Every modern generation re-invents its relation to the dead. This course explores recent experiments in poetic elegy that construct the presence of the dead and work through loss. We’ll approach this writing in close conversation with other sorts of innovations in mourning and memorial work, including emerging commemorative rituals, mortuary practices, funerary architecture, historical monuments, and cemetery design. In the experiential, creative component of this course, students will research local memorial acts and commemorative spaces in order to design their own.

This is an academic course with a substantial practicum, or non-academic and experiential, component. Our different cultural engagements will share a focus on inventive aesthetic responses to the modernization of dying and corpse disposal in the U.S. The problem that the course addresses is the radical privatization of contemporary grief and ontological incoherence of a dead person in a modern social world. My motivating argument for this course is that a wide range of recent cultural production—in writing, visual art, performance art, architecture, and landscape design—have discovered significant aesthetic techniques to render the dead legible and to make grief less lonely.

In addition to our readings in contemporary poetry, the class will learn about other cultural phenomena around us: improvised street memorials, Maafa commemoration rituals, local repatriation efforts, Burning Man commemorative temples, informal memorial sculpture parks, and contemporary cemetery and funerary design. Other case studies will include the memorial competition for the African Burial Ground in Manhattan and elegiac AIDS activism, including The Names Project. The class will also spend time in two cemeteries, Mt. Feake Cemetery, in Waltham, and Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, MA.

This is a four-credit course. I expect students to spend at least nine hours a week preparing for class sessions and completing assignments.

**Required Texts:**

**Poetry**
- Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*
- Sharon Olds, *The Father*
- Allen Grossman, *How to Do Things with Tears*
- Deborah Landau, *The Uses of the Body*
- Thom Gunn, *The Man with Night Sweats*
Natasha Tretheway, *Native Guard*
Patrick Phillips, *Elegy for a Broken Machine*
Lynn Strongin, ed., *The Sorrow Psalms: A Book of Twentieth-Century Elegy*

Criticism and Theory [in Course Reader]
Diana Fuss, “Corpse Poem”
Margaret Gibson, “Melancholy Objects”
István Rév, “The Necronym”
Palle Yourgrou, “The Dead”
Jahan Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, selections
Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, selections
Caitlin Doughty, *From Here to Eternity*, selections
Thomas Mira y Lopez, *The Book of Resting Places*, selections

Other
*Gilgamesh*
Sophocles, *Antigone*
George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*
Sherman Alexie, *You Don’t Have to Tell Me that You Love Me*

**Learning Goals**
- knowledge of the generic conventions of elegiac poetry and of contemporary developments in elegy, as these have emerged within a tradition
- the ability to relate a wide range of texts and expressive practices around a common inquiry into modern death and the ontology of dead people
- understanding the complex nature of public memory, as a combination of material and symbolic elements, especially as public memory relates to such phenomena as trauma, postmemory, collective memory, and sites of memory
- the ability to design a space, object, or practice with elegiac and memorial functions, accompanied by the ability to theoretically reflect on this creative design

**Rights, Rules, and Requirements:**
- Laptops may be used in class only with permission and for accessing relevant course materials. If you use a laptop for other purposes (email, web browsing), you will be asked to leave the class and be considered absent for the day. Bring other materials (e.g., paper, pens) for taking notes.
- All assignments must be completed and submitted to receive course credit. Late work will be penalized by one plus/minus for each day past the due date.
- Three unexcused absences lowers the final course grade by one plus/minus, and each additional absence by another plus/minus.
- If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.
• You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Students may be required to submit work to TurnItIn.com software to verify originality. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university. Citation and research assistance can be found at LTS - Library guides.

Written Assignments

Interpretive Essay: 5-7 page interpretation of assigned poetry. Questions t.b.d. 15%

Contribution to Class Poetry Anthology: a research task to discover a recent, published elegy that merits inclusion in a class poetry anthology, with commentary. 10%

Interview with Death or Grief Practitioner: summary and partial transcription of an individual interview with a mortuary or grief practitioner, e.g., funeral director, clergy, grief counselor, cemetery staff, or political activist involved in commemoration. Guidelines t.b.d. 20%

Ethnographic Analysis: observation and analysis of a social practice or public place involving commemoration or memorialization, e.g., a cemetery, official monument, informal memorial, commemorative gathering, or public art on behalf of the dead. Guidelines t.b.d. 25%

Final Design Project: a proposal for an inventive design or event with a compelling memorialization function. Guidelines t.b.d. 30%

Class Schedule

Unit I: Elegy and Its Discontents
Week 1:
Lynn Strongin, ed., The Sorrow Psalms: A Book of Twentieth-Century Elegy, selections
Jahan Ramazani, The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney, selections

Week 2:
Allen Ginsberg, Howl
Allen Grossman, How to Do Things with Tears
Robert Pogue Harrison, The Dominion of the Dead, selections

Weeks 3-4:
Sharon Olds, The Father
Deborah Landau, The Uses of the Body
Patrick Phillips, Elegy for a Broken Machine
Diana Fuss, “Corpse Poem”

Unit II: Landscapes of Modern Memory
Week 5:
Natasha Tretheway, Native Guard
Karla Holloway, Passed On: African-American Mourning Stories: A Memorial, selections
Week 6:
Sherman Alexie, You Don’t Have to Tell Me that You Love Me, selections
Thomas Laqueur, The Work of Death: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains, selections
Caitlin Doughty, From Here to Eternity, selections
Thomas Mira y Lopez, The Book of Resting Places, selections

Week 7:
Sherman Alexie, You Don’t Have to Tell Me that You Love Me, selections
Margaret Gibson, “Melancholy Objects”
István Rév, “The Necronym”
Palle Yourgrou, “The Dead”

Unit III: Untimely Digression
Weeks 8-9:
Gilgamesh
Sophocles, Antigone

Unit IV: Inventions of Farewell
Week 10:
Thom Gunn, The Man with Night Sweats
Sherman Alexie, You Don’t Have to Tell Me that You Love Me, selections

Week 11:
George Saunders, Lincoln in the Bardo

Week 12-13: final projects