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Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture

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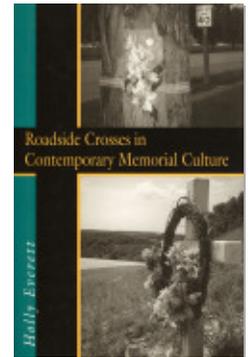
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CHAPTER ONE



Memorial Culture: The Material Response to Loss

Like most residents of my hometown, Austin, Texas, I took roadside crosses for granted. When I first became conscious of them, as a teenage driver, I thought of them as grim warnings. I did not know then that the crosses had a long history in Mexico and the southwestern United States, nor that they had analogues in several other countries. I had no firsthand knowledge of the construction of those I drove past almost daily. Nonetheless, I found them fascinating and disturbing.

The communicative process of roadside crosses, as tangible evidence of extremely personal pain, inevitably affects an entire community. As centerpieces of fragile, dynamic memorial assemblages, such crosses are only now being examined as more than incidental specks in the cultural landscape of certain groups. A unique form of public, belief-centered material culture, roadside accident markers occupy a rare place not only in the realm of roadside attractions, but in the cognitive map of the individual, a uniqueness that renders them extra-legal, or “outlaw” and almost untouchable markers of liminal space. They represent the continuation and adaptation of one of the oldest forms of memorial culture.

The word “memorial” may first bring to mind civil structures, such as the Lincoln and Vietnam Veterans Memorials in the

nation's capitol, and the ceremonies performed at these monuments. Other associations may include Memorial Day observances honoring veterans, or the recent observances held world-wide following the September 11 terror attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. Simultaneously, in an age that has witnessed the unexpected deaths of numerous celebrities and political figures, ranging from the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., to the more recent deaths of John F. Kennedy, Jr., and Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales, the process and physical manifestation of memorialization has become more mutable. In addition to prescribed commemorative practices, such as the establishment of a governmentally maintained site, individuals with varying degrees of connection to the deceased are creating extemporaneous memorial assemblages.

New York City saw the creation of a number of memorial assemblages commemorating the terror attacks of September 11 (Zeitlin and Harlow 2001). Shrines stood at street corners, fire stations, and public parks throughout the city, filled with floral tributes, flags, candles, and photographs, along with notes of thanks, solidarity, and mourning. The fences surrounding United States embassies around the world were transformed by flowers and candles into large-scale memorials.

Similar tributes were left at the site of Princess Diana's fatal crash in August of 1997 on the *Cours la Reine* in Paris. As well, remembrances were left at the gates of Buckingham and Kensington palaces and outside Harrods department store, displays, Adam Gopnik wrote, "that seemed less like funeral tributes than like the contents of some vast piñata filled with party favors, that someone had broken above London" (1997, 36).¹

The numerous analogous memorials (now often referred to as "spontaneous shrines") arising from a public outpouring of grief for disease, disaster, and crime victims include the roses and notes left at the site of the ill-fated 1999 bonfire at Texas A&M University (Grider 2001); flowers, notes, and candles left at the home of

slain Tejano star Selena Quintanilla in 1995; impromptu murder victim memorials in Philadelphia (DeWolf 1996; Primiano 1997); and the stuffed animals, flowers, and notes intertwined in the fence around the ruins of the bombed Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. In each of these instances, structures generally considered part of the public domain—sidewalks, schools and government buildings—were utilized for private and public mourning, as spaces in which to negotiate meaning.

Completed and dedicated in 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. is one of the most widely recognized sites of such negotiation, far removed from the actual scene of devastation. Scholars including geographer Kenneth Foote and labor historian John Bodnar have discussed the origins and eventual construction of the monument, especially noting the embodiment of the “memory debate” in conflicts concerning appropriate design (Bodnar 1992, 1-9). The memorial continues to be a place for remembering and recasting individual and collective impressions. Folklorist Lydia Fish and historian Kristin Ann Hass have documented responses to the site by “pilgrims” who include veterans and relatives of the dead and missing, and their offerings: rosaries, photographs, letters, flowers, poems, pieces of uniforms, and teddy bears. Emotional reactions to the monument can be so powerful that visitors, usually veterans, sometimes find it difficult to approach the wall and instead hang back in a line of trees facing it (Fish 1987, 83-86). Although the site is thousands of miles from the jungles of Asia, its liminality, in terms of landscape, design, and depiction, renders it a powerful reflection of painful memories.

While the Vietnam Veterans Memorial commemorates the horror of those years from a significant distance, thus perhaps providing some degree of emotional safety to pilgrims, memorials marking physical sites of mass death dot the European landscape, the great majority resulting from genocidal actions of the Nazi regime (commemorative sites are also located in Israel and

North America). The differing priorities of each group involved are possible points of contention. Whereas the problem of memory at Auschwitz/Birkenau centers on religious difference (Bartoszewski 1991; Dwork and Pelt 1994; Perlez 1997; Young 1993), at Dachau local officials struggle to incorporate respectful and instructive recognition of past wrongs into a positive civic image, especially in light of the tens of thousands of visitors arriving every year (Young 1983, 69). The way in which Dachau presents itself as a modern town in relation to its past, however, encompasses not only official literature, but also informal communication between residents and visitors, and once visitors return home, between themselves and members of their own communities. It is precisely this type of informal communication and activity, or folklore, centered on an infamous site that often prompts city planners to initiate a governmentally administered memorialization process.

Austin Memorials, Official and Otherwise

The designation of public and private space for memorialization is an especially delicate task in urban areas experiencing explosive growth. The city of Austin and its residents have in recent years grappled with a perceived need to expand and diversify the metropolitan area's economic base in response to the recent instability of major employers in the area, and the desire to preserve the city's unique quality of life as a more manageable, yet sophisticated and liberal municipality. Cleaner, "greener" industries like computer hardware and software developers and manufacturers have been courted by the Chamber of Commerce in an effort to promote growth while protecting the environment, which includes not only ecological concerns, but social issues as well.

The appropriate use of communally utilized space is an ever-present issue in the lively discussion surrounding public works projects such as parks, recreational and convention facilities, and memorial structures. Austin residents and city officials dealt with

the task of effectively representing public and private memory in its commemoration of late blues great Stevie Ray Vaughan. Vaughan, who moved to Austin from Dallas, died in a plane crash in August of 1990. Writing in 1991 for the *Austin American-Statesman*, Michael Point described the memorialization process as one accompanied by “spirited debate,” which finally ended with the family’s decision to install a statue at Auditorium Shores, an outdoor venue at which Vaughan frequently performed (Foote 1997, 74). The city-owned park runs along Town Lake, a section of the Colorado River which flows through downtown Austin. Ceremonially unveiled in 1993, the bronze statue of Vaughan, standing at eight feet and surrounded by a “meditation garden,” was made possible through private donations from individuals both in Austin and around the world, while the allocation of space was made by the city (Point 1993). Facing south, away from the river, Vaughan’s likeness is often adorned with fresh flowers, guitar picks, and hand-written tributes.

More controversial was the installation in December of 1997, by members of the Park Hills Baptist Church, of 1,500 small crosses in the expansive front grounds of the church at the intersection of Farm to Market Road 2244 and the Mopac Expressway. A placard placed in front of Park Hills’s permanent sign read:

FIELD OF CROSSES
IN MEMORY
OF THE 4,110 BABIES
WHO DIE FROM ABORTIONS
IN OUR COUNTRY EVERY DAY!

Symbolizing the fetuses aborted in America, according to church members, the display was planned to coincide with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion in the United States, *Roe vs. Wade*. The crosses, mentioned to me by several informants, garnered further media

attention in mid-January 1998 when the *Austin American-Statesman* reported that several crosses had been uprooted and burned on the church grounds by vandals.

The “field of crosses” and the Stevie Ray Vaughan memorial represent two points on the public/private memory continuum in the Austin area. Although for the most part privately planned and built, both are intended for public consumption and thus placed in high traffic areas. Vaughan’s family, together with the city, created a memorial that is accessible to anyone at almost any time. It stands outside the section of Auditorium Shores that is often enclosed by chain link fences for concerts, festivals, or other pay events. Similarly, the members of Park Hills Baptist Church, desiring as many people as possible to see the anti-abortion display, planted the crosses accordingly, at the corner of the church grounds bordered by two heavily traversed highways. In accordance with its intended use, each memorial’s location and structure invites a certain level of engagement from the general public. Of the two, the “field of crosses” is the more obvious candidate for on-going debate and negotiation. It was also a unique memorial in that it was temporary, and did not commemorate a specific event or individual.

The Park Hills Baptist Church and the Stevie Ray Vaughan memorials are similar in that they signify events occurring somewhere distant from the memorial site, as does the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. As noted in the case of Holocaust memorials, and that dedicated to the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Memphis, honoring and shaping memory at the physical site of violence involves a different set of challenges. Foote categorizes the choices made in commemoration of site-specific events as obliteration, rectification, designation, and sanctification (1997, 7).

Obliteration entails the complete eradication of any structure or physical feature related to a tragic incident. Closely related to obliteration is rectification, in which the site is returned to its original condition or totally redeveloped.² Austin residents have

witnessed this process at work in the rectification of numerous traffic accident sites which now bear little or no trace of destruction, and in the University of Texas's response to Charles Whitman's shooting spree from the tower of the Main Building in 1966. Following the latter incident, damage on campus was cleaned and repaired. The observation deck from which Whitman fired was reopened without ceremony the following year, closed again a few years later due to suicides, then reopened to the public in 1999 (Foote 1997, 195, 357). The site of a 1991 robbery, arson, and quadruple homicide at a northwest Austin yogurt shop serves as an example of designation. A bronze memorial marker was installed there in memory of the four young female victims. Prior to the placing of the marker, friends of the women left lighted candles, flowers, and notes in front of the burned-out store (Phillips 1994).

As envisioned by Foote, sanctification involves the creation of sacred space by physical manipulation of the landscape, whether it be the institution of a memorial plaque, garden, or building, and is usually inspired by disaster or heroic death. There are, however, an increasing number of sanctified spaces created in memory of individuals who were neither well known, nor martyrs, in Austin as well as across North America.

The memorial for Ivan Garth Johnson, killed in 1989, provides an example. It combines an existing public structure, a painted mural, graffiti, and offerings (Fig. 1.1). Spray-painted on an overpass support column are the words:

R.I.P. IVAN
 FAIR SAILING TALL BOY
 IVAN GARTH JOHNSON
 1971 - 1989
 DON'T DRINK & DRIVE
 YOU MIGHT KILL
 SOMEONE'S KID

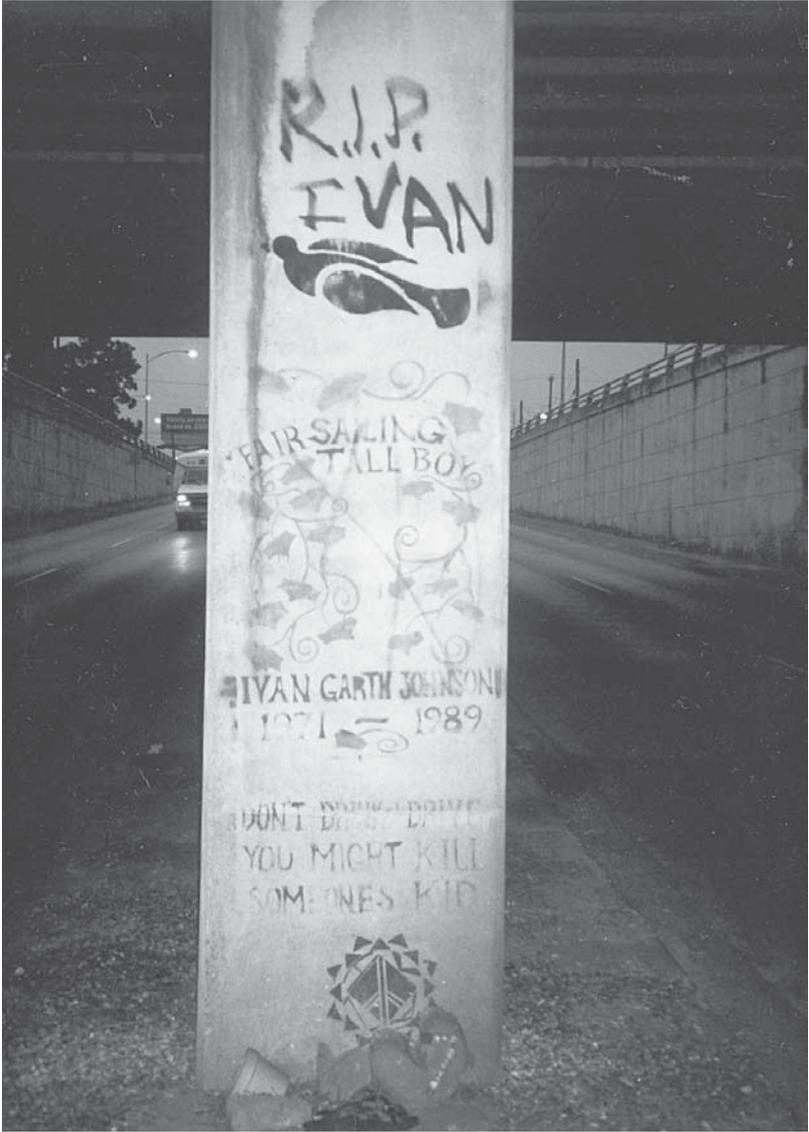


Fig. 1.1 Overpass memorial for Ivan Garth Johnson

Designs accompanying the message include a black dove, strands of ivy—Ivan’s nickname was “Ivy”—and a pattern of triangles at the base of the support. Placed at its foot are rocks decorated with shells, cigarettes, and an empty terra-cotta flowerpot. Long-time Austin resident Ryan Britton reported, “every year, they [the family] cut a piece of wood in the shape of a heart or a circle, and glue seashells in the shape of the number of how many years this boy . . . has been gone. I think the “7” and the “9” are still there.”

The column upon which the artwork remained untouched over a decade rises up from the Lamar Bridge over the Colorado River, less than half a mile from the Stevie Ray Vaughan memorial.³ Rush-hour traffic comes to a standstill on the bridge twice every weekday, providing a captive audience for the memorial’s affecting message.

All memorials communicate in different ways. A supporter of anti-abortion legislation will, of course, react to the Park Hills Baptist Church display far differently than someone in favor of legalized abortion. A motorist viewing Ivan Garth Johnson’s memorial for the first time will likely be more affected than a commuter who regularly traverses the bridge ten times a week. The fact that four informants recited the memorial’s poignant message to me word for word, however, attests to its continued power to impress.

Johnson’s memorial has certainly passed into the vernacular knowledge of the area, but visitors to the city will not read about his memorial in any tourist literature or guidebook.⁴ In addition, neither the informal memorials described above nor institutionally maintained sites are guaranteed veneration as sacred spaces, as monuments of all kinds have been the objects of vandalism, if not outright desecration.⁵ Further, whether due to their origin, design or location, some sites become the focus of pilgrimage, as a shrine, while others fall into disrepair and obscurity.

A memorial on Guadalupe Street in Austin, while relatively

new, appeared to have been abandoned and when photographed was almost camouflaged by a thick layer of dead leaves. The rounded tombstone-like metal marker was completely overtaken by rust save for the rectangular plaque bearing the inscription:

SKIA OURA

March 28, 1996 - November 4, 1996

“Taken by our negligence [*sic*]”

A crumbling funeral wreath flanked the north side of the marker on an equally rusted stand. As noted by folklorist Thomas Zimmerman with regard to similarly neglected roadside crosses in south central Kentucky, Oura’s memorial has perhaps served its purpose for grieving family and friends (1997, 3). Attention and maintenance may have moved from the site of death to the home or cemetery.

Sacred Space and Pilgrimage

Foote states that the United States, from colonial days to the present, has been something of a landscape of disaster and loss, as well as diversity and beauty, thereby forcing the population, and governing bodies in particular, to develop alacritous and meaningful memorial responses (1997, 6, 289-91). In considering items left by visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Bodnar writes: “a park service technician who helped catalog the items left behind told a reporter that the mementos left him ‘a little misty.’ He claimed that these objects were ‘not like history’ but had an ‘immediacy’ about them. What he might have added was that they were not really like the history that was usually commemorated in public” (1992, 8). Ultimately, Bodnar asserts, “[P]luralism will coexist with hegemony” (253), as civil institutions find it increasingly necessary to accommodate vernacular culture and memory in the formation of public commemorative activities and structures. The roadside cross tradition, not far removed from

war memorial customs, similarly spotlights “ordinary” lives and memories, creating polysemic monuments in otherwise banal public space.

In 1993, folklorist George Monger posited two primary reasons for the roadside shrine practice, memorialization, and warning, describing the action of maintaining the site of fatality in such a manner as “private and individual pilgrimage” (114). As a basic motive behind such assemblages, his assertion works well, as a number of my interviewees voiced the same opinion (see chapters four and five). Historian Richard West Sellars and sociologist Tony Walter go further, sensing an almost instinctual need to confront sites of sudden death in an effort to better understand death itself, citing the large crowds that gather for public executions and accidents “simply to observe how other people die” (1993,196). Thus confronting the unknown is a tenet of pilgrimage as conceptualized in the writings of anthropologist Victor Turner (1973, 213-14).

The primary distinction made by Turner with respect to pilgrimage and other rituals is that pilgrimages require a journey (207-8). Such peregrinations are further distinguished by innovation and inclusion, and are thus, as stated by religions scholar Karen Pechilis, “unbounded” (1992, 63). It is this quality of the pilgrimage that creates an environment in which meaning is created and recreated, “an area of multivocality” (Turner and Turner 1978, 145). Moreover, as Pechilis states, “Pilgrimage sites are not the realm of the familiar everyday; therefore the attempt is to make it familiar, to invest it with known meanings. Pilgrimage evokes an application of the known to the unknown in which the known is changed” (65).

The intersection of the familiar and the unfamiliar is commonly marked by, among other things, the action of taking items to or away from the site (66). Thus, the home and the pilgrimage site become invested with the symbols of each. Pilgrims to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial leave teddy bears and articles of clothing

and take home a T-shirt or postcard, as those visiting a roadside cross leave a note or figurine and perhaps take away a flower, resulting in a kind of domestication of the site.

Although a site may be familiarized by a variety of actions as a meeting place of different voices and messages, it is also a likely candidate for conflict. For Pechilis and others, the occurrence of discord is not a problematic one. Pilgrimage, as a liminoid phenomenon operating outside of rigid power structures (Turner and Turner 1978, 1-39), provides an open forum for negotiation that does not necessitate resolution (Bowman 1993, 55-56; Pechilis 1992, 65, 71-73). However, there must be some element of agreement at the core of the assemblage. In other words, while the ritual may divert from convention, it must be grounded in established symbolic systems (Pechilis 1992, 67; Hufford 1985, 198).⁶

Religious landscapes, while also reflecting diversity and negotiation, usually mirror religious hegemony. Cultural geographers Terry Jordan and Lester Rowntree note the plethora of crucifixes, crosses, wayside shrines, and Christian place names in Christian, especially Catholic, cultural regions such as Québec and certain parts of Germany. Predominantly Protestant areas, they write, are notable in their relative lack of religious iconography (1990, 219). The sacred landscape of the Austin area bears evidence of the heavy influence of both Catholicism and Protestantism. Its geographic location, in the state as a whole, is important to note here in that it straddles the demographic border between the predominantly Catholic counties to the south and those with heavy Protestant populations to the north (1990, 213; Ramos 1997, 489).

Yi-Fu Tuan emphasizes marginal location as emblematic of anti-structure with reference to Turner's conception of pilgrimage, but also acknowledges the varied character of sacred space, and of the sacred itself (1978, 91, 89). In contrast to the mundane landscape of the modern city, the sacred produces a tension that is awesome, horrible, and yet almost magnetic: "Contempo-

rary space, however colorful and varied, lacks polarized tension as between the numinous and the quotidian. Contemporary life, however pleasant and exciting, moves on one plane—the plane encompassed by rational and humanist vision. Ecstasy and dread, the heights and the depths, the awesome and the transcendent rarely intrude on our lives and on our landscapes except under the influence of chemical stimulus. Along certain lines our world has contracted” (99). While Tuan’s statement encompasses the sterility and tedium of the modern suburb and the often tumultuous vibrancy of large cities, it neglects the sacred within the city—the roadside cross, the storefront shrine, the memorial mural.

Anthropologist Alan Morinis identifies pilgrimage sites as “divinely-infused ruptures in the continuous surface of the mundane, human social world” (1984, 281). Though his description is directed to pilgrimage in the Hindu tradition, it is equally applicable to the unexpected and perhaps disruptive nature of impromptu public memorials. In the cultivation of an active connection between site, marker, and memory, they combat more static memorials or what historian Pierre Nora has termed *lieux de mémoire*, “sites of memory”. These substitutes for actual “environments of memory,” include museum exhibits and festival presentations which “deritualize” (quoted in Kugelmass 1994, 180).

Sites of personal, local, national, and international importance are examples of sacred space, set apart from the quotidian and dedicated to commemoration. In reference to his conception of sanctification, Foote defines sacred spaces as places “that are publicly consecrated or widely venerated rather than those owned or maintained by a particular religious group,” further stipulating that “there must be a ceremony that includes an explicit statement of the site’s significance and an explanation of why the event should be remembered” (1997, 8). The recognition of roadside cross memorials as sacred space, however, whether temporary or permanent, can occur without formal marking or ceremony. State-

ments by area residents attest to the extraordinary character of these sites, and their varied roles in the memorialization of people and events.

Religious studies scholar Ian Reader, assessing conventional (e.g., Fatima, the Hajj, Lourdes) and unconventional (e.g., Graceland, Kent State, Dallas' infamous grassy knoll) pilgrimage, concludes, "[P]ilgrimage, in providing a means for uniting the living and the dead, offers the means for individual and social message to be relayed simultaneously without impairing, or bringing into conflict, their separate and multiple meanings" (1993, 21). So, too, roadside memorial markers offer a meeting place for communication, remembrance and reflection, separate from the "everyday." Embracing many voices, they may also represent the quiet acquiescence of civil authority, for in many states their mere existence violates official policy. The multivocality and cooperation embodied in each memorial, and the vernacular support that facilitates their existence, contributes to their dynamism and popularity. The survival of vernacular commemorative tradition, of which roadside crosses are a longstanding and integral part, involves the complex interplay of politics, culture, and belief.