identify with: camping under
the stars with a friend, staying up late, laughing until it hurts. When the reader can
identify with their closeness, the elegy becomes even more devastating when the
friendship ends with a “difficult, tedious, painful enterprise.” Gunn’s “Lament”
draws the reader in so that mourning for the victim becomes a shared experience
between poet and audience.

One poem in Gunn’s collection, “The Missing,” is a kind of communal elegy,
in that it describes a community of caring and support, as well as one of mourning
when the community dissolves. The poem shows the “dissolution of what was once
an ‘increasing family’ – partly friends, partly sexual partners, partly even the vaguest
of acquaintances, with the sense of being in some way part of a community”
(Hoffman 26). Ironically, death is what ultimately brings this community together.
The speaker describes the building of this community, “contact of friend led to
another friend” (9), and the feelings of affection that lead to “image of an unlimited
embrace” (12). This image of an “unlimited embrace” shows how his community
was not only supportive and loving, but without limits. Gunn’s words of
participation and inclusiveness also pull the reader into this community – into this
“unlimited embrace” – even as this community begins to dissolve due to illness and
death. When what was once a community whose “push kept [him] as firm as their
support” (16) began to dissolve into fragmented pieces, the speaker discovers a part of him has dissolved as well: “their deaths have left me less defined” (80). No longer feeling his community’s “pulsing presence” (17), the speaker feels “unsupported here” (19) in this world alone.

The poem demonstrates the change that occurs in the speaker when his community dissolves; he is personally changed and demonstrates Judith Butler’s position that “perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance” (21). As the speaker transforms in the wake of mourning, the poem demonstrates how his community affects a profound change in him. He explores this sense of losing part of himself in the final four lines. “Abandoned incomplete” and “trapped in unwholeness,” the speaker reflects that he has lost part of himself when undergoing his transformation, one of “constant give and change.” Without his community of friends, the speaker finds himself “strange” and “incomplete,” and has ultimately “become inscrutable to [himself]” (Butler 22). By the conclusion of the poem, the reader also shares this feeling of abandonment. Sensing the withdrawal of the “unlimited embrace,” the reader experiences “the missing” of not only the community, but the support it provided. The final lines feel empty, alone, and lacking of what is essential – friends and their embrace.

Because Gunn’s poetry reflects what actually happened to him as his community was ravaged by AIDS, his formal technique offers him a full release of
feeling that might otherwise be seen as chaotic. Unlike Gunn whose rhyme and mastery of language gains the reader’s attention, Monette’s poetry that uses furious lines with no punctuation, as well as capital letters, makes demanding claims for the reader’s attention (e.g. “I AM THE SENTRY HERE”). Regarding his formal technique, Gunn says that “in looking for a rhyme, or in trying to get meter right, you are often having to go deeper into your subject so that you discover things about it, and about your reaction to it, that you didn’t know before. You are digging in – because you have to” (Shelf Life 221). By “digging in” to his subject, Gunn encourages a similar exploration from his reader. We think about the subject more deeply as we admire Gunn’s craft, wondering how he will manage the meter and the rhyme. In the poem “The Man With Night Sweats,” Gunn uses rhyme to explore the approaching avalanche of AIDS:

    Stopped upright where I am
    Hugging my body to me
    As if to shield it from
    The pains that will go through me,

    As if hands were enough
    To hold an avalanche off (19-24).

As we move from “enough” to “off,” the reader not only delights in the rhyme, but marvels at the use of “avalanche” as a metaphor for AIDS. Importantly, an avalanche falls on everyone, indicating that AIDS is affecting all people regardless of whether or not they have the disease. Gunn’s mastery of the form encourages
thematic exploration of the implications of AIDS not only from the poet, but from the reader as well.

Gunn’s elegies have the potential of becoming communal with an outside group of readers. Poems that elicit responses from an outside community require both readership and an issue that people can find connections in their personal lives and collectively mourn with the speaker. As I have demonstrated above, Gunn’s poetry of relationships can speak to anyone, not differentiating between gays and straights, the sick and the healthy, the living and the dying. When it was published, readers and reviewers made Gunn's *The Man With Night Sweats* one of the most admired poetry books of recent years. It won the 1993 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, which recognizes “the most outstanding book of poetry published in the United States in the previous year.” Because an award-winning collection brings a certain amount of attention to a specific text, *The Man With Night Sweats* has more notoriety and community exposure than Monette’s *Love Alone*. And because visibility is required for political activism, Gunn’s collection does more to bring attention to AIDS than Monette’s work. Gunn’s collection explores issues that others can find connections in their own lives and its demonstrated readership indicates that it can resonate with people. His words invite people to participate and to empathize with the dying and those that mourn them; his words offer a means for understanding losses we all encounter as humans. *The Man With Night Sweats* has
become a text in which people can gather around to explore disease, dying, and loss both when it was published and continuing today.

Another place to look for the impact of Gunn’s collection is the recent attention on loss and mourning by critics and scholars. Theoretical work like Judith Butler’s, Patricia Rae’s, and Clifton Spargo’s have focused on the political implications of mourning, which are often connected to community. Gunn’s AIDS-era poetic project contributed in part to a larger cultural response to sexism and homophobia that led directly to the emergence of theoretical work like Butler’s, Rae’s and Spargo’s. Such theoretical work does not just help us elucidate the earlier work of AIDS-era poetic projects, but is in fact part of these projects’ larger legacy of analyzing grief, lives that are worthy of grief, and society’s responses to these lives.

Mark Doty’s collection of poems, *My Alexandria*, enlists a community of reaction and political activism by dispelling myths about homosexuality and AIDS. His collection focuses on building a community of open-mindedness and understanding regardless of sexual preference, where the boundaries of human difference dissipate and are replaced with unification. In “‘How to Live. What to do.’: The Poetics and Politics of AIDS,” Deborah Landau says that Doty provides “humane and comforting narratives that stand in sharp contrast to the hostile socio-political climate of the contemporary United States” (206). Especially significant and necessary at its 1993 publishing date, Doty’s “humane and comforting
narratives” not only present an alternative language to the dominant discourses about AIDS, they perform the work of building a community of understanding and empathy – for the AIDS victim, for his partner, his family, and his friends.

Doty begins his collection with “Demolition,” a poem in which the demolition of a building structure serves as a metaphor for his poetic project; he is attempting to topple the ideological structures that have relegated homosexuals to the borders of society. A fitting introduction to his volume of poems, “Demolition” establishes the tone for Doty’s collection, in that he is providing an alternative to the traditional (and often stereotypical) way of examining AIDS and homosexuality. He describes the demolition of the building:

The enormous, articulate shovel nudges the highest row of moldings and whole thing wavers as though we’d dreamed it, our black classic, and it topples all at once (63-66).

Although not an elegy in the traditional sense of mourning a loss, “Demolition” presents a death of sorts. As the building topples and the old guard, or “black classic,” goes down, the poem signals that something new will return in its place. By providing an alternative, more humanistic discourse for examining AIDS, Doty is presenting the disease and its victims in a new light. Just as the sky opens around what was once occupied by buildings, Doty’s collection provides access for everyone to discuss relationships, love, disease, and loss. His poem is reminiscent of Gunn’s “The Man With Night Sweats,” where an impending avalanche becomes a
metaphor for AIDS. A powerful force that can fall on anyone, an avalanche leaves a lasting effect on everything in its wake.

In “The Wings,” the speaker attends an exhibition where the AIDS Quilt is displayed. Doty uses the quilt, where “every banner [is] stitched to another / and another” (124-125) as a metaphor for the link humans share. Each victim of AIDS is represented in a “three by five field” (122) and sewn together to form a collective. Just as strangers’ fields are sewn together, Doty’s words reflect how all types of people are brought together by this disease, including victims, families, and even strangers who feel an emotional connection to these victims and want to participate in the mourning. Regardless of background, Doty suggests that we are all part of the “banner stitched to another / and another” (124-125). Doty makes a similar move here as Gunn and Owen performed in their work. In Gunn’s “The Missing,” the speaker’s “increasing family” of friends represented an “image of an unlimited embrace” (12), where an emotional connection between previous strangers was shared. This embrace had no limits; all could experience the benefits of community and the link that all humans share. Owen uses the communally understood phrase, “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” to bring attention to his message and provide an alternative way of thinking about this phrase and its implications for battle. By demonstrating that it is not sweet and proper to die for one’s country, Owen provides another means for community in times of war. People can reject the false rhetoric while still feeling an emotional connection to the victims and those that mourn.
Returning to Doty’s “Wings,” as the names of the victims are read in a
 ceremony, the speaker reflects on this catalog of names, noting that these names
 represent another link to human kind.

They’re reading
the unthinkable catalog of the names,
so many they blur, become
a single music pronounced with difficulty
over the microphone, become a pronoun,
become You (125-130).

Doty’s ambiguous use of the pronoun “You” blurs the lines between the AIDS
victims whose names are being read and the reader who is participating in this
 ceremony through the eyes of the speaker. This “You” could be anyone, and it is
 pointedly not attached to an adjective of differentiation (e.g. gay, straight, young,
 old, male, female). For Deborah Landau, this linguistic moment “dissolves the
 boundaries between one body and another and counters the prevalent tendency to see
 people with AIDS as Other” (212). There is no “Other” here, as these
 representations of bodies combine under the all-inclusive umbrella of “You.” While
 a community is usually distinguished by the concept of others, Doty’s community of
 “You” represents a community where dissimilarities, or “otherness,” is transcended
 by inclusiveness. Everyone can be found on this list of names, whether they choose
to participate actively in the AIDS community or not.

The speaker continues to examine the material representations of the dead,
noting how clothing is coupled with an actual body, and how these empty clothes
represent an “essential, missing body” (135).
It’s the clothing I can’t get past,
The way a favorite pair of jeans,
A striped shirt’s sewn onto the cloth;

The fading, the pulls in the fabric
Demonstrate how these relics formed around
One essential, missing body.

An empty pair of pants
is mortality’s severest evidence.
Embroidered mottoes blend

into something elegiac but removed;
a shirt can’t be remote.
One can’t look past

the sleeves where two arms
were, where a shoulder pushed
against a seam, and someone knew exactly

how the stitches pressed against skin
that can’t be generalized but was,
irretrievably, you, or yours (130-147).

Again, this selection demonstrates how bodies blend together under shared
commonalities. While these clothes belonged to a singular person, they become a
universal symbol of loss. The clothes represent the Freudian model of installing a
substitute for the lost person. Just as Hardy installed substitutes for his lost wife,
Doty is using clothing to represent the countless bodies that have been lost. By
attaching “affection to a self that is nevertheless identified with the lost object”
(Sacks 252), Doty finds a substitute that can capture the qualities of the lost object.
Just as he sets himself up to do in “Demolition,” Doty challenges the ideological myths surrounding the homosexuals and replaces them with accuracies.

In “Wings,” he challenges the notion that HIV is a product of sex.

Don’t let anybody tell you

deadn’t the price exacted
for the ability to love;

couldn’t we live forever
without running out of occasions? (116-120).

Providing alternative ways of thinking about love and loss, Doty “rejects the link between love and death and challenges narratives that portray homoerotic love as self-destructive” (Landau 210).

Like Gunn, Doty has received accolades from both readers and critics alike for his collection of AIDS poetry. The book received numerous awards, including The Los Angeles Times Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Because an award-winning collection brings a certain amount of attention to a specific text, My Alexandria shares the notoriety and community exposure of Gunn’s The Man With Night Sweats. But unlike Gunn’s (and Monette’s collection), Doty’s My Alexandria anticipates the death of his partner of twelve years, Wally Roberts. In such an anticipatory collection, which was published one year before Roberts’ death, Doty is able to present an alternative viewpoint on the elegy. Although he does not refer to Wally or a lover explicitly, Doty explores the emotional and physical arrangements people make for the death of a loved one. Doty’s
preparations for an impending death provide another means by which strangers can gather around his experience. He offers room for a category of imagined experience; like many of his readers, Doty has not yet experienced a loss of this magnitude. But his category of the imagined demonstrates that mourning for those experiences only imagined and anticipated is still capable of drawing in others. His collection presents another language to examine personal loss and disappointment and the communities that can result.

While his text has been accepted by a community of readers and critics alike, Doty complicates a community of strangers’ ability to share in the mourning of the tragedy. When he states that “we love disasters that have nothing to do with us” in “Demolition,” he not only points to a human’s gesture to participate in a tragedy, he questions whether a genuine human response is possible to a tragedy that is emotionally removed from our personal experience. By giving our attention to these tragedies – by watching television reports, attending vigils, reading and listening to poetry – we can only experience the disaster from a position of (safe) removal. If humans enjoy participating in the mourning without going through the intense pain of proximity as Doty suggests, is it possible to participate genuinely in a community of mourning? If an individual’s only experience with AIDS is encountered through an elegy, can he join in the mourning for victims of the disease?

Many readers have written to Doty describing their experiences with illness and death. Doty describes some of these countless letters that demonstrate the
connection they feel to his poems: “Some who found their own experience of a lover’s illness mirrored or defined; straight readers who wrote to tell . . . about arriving at a new understanding of homosexual relationships” (Landau 219). These letters from readers would indicate that regardless of their personal experiences, strangers can use Doty’s experiences to find emotional connections in their own lives. While some of these experiences are mirrored in their own lives – some letters indicate that they too have watched their lovers suffer\(^2\) – some of these experiences are unfamiliar. Because Doty provides a category of imagined experience as I discussed above, even readers not knowing someone with AIDS can still feel the emotional draw of these words. Such readers can be included in the community of strangers that have gathered around *My Alexandria* because mourning can occur for those losses only imagined or experienced through others.

\(^2\) One reader writes: “Lately I have been mourning the death of my lover. I have been trying to understand what I lost, what exactly I have gained (ache), how to forgive and how to ask for forgiveness. Your poems opened me and stilled me. Thank you” (Landau 219).
CONCLUSION

This study of the communal elegy began with Sacks’ argument about English and American elegies. Arguing that the English elegy followed the conventions of the genre while the American elegy did not, Sacks concluded that the English elegy was more capable of establishing community and encouraging consolation from the reader. In Chapter I, I argued that conventional English elegies did not promote a shared community of mourning and consolation any more than other American elegies that depart from the tradition. A community of grief and consolation can form around elegies that create a connection through an emotional solicitation for caring by the reader or subject matter in which a reader can identify connections in his personal life. Such a community is possible to form around elegies of all types, regardless of following the form’s conventions. I used Thomas Hardy’s conventional English elegy to show that it is not the generic continuity that enables “The Going” to find a community of people who care, but Hardy’s powerful imagery, poignant language, and emotional solicitations to both his dead wife and to the reader that petitions an interest with the audience.

I then examined the role of consolation in the genre tradition, by looking at the critics’ arguments about whether reaching solace is necessary for an elegy to be successful in its process of mourning loss. I argued that the modern elegy can be successful even if the speaker remains inconsolable by examining elegies where the speaker’s melancholia only enhances the work of mourning. I reexamined Hardy’s
“The Going,” by observing how remaining inconsolable serves the poem by portraying realistic emotions about his wife’s death that are not easily overcome. I also used Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce Et Decorum Est” to demonstrate how inconsolability can lead to political progressiveness as the elegist uses his melancholia to draw attention to his issue. While the tradition of the elegy was marked by consolation, remaining melancholic can make the personal poem even more devastating, as in the case of Hardy, or it can bring added attention to the political poem, as in the case of Owen.

In Chapter II, we transitioned from the traditional English elegy to the modern American elegy, noting how the form shifts from Sacks’ sense of poetic conventions to a physical sense of convention, or “coming together.” I used Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* to demonstrate a different kind of community of shared knowledge and feeling in the United States than what Sacks assumed in the European tradition. I showed how the reader is invited to grieve with this community of mourners and how his mourning is ultimately limited by the fictional quality of the poems. Because these elegies are not written from personal, lived experiences, *Spoon River* cannot create the same kind of community of outside readers who will share in the mourning like other elegies.

In Chapter III, we looked at AIDS elegies written by poets Paul Monette, Thom Gunn, and Mark Doty that grieve for a group of people who for decades were marginalized by the dominant culture. These AIDS-era poetic projects extend the
circle of those who are affected by AIDS, not only reaching the greater homosexual community, but other communities who are not intrinsically tied to homosexuals or the AIDS disease. These elegies solicit a community of support and activism, and some are more successful than others.

I argued that Monette’s work, which explores the personal experiences between Monette and his partner, has difficulty in allowing others to completely identify with his personal world and to take political action with Monette. I also argued that Gunn’s and Doty’s poetry about friendships and relationships could solicit a community of caring and support because it can speak to anyone, not differentiating between gays and straights, the sick and the healthy, the living and the dying. Because Gunn’s *The Man With Night Sweats* and Doty’s *My Alexandria* received accolades and awards from both readers and critics alike, the collections of AIDS poetry had the notoriety and exposure to generate a community of activism.

In *The Modern Elegiac Temper*, John Vickery makes an argument for the specific polyvocal and communal aspects of the modern American elegy. He suggests that the history of the elegy from classical to modern times demonstrates the “steady expansion of subject matter and diversification of voices with which [the elegy] is expressed” (155). As the traditional elegy was previously characterized by a singular poet who was lamenting his own personal loss or the loss of a public figure, Vickery posits that the modern American elegy is capable of employing a
greater number of diverse voices, which in turn can result in a greater effort of combined voices that are lamenting the dead. Vickery suggests that now “the elegiac spirit embraces, through its affective and expressive movement, a polyvocal ritual of accommodation and transcendence of loss in all its forms” (155). The modern American elegy moves beyond the traditional form to a place where personal loss can affect more than just the singular poet. Vickery explains:

In effect, this movement reflects a growing awareness that loss, ruptures in expectancies and responses, and existential discontinuities may be engendered not only by individual persons but by families, relationships, cultures, and historical ages (155).

Vickery’s suggestion that loss can be experienced by more than just individuals and families, but cultures and historical ages provides another argument for community. Loss can be experienced by multiple people simultaneously, but the way they experience that loss may not be the same for a community of mourning to develop. For example, the internet culture captures an online version of communal mourning and demonstrates that a community does not need to know each other to collectively mourn. Although people look at the internet in their own time and place, there are several websites where people can share comments and thoughts with each other about their loss. Forums such as tributes.com, livingtributes.com, and opentributes.com, provide a space for people to submit and view obituaries and to create and view tributes that celebrate the lives of loved ones. These websites are meant to “provide support during times of loss and grieving.” Some of these websites have a tab for “grief assistance” that includes the contact information for a
number of counseling services and hospitals, or places of support and community. Tributes.com identifies a specific communal purpose, as it is a “place for people of all ages to come together through online community to remember and to share the rich stories of the important people in their lives that have passed away.” It has a database of over 82 million records dating back to 1937, including a “Memory Journal” for each obituary where people can share memories, comments, and photographs about the deceased individuals. Dozens of journals demonstrate that both intimate friends and distant strangers alike have posted their thoughts about an individual or have expressed love and support for the family. Even if only a small number of people contribute their ideas, these websites provide a space where communities of strangers can mourn and celebrate lives and losses.

In this age of mourning loss, Vickery’s suggestion that the modern American elegy is capable of employing a greater number of diverse voices, which in turn can result in a greater effort of combined voices that are lamenting the dead, provides a counter to Sacks’ claim that the American elegist is “explicitly on the margins, dislocated, vagrant, or expelled” (313). The American elegy can find its own community for mourning loss as “families, relationships, cultures” seek a forum to collectively grieve their ruptures in expectancies. These groups of voices turn to the elegy to find community and the elegy provides the means for mourning their losses.
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