# Elegy and the Melancholic Public from "9/11" to "Trumpland": Ayad Akhtar's Homeland Elegies in Context

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**Abstract:**

This paper examines why and how the genre and tropes of the elegy have returned to US literature and culture in recent decades, namely after the terrorist attacks of "9/11" in 2001 and in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. It starts by referring to different works which make use of elegiac narratives and aesthetics to comment on social and political contexts in the US: works that emerged after the 11th of September 2001 such as Mohsin Hamid Reluctant Fundamentalist (2005) and others written after the economic recession, such as Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis by J. D. Vance (2016) and Nomadland by Chloé Zhao (2017). The paper will, thus, analyse in more depth Ayad Akhtar's acclaimed novel, Homeland Elegies (2020), a book that fictionalizes biographical elements in order to comment on the economic and social changes experienced by the United States during the last five decades. The paper will demonstrate how, in this novel, the elegy is both a work or mourning and a critical examination of the zeitgeist of the last two decades in the US, which pays particular attention to the aftermath of "9/11," the impact of the economic recession and the social climate in the USA during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.

**Keywords:** Elegies, Ayad Akhtar, melancholic publics, 9/11, economic recession, Donald Trump

Elegy is perhaps the literary genre more attuned to our vulnerability. More or less formally and with more ritualistic or artistic verve, we continue to turn to elegiac messages and texts, either through social networks or through other media, to express and share our deepest wounds, particularly those caused by death or loss. Elegy derives from the Greek word elegos where it already had "some distant connotations of mourning, originally described a poem written in elegiac distich, a couplet composed of a hexameter followed by a pentameter" (Kennedy, 3). Although it assumed various forms and subject matters since antiquity it has kept its core associations with a poetics of mourning. In ancient Greece, the topics of the elegy could be erotic or political; Latin poets added significant derivations such as the pastoral eclogues or idylls (Kennedy, 2007). As a literary text, the form continued to appeal to poets particularly in the sixteenth century. Neoclassic writers but also, to a great extent, romantic writers all over Europe continued to use this genre. The generic permeability of the elegy has continued to breed new texts and artefacts during the 20th century.[1] Here, I will examine the elegiac impetus of Ayad Akhtar's novel Homeland Elegies (2020) in the context of a wider corpus of texts produced in the last decades in the US.

In order to explain the current appeal of the elegy, it is important to understand the psychological dynamics it is associated with not only at an individual/personal level but also collectively, in social and political terms. Much has been written about the role of elegiac texts in the work of mourning, since elegies are privileged moments for sharing personal or collective grief and could therefore help distressed subjects to process the pain associated with their losses. In his famous text "Mourning and Melancholy" Freud presents mourning as part of a healthy process of grieving a loss, and elegies can be, thus, seen as conscious attempts to relate with the inner turmoil and immense pain caused by the loss of a loved one. For Freud, those who suffer from melancholia are, on the other hand, unable to fully mourn and can become pathologically depressive or melancholic. Although Freudian theories may be suggest a too rigid demarcation between melancholic

[1] Disentangled from traditional forms and metrics, the 20th century literary elegy has embraced not only new themes but also speculative modes of writing, including self-referential reflections about the form or about the possibilities of mourning. New media, heighted by social networks and digital technologies also gave new vehicles to the form and allowed elegiac texts to reconfigure themselves through inter-arts and intermedial experiments.

and non– melancholic subjects and their approach to mourning, Freud's attention to these processes initiated an important examination of the relations between melancholia, grief and mourning which remain relevant today. Of particular significance for us here is the fact that, in Freudian terms, mourning is not restricted to personal loss but can be associated to the loss of an idea or value: "mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (234). As a genre, the elegy has also been able to embrace multiple facets of loss, enabling not only the release of personal pain but assuming social functions and purposes. Peter Middleton, for example, has identified in the contemporary elegy 'scenes of conflict between exploitation and ethical resistance,' his work highlights 'the entangled banks of personal history and public culture' that are made visible by the elegiac encounter (Middleton, 2006, p. 44, p. 52). A similar concern is stated by Peter Sacks who employs and interpretive approach to the genre and suggests that 'elegy should be seen as a working through of the work of mourning experience and as a symbolic action' (Sacks, 1985, p. 1).

Particularly violent and unexpected events such as massacres, terrorist attacks, natural calamities and pandemics are moments prone to the writing of elegies. Within the last two, 9/11, was – no doubt due to the media attention it received and the fact that it had its epicentre in New York – the "event" that resulted in the largest corpus of elegiac texts, consumer objects as well as works of art. In literature we saw the rise of 9/11 novels and "new New York novel" in texts where the discourse of mourning dominated narrative motifs and plots. Many authors, particularly after the first five years after the attacks, also became particularly attentive to the way mourning was mobilized for political purposes. The novel by Mohsin Hamid's novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist describes the mournful landscape in vivid terms: "New York was in mourning after the destruction of the World Trade Center, and floral motifs figured prominently in the shrines to the dead and the missing" states the narrator of Hamid's novel. He adds that "photos, bouquets, words of condolence – nestled into street corners and between shops and along the railings of public squares (Hamid, 2007, 89-90). It is, however the omnipresence of the image of the US flag after the attacks that strikes the narrator: "Your country's flag invaded New York after the attacks; it was everywhere. Small flags stuck on toothpicks featured in the shrines; stickers of flags adorned windshields and windows; large flags fluttered from buil-

dings" (Hamid, 2007, p. 90). Mohsin Hamid's novel, written more than ten years before Akhtar's work, calls our attention to the mobilization of national grief after 9/11. It shows how mourning, itself, can be used to justify political and military interventions, such as the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. As both Hamid's and Akhtar's novels will real, this will profoundly change the terms of hospitality in the US for a great number of Muslim citizens (Hamid, 2007).

"9/11" shapes Ayad Akhtar's Homeland Elegies to a great extent but this "event" will be set against another set of political and social contexts that will affect even more profoundly the lives of those portrayed in the novel: the socio-economic trends of the last three decades in the US, culminating with the financial crisis of 2008 and their relation with the election of Donald Trump. Before launching into a closer reading of Ayad Akhtar's novel I will refer here to two works, that came out in the aftermath of the 2008 economic recession and that also received a great amount of critical attention. Both of these, have been associated with the word "elegy." In one of them, a book, "elegy" is directly used as a title and in the second one, a film, the elegiac tropes are so striking that the word was recurrently used by reviewers and critics to depict the film's narrative and aesthetics. Despite their very different aesthetics and political assumptions, they have affinities in terms of themes, as they both focus on groups of people particularly affected by the neoliberal policies in the last decades, whilst also attempting to address and explain, to wider audiences, the questions and interrogations which emerged by the popular success of Donald Trump's electoral campaign.

## Elegy, Crisis and the 2016 Presidential Elections in the US

The book Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis by J. D. Vance, published in 2016 became a New York Times bestseller that same year and was adapted to film by Ron Howard in 2020. It is a biographical book that describes' Vance's life in city of Middletown, Ohio. It depicts the values of his Kentucky family in its Appalachian background. It portrays an impoverished community struggling with unemployment and low-paying jobs, riddled by drug addiction and instability and focuses on Vance's own path after leaving middle Middletown to attend Ohio State University. It can be argued that its portrayal of a culture in crisis is far from unproblematic: Vance's criticism of hillbilly culture departs from the thesis

that resilience on welfare culture leads to the victimization of many in those rural areas and should be replaced by a culture of individualism and self-reliance closer to "tough-love."[1] By presenting poverty as innate or self-promoted, Vance posits the responsibility of people and their families and people for their own misfortune. I will not be able to present a thorough analysis of the book here, nor a thorough examination of what I believe to be its limitations but I would like to highlight that its elegiac and melodramatic overtones are important to explain book's popular appeal in the context in which it was published. Given Appalachia's political swing from the Democratic Party towards the Republican candidates in recent elections, Hillbilly Elegy became a privileged terrain for the discussion of the 2016 presidential elections. Published a few months before Donald Trump was elected and explicitly assuming the point of view of someone whose background was shaped by hillbilly culture, both the book and its author soon came to be seen – for better or worse – as local interpreters of Trump Country.[2] An elegy is always written by those who survive and there is something very Darwinist in Vance's tale: while the author remembers with gratitude the protectiveness of his grandparents, this "elegy" of hillbilly culture is beset by old myths about white poverty, which are ultimately used to glorify the narrator's own escape from that culture.

Very different in terms of political premises, Nomadland by Chloé Zhao is a film also concerned with revealing the lives of a group of people affected by the recession (Zhao, 2020). The film depicts a group of nomads, man and women, who travel in the USA in their vans, searching for work. The elegiac overtones of the film are conveyed by the melancholic settings and the mournful narrative motifs that shape the narrative. These are clearly

[1] For example in Chapter 9, Vance writes that "political scientists have spent millions of words trying to explain how Appalachia and the South went from staunchly Democratic to staunchly Republican in less than a generation" (Vance 2016, 140). He suggests that as far back as the 1970s, the white working class began to turn to conservative politicians such as Nixon "because of a perception that, as one man put it, government was "payin' people who are on welfare today doin' nothin'! They're laughin' at our society! And we're all hardworkin' people and we're gettin' laughed at for workin' every day!"' (Vance 2016, 140).

[2] Vance himself offered commentary on how his book provides perspective on why a voter from the "hillbilly" demographic would support Trump. Although he does not mention Trump in the book, Vance openly criticized the now-former president while discussing his memoir in interviews following its release. However, Vance walked these comments back when he joined the 2022 U.S. Senate race in Ohio and now openly embraces Trump ideology.

highlighted by many of the titles used to review the film, such as "Nomadland' Review: A Gorgeous Elegy for Life After the American Dream" (Goldberg, 2021) 'Living on instinct: 'Nomadland' is an elegy for our times" (Bain, 2021) or simply "Nomadland: an Elegy" (Freedman, 2021). The film was inspired by the nonfiction book, Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century by Jessica Bruder, a sweeping journalistic account of post-recession contemporary nomads (Bruder, 2017). The movie was released in 2020 and at the 93rd Academy Awards ceremony it won the Oscar for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actress, and several Golden Globes and therefore received much critical attention. The film focuses on the character of Fern, a widow (a character performed by Frances McDormand) who, still mourning the death of her husband, becomes unemployed. After the shuttering of Empire, the United States Gympsum Corporation's company town in Nevada, where she and her late husband lived and worked, she decides to becomes a nomad. Like many others like her, she starts travelling the United States in a van, where she leaves, while she looks for work, befriending fellow nomads and discovering the challenges and of life on the road and the precious but surprising networks established in these growing communities. The film explores the precarious lives of those left unemployed and left behind by unforgiving neoliberal economic system, many of them older people which in normal circumstances would be at retirement age (Randall, 2016). It shows how economic distress changed the lives of a significant section of the population, exposing these changes with more depth and complexity than Hillbilly Elegy.

Yet despite their critical differences, both these works use the themes of mourning and elegy to address – more or less critically – myths and symbols of US national identity, dwelling on mythologies associated with the American dream in the face of the wounds reopened by the recession. Not unlike Ayad's novel, the work we will discuss next, these two works use elegiac motifs to portray communities constituted by dejected, melancholic subjects, whose lives have been affected by long term unemployment, alcoholism, drugs divorce and homelessness. As several studies demonstrate, these conditions are the consequence of a growing economic decline experienced by working and middle class families since the 1980s, intensified by neoliberal policies, which has a direct impact in the health of a large part of the population in the US. A study by the Pew Research Centre covering the 1971-2015 period, showed that after more than four decades of serving as the

nation's economic majority, the American middle class is now matched in number by those in the economic tiers above and below it (Pew Research Centre, 2015).[1] Another study, conducted by economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton showed that between 1998 and 2013, white Americans across multiple age groups experienced large spikes in suicide and fatalities related to suicide, drug and alcohol poisonings, and chronic liver diseases and cirrhosis (Case & Deaton, 2015).[2] The incidence of suicide became a clear indicator of the social crisis gripping America (Chen 2016; Case 2015). By the first decade of the millennium the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention of the National Center for Health Statistics US Suicide rates increased 30% between 2000–2018. These numbers coincided with a sharp increase in terms of lifespan differences between rich and poor and revealed the tragic result of the economic recession on large sections of the population.[3]

## Ayad Akhar's Homeland Elegies

Ayad Akhar's novel Homeland Elegies offers a social portrayal of the last two decades in the US in light of recent events. Akhtar states that he wrote in something of a fever dream after my mother passed away, and after Donald Trump's election…I wanted to remember what it was that brought them here…fifty years ago" (Akhtar 2020, vii). He explains that he wanted to create "Elegies, then, for homelands of various sorts, as told by the child of a generation, caught between notions of home, of success, of belonging, and most of all, of America"(Akhtar 2020, vii). The intersection of personal and collective death evoked by the previous elegiac texts mentioned is maintained: the author uses the novel to remember his parents at the same time that he acknowledges the loss of certain ideals that his father had for many decades associated with the US. Homeland Elegies makes use of autobiographical elements encouraged many reviewers to read it as autofiction, as many

[1] Looking specifically at 2014, the study showed that the median income of these households was 4% less than in 2000. Due to housing market crisis and the Great Recession of 2007-09, their average wealth fell by 28% from 2001 to 2013 (Pew Research Centre, 2015).

[2] This upsurge of mortality was so intense that for whites aged 45 to 54, it effected the trend of steadily improving life expectancy (Case & Deaton, 2015).

[3] Other contributing factors cited by the study's authors include rising drug addiction and overdoses, growing divorce rates among older Americans, increased social isolation and a health care system ill-equipped to deal with mental health issues and suicide prevention (Case & Deaton, 2015).

have reviewers called it: the narrator is called Ayad and is a writer whose literary career as playwright and writer is inescapably similar to the author's own. Ayad Akhtar presents the memoirish style of the book as a result or commentary on current cultural trends: "The book apes the memoir as a mode and tone but it's doing so because of the politics of the time we're living through, the collapse of fact and fiction. I don't think of it as autofiction as much as literary reality television" (Akhtar, and Kreizman, 2020). It can be said that the book re-enacts, explores and exploits the dissolution of the line between public and private, intensified by new social media and reality tv.[1]

Despite its autobiographical traits, the also book has the striking capacity to offer a kaleidoscopic and panoramic view of the US; it not only focuses on the accounts and perspectives of members of the narrator's large Pakistani family – whose members offer varied ideological positions – but Akhtar's narrator also includes the narratives and perspectives of characters with backgrounds very different from his own. Among these we find the stories and viewpoints of police Officer Mathew and John Marek the owner and repair shop from Scranton in Pennsylvania; Mary Moroni a white Liberal academic; Riaz Rind, a Pakistani millionaire; and Mike Jacobs, and the narrator's African American Hollywood agent who, despite his own background, has voted for Donald Trump. The narrator's conversations with Mike Jacobs for example, offer him important insights about the tensions and contradictions that emerge from the recession:

> Most Americans couldn't cobble together a week's expenses in case of an emergency. They had good reason to be scared and angry. They felt betrayed and wanted to destroy something. The national mood was Hobbesian: nasty, brutish, nihilistic – and no one embodied all this better than Donald Trump. Trump was no aberration or idiosyncrasy, as Mike saw it, but a reflection, a human mirror in which to see all we'd allowed ourselves to become. Sure, you could read the man for metaphors – an unapologetically (Akhtar, 2020, p. 242).

[1] Ayad Akhtar wants to explore this mediatic self-portraiture, reinforced by the culture of spectacle, as to the convey investment that the political system itself has placed in it. Donald Trump, the millionaire/show-host/president who is referred to recurrently in the novel, can be seen as exemplary case of that investment which intersects the cult of celebrity with political culture.

As he mixes among the celebrities and billionaires associated with art and media worlds, the narrator starts to see himself as a "neoliberal courtier" (Akhtar, 2020, p. 151). Not unlike Mohsin Hamid's protagonist who saw himself as a modern janissary, Akhtar realises that he has become "a subaltern aspirant to the ruling class" an "exemplary defender not only of inalienable human rights and enlightened rage but also of freedom itself, both sexual and monetary" (Akhtar, 2020, p. 151). The confesses that his awakening from this self-serving entitlement will be ruthless: "An accumulation of private and public misfortunes – a copper penny rash on my palms, my mother's death, the election of Donald Trump – would disabuse me of my will to benevolent privilege" (Akhtar, pp. 151-152).

One of the most important characters in Hamid's novel is the narrator's father, Sikander Akhtar, a cardiologist born in Pakistan who becomes a headstrong supporter of Donald Trump, after having worked for him as a doctor. Sikander, an adept of American mythologies of success, momentarily sees his own fantasies of freedom and power reflected in the figure of the businessman and show– host turned presential candidate. His ideas clash with his son's political positions as well as those of his wife, who has an increasingly critical of the US foreign policies and its materialistic ethos. (Akhtar, p. 70). The book follows the family's fall from grace, as Sikander wastes the money he made as a cardiologist on a real estate scheming and gambling addiction. After the death of his wife and several professional and economic setbacks, Sikander returns to Pakistan. Sikander's attraction to Donald Trump is nevertheless at the heart of the novel: "Trump's unruly penchant for debt and his troubles with borrowed money were widely reported in the business pages of the time… My father, like Trump, binged on debt in the '80s and ended the decade uncertain about his financial future" (Akhtar p. 3). For the narrator, Trump represents a country unable to come to terms with the course of its neoliberal path. As the narrator attempts to understand his father's fascination with trump, he asks:

> What was this attachment to the man? Was it really just the memory of the helicopter rides, the spacious suite, the hooker, a tailor's tape, a lapel pin? Could it really be so banal? Or were those things standing in for something else, something more encompassing and elusive? Father always called America the land of opportunity. Hardly original, I know. But I wonder: Opportunity for whom? For him,

> right? (…, …) Isn't this what Father saw in Donald Trump? A vision of himself impossibly enhanced, improbably enlarged, released from the pull of debt or truth or history, a man delivered from consequence itself into pure self-absorption, incorporated entirely into the individualist afflatus of American eternity?

Refracted through the image of Tump, Sikander becomes himself, an impossibility, a legend, rather than a man. The fictious self-images he creates about himself, released him "from the pull of debt or truth or history." Sikander – like many others indebted or impoverished during the recession – becomes attracted by the megalomania of Trump's discourse, because Trump's hyperbolic and offensive speeches apparently seem to counter their own sense of powerlessness. A number of scholars have explained Trump's attraction to vulnerable communities in these terms. In her study of the impact and relations between processes of mourning and melancholia in Trump's supporting communities, Christina Tarnopolsky argues that "if Trump often seemed megalomaniacal, this should not be surprising since mania for Freud is defined by the fact that the individual's ego becomes conflated with his ego ideal, allowing the person to be free of any self-recriminations or reproaches for falling below this ideal, thus facilitating a grandiose sense of the self" (Tarnopolsky, 2017, p. 110). Tarnopolsky explains that "mania is characterized not only by a freedom from self– recrimination but also by delusional or magical thinking" (119). This allows Trumps' supporters, many of them distressed by their inability to face increasing economic pressures, to eschew their melancholic state through fantasies or misconceptions that will momentarily evoke the possibility of an alternative realities. Like scholar Mary Caputi, Tarnolpsky presents melancholia as a prevailing condition in the United States, a condition that has been exacerbated by neoliberal pressures, as the above mentioned increase in suicide rates, alcoholism and drug abuse suggests (Caputi, 2000; Tarnopolsky, 2017). Caputi considers that melancholic feelings behaviours can be ignited and reinforced by socio-economic and political conditions, not least by capitalist economy, by consumer culture, and the reinforcement of neoliberal culture via the media (Caputi, 2000). This sense of sacrifice is also highlighted by the scholar, Wendy Brown who states that the politics of austerity has been presented by liberal and conservative politicians as an inevitability, by relocating "classic gesture of patriotism from a political-military register to an economic one, a relocation that

itself indexes the neoliberal economization of the political." (Brown, 2015, p. 70). The logic of sacrificial citizenship erected by the neoliberal model, thus, leads to the multiplication of melancholic subjects that channel self-recrimination into the sensational discourse of populist leaders ready to point their finger at "social enemies" such as minorities and migrants, used as scapegoats for larger systemic problems.

The theories of Brown (2015), Caputi (2000), and Tarnopolsky (2017) help us understand the elegiac turn of recent works as different as Nomadland and Hillbilly Elegies and they offer us insight into works that intersect economic and political and cultural tensions such as Homeland Elegies. As Hari Kunzru suggests Homeland Elegies deals in ambiguities that became clear after 9/11 and were exacerbated by the Trump's presidency: "The many unacknowledged failures of American policy and the coarsening of popular attitudes form the matrix in which Akhtar's stories grow (Kunzru, 2020). Kunzru calls Akhtar's elegies a "fading dream of national belonging" (Kunzru, 2020). In Akhtar's work that fading dream is explored in the context of a growing sense or crisis and generalised melancholia – punctured by the attacks of "9/11" and exacerbated by Donald Trump's presidency. His Homeland Elegies are, thus, both a work of mourning and a critical examination of the national zeitgeist.

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