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Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture

Everett, Holly

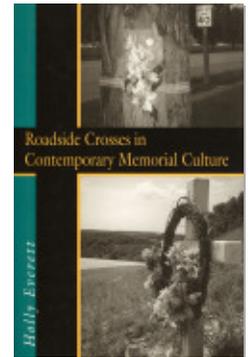
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CHAPTER FOUR



Bereavement Made Manifest

The communicative power that roadside crosses accrue as a result of the tension between private and public, and the recognition of “ordinary” lives and memories, results from contemporary responses to death in North American society. Many scholars and health care practitioners, such as Geoffrey Gorer (1965), Jack Kamerman (1988), Kathy Charmaz (1980), and Phyllis Silverman (1981) have studied such responses in North America and Britain. All note the increasing isolation of bereaved individuals and contributing societal conditions, such as the development, Kamerman writes, of “mechanisms . . . in American society to keep death out of sight and out of minds,” (1988, 2). Similarly, Charmaz refers to the “social construction of the denial of death” (1980, 88-96). Indeed, the contemporary experience of loss, even when documented almost four decades ago by Jessica Mitford in her oft-cited *The American Way of Death* (1963), frequently involves the medical establishment and the death care industry in processes that minimize contact between the deceased and her or his survivors.

Writing about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Hass outlines the way in which many contemporary Americans experience the death of a relative or friend: “The standard funeral . . . begins with death in a hospital and transportation of the body to a

funeral home. There the body is embalmed, dressed, and made up; this process is usually followed by a viewing of the body and a funeral service in the church of the deceased or at the funeral home. The service is most often followed by a smaller burial service at the cemetery” (1998, 76). In nineteenth century America, however, death often took place in the home, as did preparation for burial and visitation by the community. Nearby cemeteries further strengthened the immediacy of death in the sphere of everyday activity (Laderman 1996, 23-37). In the current context of bereavement, the home symbolizes seclusion and detachment from the everyday activity of the public sphere (Rosenblatt, Walsh and Jackson 1976, 46). Roadside crosses and memorial assemblages, by contrast, occupy a space in the *public* landscape, and imagination, in between the home and the often geographically removed modern cemetery. As revealed by my informants’ statements, many aspects of unofficial memorial maintenance are further indicative of their interstitial nature, as their continued existence exhibits a combination of tacit civic support and active community involvement.

The Art of Domestic Experience

Viewed as an extension of domestic activity, corollaries to the roadside cross tradition in Texas are observable in the complex of custom and practice that constitute Day of the Dead celebrations throughout Latin America and the United States.¹ Folk art historians Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer have studied traditional observances across Mexico. They found that women generally cook the majority of the food items placed on altars and left at the cemeteries. In those families who own bread ovens, the men of the household do the baking after the women have mixed the dough (1991, 18, 78). Freddy Méndez, a resident of La Congregación del Tajín in the state of Veracruz, for example, describes the way in which his mother prepares chocolate ornaments to adorn the house and especially the altar, as taught by her mother

and grandmother. Prior to the festival, women across Veracruz produce cooking utensils and incense burners in fired clay for use during the holiday.

I am particularly interested here in the pattern that emerges in the data collected by Carmichael and Sayer, which includes interviews with a number of artists and craftspeople across Mexico variously involved with the yearly observance, as well as an examination of historic travellers' accounts. In general, women are involved in the preparation of items for use inside the home, or at the cemetery. Men, however, are generally engaged in a different range of activities: reciting prayers for the dead (professional "prayer-makers," or *rezanderos*); going from house to house and singing *alabanzas* in groups of four; or performing as *Xantolo* dancers, sometimes dressed as women, in village streets (1991, plate 23A, 81-82).

The public/private, male/female dichotomy is echoed in the St. Joseph's Day activities of Italian-American women described by folklorists Kay Turner and Suzanne Seriff in their 1987 article "'Giving an Altar': The Ideology of Reproduction in a St. Joseph's Day Feast." The altars, cooperatively designed and constructed by women in a small Texas town, are assemblages which connect "sacred and secular realms by providing a locus of communication, a place for the performance of belief in the home" (448). Their manifest meaning is a tangible, edible thanks offered to Saint Joseph in return for succor in a time of family crisis such as illness, debt, or separation. The altar is laden with an abundance of special foods such as *cosi figli*, *cucchidagli* and *canoli*. The formal presentation of the altar occurs after a ritual reenactment of the biblical account of Joseph and Mary's arrival in Bethlehem, in which the Holy Family is played by community members chosen by the woman giving the altar. The reenactment ends with the ritual feasting of the actors and the community, at which time men serve the food prepared by the women.

While the Saint Joseph's Day preparations and presentations are not connected with death custom, the similarities between women's (and men's) creative labor for this and the customs previously described are notable as reflections of an ideology of reproduction. As conceived by Mary O'Brien, the "maternally derived ideology of reproduction foregrounds social practices based on affiliation, concern for others, sharing, caring, gifting, and religious beliefs" (Turner and Seriff 1987, 447; see also Turner 1999). Such practices certainly encompass the work and artistry evident in Day of the Dead home and cemetery decoration, the St. Joseph's Day traditions of Italian-American women and the memorialization of accident victims with roadside crosses as detailed here. Indeed, as Turner and Seriff assert, it is just such practices that ground the feminist ontology developed by Carolyn Whitbeck. Denouncing the necessity of the self-other opposition that pervades western, and largely patriarchal, scholarship, this ontology is defined as "the mutual realization of people" (Turner and Seriff 1997, 458). Whitbeck's examples include "nursing and caring for the sick, disabled and elderly, . . . counseling and various forms of spiritual practice" (1984, 75). While St. Joseph's Day traditions stem from the desire to acknowledge the saint's intervention in the past, the aforementioned death customs concern the immediate spiritual needs of grieving individuals and communities.

Personalized spiritual practice, when based and performed in the home, may also be viewed as vernacular religion (Primiano 1995, 44), or the "domestication of religion" (Sered 1988, 516). Both imply an active manipulation of religious tenets or iconography for highly personal use, and thus are closely related to materials or built environments studied by folklorists and others as examples of "vernacular architecture." Indeed, as folklorist Leonard Primiano states, "[T]he beliefs of individuals themselves radiate and influence the surrounding environments. The verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief mean a

variety of instruments and occasions of expressive culture which can be categorized under the rubric of visual or performed arts, public and private cultural performances, and individual acts. These would include but not necessarily be exhausted by the following: speech, music and song, dance, mime, ritual and drama, bodily communication, the manifold uses of writing, foodways, costume, culturally encoded architecture, and *the permanent and ephemeral objects within domestic and public environments*” [emphasis added] (44-45). Moreover, Primiano recognizes the presence of the vernacular not only in the domestic, which often assumes a degree of privacy, but in the public sphere as well.

Correspondingly, it is the ephemeral aspects and objects of built environments that historian Angela Kwolek-Folland singles out for attention in gendered analyses of vernacular architecture. She writes that “many contributions to vernacular architecture are ephemeral, a fact particularly true in the case of women. In our historical experience of gender, the trappings and interior decorations of buildings, some of which are seasonal, are important to the meaning and experience of vernacular space” (1995, 6). Certainly the extension of the scope must also include, in the case of material culture studies, the ephemeral in more public settings, specifically the ways in which women and men (re)create and (re)present various events and ideas in ritual altars, yard art, shrines, and memorials.²

Analytical Intersections

Excessive speed may have been a factor in the accident that killed Shilah Lamay’s daughter, Heather, and Bowie High School classmate Lisa Wendenburg in 1996. Lisa was driving the car when she apparently lost control of the vehicle. It crossed the center line of Manchaca Road, and hit another car. Heather, who was in the passenger seat, died at the scene. Lisa died the following day (Hoppe and Gonzalez 1996). Shilah said, “they were killed Saturday afternoon, Saturday night there was a cross put up, made

by the kids that night.” The two crosses, one for Heather and one for Lisa, no longer stand at the accident site, due to a road-widening project. At the request of the Texas Department of Transportation, Shilah and her husband, John, first moved the assemblage back a few yards, to the fence line of the nearest property owner. Later they removed the crosses as well, leaving a granite piece bearing an etching of the two women, and a wreath. Shortly before I interviewed Shilah in May 1997, they removed the granite and wreath in preparation for a move to another state.

Shilah identified a classmate and friend of the two young women as the driving force behind the memorial. She said, “There were two temporary crosses that the kids wrote all over. And basically what they wrote on those crosses was all goodbye notes, and we have one of those crosses. I mean we took those down simply because they were not going to last. Her best friend is the one . . . they made a cement cross and it had the girls’ names on it, and that’s, you know, they put that up and put a heart around it. They did all that. We didn’t have a thing to do with it. What we did do, though, at the site, was we had two, a granite picture made with just the girls’ picture on it.” Shilah’s reference to the “heart around it,” concerns the heart-shaped border, fashioned out of nearby rocks, laid around the white, cement cross. The east-facing memorial, constructed at the spot where Lisa’s car came to rest, quickly became a gathering place for Lisa and Heather’s friends.

Local teacher Linda Boyd spoke of seeing groups of teenagers at the memorial for several weeks after the accident, as she drove home from work in the afternoon. Area teenagers reported seeing offerings such as beer bottles and coins at the site. When I asked Shilah about items left there, she said, “Yeah, there were coins. They would leave cigarettes. . . . Of course, they’ve always left flowers. I would go every once in a while and see a single rose. We had “The Rose,” that song, sung [for Heather], and my husband had sent her a dozen red roses the day before at school,

and so the rose, anything with rose has always [been] pretty special . . . I notice that if it's kids who are leaving something for Heather, they'll usually leave a rose, you know." Items were left at the site up until the time that the cross was removed. In addition, the teens planted a small flower bed, also bordered by rocks.

Shilah emphasized the fact that the memorial was the kids' enterprise in statements such as: "Essentially . . . that was unrelated to us. I mean, we did not have anything to do with it." However, her comments also revealed that she and her husband spent a great deal of time visiting the site in an effort to show support for the victims' friends. In keeping with Mary O'Brien's ideology of reproduction (1981), Shilah and John showed concern for the teenagers in a time of crisis for all involved. John was especially worried about the reaction of Lisa and Heather's friends. Shilah explained, "My husband was, more so than me, he was very concerned about making sure that some of these kids, they had lost two friends earlier in the year, and so he was more concerned, 'I don't want these kids, somebody to, you know, to try to commit suicide.' So we went there, and spent two nights with the kids. We went on Monday night right after she was killed and I believe it was Tuesday night we stopped by." Although the cross, as a symbol, was not important to the Lamays, they considered it essential to be present at the memorial for the emotional well-being of the young people gathering there.

Bowie students lost another classmate in May of 1997, in the one-car wreck that claimed the life of Heather Werchan. Like the memorial for Lamay and Wendenburg, the large cross on Slaughter Lane bearing Heather's name was constructed and installed by classmates rather than by family members. Her father, James, said, "As far as Heather's, it never, we had never thought about it . . . her friends that she ran around with, she dated two boys in that group. And they were good friends. They were the ones that actually, together they put the cross up. They decided to put the cross up and it was, I guess it was probably about a week after the

accident or after the funeral that they put it up. They decided to put it up.”

The Werchans were not upset by the young men’s decision to memorialize Heather publicly. Moreover, he and his wife, Ruby, assumed care of certain aspects of the site. In addition to changing the floral displays seasonally, James explained that, “It’s a grass median. There’s a wide median there. And I mow the grass, you know, on the other side of the tree and a pretty good ways back away from the cross toward Bowie [High School]. So I keep it looking nice and maintain it.” Ordinarily, city crews mow such medians. As James reveals here, not only have Heather’s family and friends utilized city property for her memorial, they have also taken over its maintenance.

The Werchan family now finds the cross a consoling presence. As lifelong Lutherans, they are comfortable with the cross’s symbolism. In contrast, Shilah thinks that the cross, as a Christian symbol, was not particularly meaningful to Heather and Lisa’s friends. When I asked if those who had constructed and visited it were practicing Christians, Shilah laughed and said, “Very definitely not. Very definitely not her friends, you know. No. . . . I don’t think the cross itself from a Christian standpoint has any significance to these kids. I think they see it more as a memorial, yeah. And see, even for us, from our perspective, a cross to me is, it can easily be an idol . . . to me the spiritual part of this is something inside of us. I don’t see it as things from the outside. And so for us that’s why, in a sense even though we may be Christians, the cross isn’t necessarily a form of any meaning to me at a personal level. But, no, definitely . . . based on a few of the other people I know, it doesn’t seem to be related at all to kids who tend to be Christians.”

Even in light of their views about the cross and its place in her family’s beliefs, she and John wanted to support the young people in the maintenance of the assemblage. Their relationship with Heather and Lisa’s friends may be understood as mutually

achieved, rather than oppositional, or self-other (Whitbeck 1984). The teens' use of a symbol which holds little meaning for Shilah and John, and perhaps negligible meaning for themselves in Shilah's assessment, did not preclude cooperative participation in the construction of the memorial. Indeed, Shilah and John's informal counsel of the teens, which I interpret as reproductive labor, extended beyond participation in the memorial to their home. As Shilah explained, even after she felt that her family was ready to "move on," grieving youths continued to stop by their house.

Further, Shilah considered the concern for the teenagers' emotional well-being to be more her husband's than her own. She stated that, "Even after [Heather] was killed, I tended to focus in more on my three kids, whereas my husband . . . also kind of included the other kids, you know, her friends." Nonetheless, she went with him to visit the memorial in the days following the accident, and on subsequent occasions such as the first anniversary of Heather's death.

Likewise, the anniversary visit to the accident site was made, at least in part, in response to the needs of someone other than herself. Shilah commented, "Well, this last January was the year anniversary. And I said to John, 'I just really feel like I want something there on that year anniversary.' Because it was blank. So, I had a little wreath made and then, kind of cowboy-like, and it said 'In Loving Memory of Heather and Lisa' and then we put the girls', the little granite piece back up. . . . We had a lot of things going on that day, but we just felt like we wanted to put something so it wasn't just blank on the anniversary. And, it was just a way of us knowing we remembered her, you know. And I think a lot of kids were calling us at that time and asking us, you know, where the stuff was and if it was going to be able to go back in."

Shilah and John, in their participation in the roadside memorial, took roles as caretakers of both womens' memories. Lisa's family

was not involved in the construction or maintenance of the site. The granite piece depicting both women was ordered and installed at the site by the Lamays, as was the wreath Shilah had made a year later. Thus, the Lamays labored not only to preserve the memory of both their daughter and her friend, but to support the friends they left behind. Shilah made all concerns her own.

Her attention to the accident site, evident in her desire that it not be “blank” on the anniversary, was echoed in comments made by Heather Werchan’s father, James, and Nathan Crane’s mother, Susan. In all three accidents, the driver lost control of the vehicle, and in the case of Werchan and Crane, the cars collided with trees. Marking the accident site, therefore, entails the public recognition of responsibility to no small degree. The cross for Heather was made by two friends, one of whom, Christopher Johnston, was driving the car at the time of the accident. Regardless of the cross’s origin, Werchan knows that “one way or another we would still go down that road. And it’s always nice and comforting to see that there.” Elaborating further, he stressed the significance, both positive and negative, of the site, “You know, we’d never want to forget about her. So, you know, just because that’s there we wouldn’t, if it wasn’t there we wouldn’t forget about her anyway. But it’s just a nice tribute to her. And even though, unfortunately, it had to happen. But it was her time to go home anyway, to see her heavenly father.”

James understands Heather’s death as ultimately purposeful. Therefore, the responsibility for the accident rests with God, rather than with Johnston. Christopher and his mother also help decorate and maintain the memorial site. James said, “[S]he just replaced the letters. They were, I think they were dark green letters, I think, before. Now they’re yellow and she painted flowers on them. And she planted, they planted a little miniature rose shrub next to it also.” Caring for the site—constructing its meaning and thus the meaning of the accident—also involves the construction and negotiation of role and responsibility.

Margie believes that because the circumstances of the accident that killed Tammy, Nathan, and Jeff were somewhat mysterious, it was predestined. Noting that there were no other cars involved and no witnesses came forward, she said, “God had a certain amount of days for Tammy. She was in heaven the instant she died.” While authorities maintain that Tammy was speeding when she lost control of the vehicle, Margie says she knows “that isn’t true.” During our conversation, she stressed Tammy’s driving skills, the fact that she had taken driving lessons and that she was the best driver of all Margie’s children, regardless of what I or others might have read in the newspaper.

As Margie continues to struggle with the circumstances of her daughter’s unexpected death, she also grapples with the knowledge that two other youths (Nathan and Jeff) died in the accident. She stated that Nathan’s mother, Susan, has continued to be friendly toward the Franklin family since the accident, alluding to the fact that Susan does not openly blame Tammy or her family for Nathan’s death. Both Susan and Margie, however, mentioned that Jeff’s mother reacted rather more negatively.

In the course of our discussion about the memorial for Tammy, Jeff, and Nathan on Guadalupe Street, Susan Crane said, “I wanted something there that was a connection. I didn’t want it to be just a lost place. To me that was not, it is a place of violence, but it was not, to me it was more of a, well like I said the last place where I feel like the spirit was last. It’s not, I mean, I don’t think Jeff’s mother, I think that she was very angry about it. So that I know that would not be a place of endearment for her. You know, and I, to say endearment is a horrible word, because a place of a death is not an endearing place.” Regardless of the circumstances of her son’s death, Susan wished to mark the spot for herself as the teenagers’ friends first had. At the same time, she helped provide a place for the school community to grieve.³

The site is approximately two miles from the school that the three teenagers attended, a private, religious institution that at-

tracts students from across the city. Like the Lamays, Susan worried about the emotional impact of the fatalities on the student body at large, saying, “I guess one other thing that that cross does, is it, well I’ve already mentioned that, but to me, it was traumatic for me. And I knew that it was for those kids at school and a lot of things that I did, not only were for me, but I wanted to do them for the kids at school. Because I wanted them to have a way to deal with it.” Susan did not have a partner at the time of Nathan’s death; however, dealing with the tragedy was far from a solitary endeavor.

Although Susan and Margie often redecorate their parts of the memorial independently, their labor, or “grief work” applies to the school community at large.⁴ Both women believed it important to include the tree that was struck in the assemblage. Susan explained, “You know, since that was the scene of the accident and the tree that’s there, if you notice the tree the bark is off. And that was from the accident. In the photo that I have of the wreck that was in the paper . . . you can see the different kind of things there. They had the IVs and things for the children while they were trying to get the jaws of life to get them out. They had that hanging from the tree, and I know a lot of the kids went there or were aware of that. So I think that a lot of them went there to deal with the emotions that they had.” While Susan admits that it was a traumatic time for her, she reveals that she was thinking about the accident victims’ friends as well—what they had seen or heard, and how they might have been affected. She recognized their need to grieve and attempted to address it through the transformation of the accident site into a memorial.

Similarly, Vicki Biggs believes the memorial constructed at the scene of her daughter Tara’s accident to be an important place for the entire community. It plays an integral part in the grieving process, she noted, saying, “I think it’s a big part of the process for people. . . . what it does is give people—kids, adults, what-

ever—a place to go. . . [Tara’s] friends tell me all the time that when they’re feeling down or they’ve got a problem or whatever that they’ll go up there and sit at the cross. And then they’ll feel better when they leave. So I feel like to them it’s, it’s a place to go, someplace that they feel like Tara’s still there, you know, and I, it’s hard to explain.”

The cross was cooperatively constructed, and still bears the imprint of many hands—the notes from Cara, the plaque that reads “We love and miss you.” Vicki has taken over most of the responsibility for the maintenance of the assemblage now, and said that she and her husband, Ronnie, and her daughter, Crystal, decorate more at the cross than at the cemetery.⁵

Tara’s classmates continue to contribute to the site, as well. Vicki told me, “That cross, up there, really means a lot to the kids. The kids go up there a lot. When it’s holidays, or it’s anniversaries, or, it’s just like here at Christmas. I went up there and put poinsettias out, and decorated it, you know, for the holidays, for Christmas and put a candy cane, and this and that. Well, I had several people calling me wanting to do something. One of her best friends went up and put garland, you know, around the cross, and another one came up and brought a little angel.”

Additionally, her commitment to the public nature of the assemblage is such that she has not been troubled when something has been taken away. She said, “The only thing that ever happened, and I think—’cause during football season each year, the Cavalette moms do mums for all the Cavalettes.⁶ And they’re all alike and everything, so we always do one for Tara and hang it on the cross. And then I always bring it back home and then Crystal keeps it as a keepsake and stuff. And when I went up there to get it, it was gone. Somebody had taken it. But nothing else was touched. So I really feel like somebody took it that knew Tara. That it wasn’t stealing it, they really wanted it as a keepsake for them. Other than that, no one’s ever touched anything up there, which makes me happy as can be.”

The act of taking a memento from the cross is in agreement with Vicki's conception of the site, even if an item is removed anonymously. She understands it to be a place where many people go to feel close to Tara, saying "I've driven by and seen cars stopped there and some of the kids up there, or, they tell me all the time, like, one of her friends, Jamie, she says she goes up there and talks to her all the time. She said, you know, anything big going on in her life and she goes up there and asks her to be her guardian angel and to pray for her and make, help her get through it, or whatever. They kind of use that as, everybody . . . that knew Tara, that were close to Tara, which was a lot of people!" Her efforts to maintain the memorial emphasize her acknowledgment of the community's participation in her grieving process, and she in theirs, a mutual realization that honors the needs of bereaved individuals and groups, such as Tara's dance team, the Cavalettes. The Werchans understand Heather's memorial similarly. James has noted that although the site has never been disturbed, nor have items been taken away, he regularly finds other offerings.

The seasonal, or event-centred nature of the decorating that is done at roadside memorials—such as placing a custom-made homecoming mum at a cross during football season—underscores the transitory nature of the assemblages, as does the very real threat of destruction due to roadway construction, safety considerations, or vandalism.⁷ Moreover, the ephemeral nature of the memorial sites facilitates participation. As noted by folklorists Turner and Jasper with regard to Day of the Dead grave site decoration customs in Texas, ". . . participants in the tradition know that their offerings inevitably will be consumed by time and nature. Someone who buys an impermanent product will have reason to return . . ." (1994, 145). The maintenance of an outdoor memorial assemblage, including items such as fresh and artificial flowers, stuffed animals, and notes, necessitates regular attention. Thus the memorials represent the construction and consumption

of memory, while simultaneously acting as a reflection of the attendants' own lives.

Religious beliefs are bound up in the expressions of everyday life—a white cross, facing east, adorned with plastic beads, or a note from a friend. While Shilah may question the value of the cross in her spiritual practice and those of her daughter's friends, James, Margie, Susan, and Vicki embrace the cross as a symbol of hope. Tara's grave site at a non-denominational cemetery happened to be in the shadow of a white, fifteen-foot-high cross. Vicki explained that she and her husband had not previously known where Tara would be buried, as they had purchased the family plots some years earlier. When they went to see the site, following the accident, Vicki asked to see the plot. She said, "And so they took us out there, and I went, 'What more appropriate?' I mean, she's buried right there below that big cross. And I was like, 'Wow!'" Although, as Vicki says, her family is not "very, very, very religious," they hold firm Christian beliefs. Elaborating, she said, "We do go to church. We don't go to church every Sunday. We believe, you know, that you don't necessarily have to go to church to believe and to be a Christian. Yes, you should be [laughs], but with our lives . . . we make excuses. But we, we're very religious and we believe that Tara's in heaven and we're going to see her. One of these days." The cross, and the decorating that accompanies it, has become an integral part of Vicki's expression of spiritual convictions.

The cross constructed for Tammy, Jeffrey, and Nathan is viewed similarly by Margie Franklin and Susan Crane. Susan wanted the cross to face east, "because Jesus will come back in the east." Additionally, in Christian belief the cross signifies death-as-transition. Susan explained, "I'm Baptist, because of the fact that I believe in, in when you die you go straight to heaven, somehow or another the cemetery did not hold anything for me. I mean, I do flowers at the cemetery also, but . . . to me, the last place that Nathan was was at that tree. You know, that was, the symbolism is

there and even though I go to the cemetery, I don't, it didn't seem like that was where I was drawn because he's not really at the cemetery. For some reason or another this location is where he was, so I would go there and I wanted to put a cross there because that was where I went the most. And so I guess the symbolism is that that's kind of where I felt his spirit was last." In accordance with her religious beliefs, Susan views the accident site, marked with the cross, as more hopeful and comforting than the cemetery. Like Susan, Margie feels connected to the accident site because it was where her daughter was last alive on this earth. She said, "that's where everything ended and began."

Margie attributes her continuing desire to maintain the site to her gender, saying "I know it has a lot to do with being a woman, [you want to] make sure everything's in order." Susan, especially, has taken great care with the decorating, even going so far as to make arrangements with someone else to change the flowers when she has been unable to do it: "I'm in the process now, once it gets a little enough away from Christmas, I'm going to do the January flowers. Of course, I'm fixing to go into the Valentine's Day flowers. I have been doing seasons. Each of the holidays and things like that. There's been a time or two when I've been out of town and I've put something there and it kind of disappeared right away, or something like that, or I thought someone, I was going to have someone else do it for me and they either didn't get there or whatever . . . if I could not go there, then I had arranged for someone else to take it over there for me, if I was out of town." Every time she changes the flowers at the cross, she tries to change them at the cemetery as well.

Margie, Susan, James, and Shilah all spoke of cleaning or reorganizing the assemblages. Susan said, "You know, the flowers have been—one time, one Christmas several years back, the flowers and things that are there, someone threw them everywhere, the little tree and everything that I'd put. They were, I couldn't find them, I had to start all over and finally I found them. And occa-

sionally, I found them off in the bushes where they used to have trash there. And occasionally the grounds keepers would find things and bring them back and put them over there for me.” James and his wife, Ruby, have assumed care of certain aspects of Heather’s memorial as well. In addition to changing the floral displays seasonally, James mows the grass in the median, a task he has apparently taken over from city maintenance crews. Shilah and her husband regularly checked the site of Heather and Lisa’s cross for refuse. Shilah explained, “We asked the kids, I said, ‘Please keep the trash, you know?’ Lot of smokers. . . . so we would, my husband and I, one of us would kind of try to like, on a weekly basis, you know, stop by and make sure that things were kept clean.” Labor included not only providing decorative elements, but maintaining the overall orderliness of the memorial site, as one might straighten up one’s own home or yard.

Folklorist Grey Gundaker, in a study of Halloween and other decorations in an Alabama cemetery, writes that the life and death symbolism of the holiday, together with the traditional images (angels, praying hands, lambs) found in graveyards, helps “construct interlocking worlds and open lines of communication for the living, the dead, and the spirits in between” (1994, 263).⁸ Displays more often associated with home and yard adornment, she asserts, allow bereaved individuals to incorporate the dead into the world of the living, and vice versa—a function also performed by roadside memorial assemblages. Changing the flowers, seasonal items and even the figurines or photos left at memorial crosses keeps the memory of loved ones highly accessible and vital.

Grief Work

In a quantitative study of seventy-eight cultures, Paul Rosenblatt, Patricia Walsh, and Douglas Jackson documented emotional responses to death, including crying, anger, self-mutilation, aggression toward others, and fear (e.g., fear of a corpse,

fear of ghosts). Their survey, which included groups as far-flung as Thai villagers, Pawnees, Trobrianders and Egyptian Fellahins, did not produce results as disparate as one might expect. In fact, the trio's work serves as confirmation of certain gender stereotypes: women tend to cry more frequently, while men more often express themselves through anger and aggression (1976, 144-46). Also noted are various tie-breaking rituals of "destroying, giving away, or temporarily putting aside personal property of the deceased" (68). What the authors do not address, however, are ways in which grief manifests itself in the *production* (or offering) of material goods.

Items left at civil structures like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, altars such as those connected with Day of the Dead celebrations, and roadside memorial assemblages materially express profound feelings of loss and remembrance. The remembrances speak not only to the creator(s) of the assemblage, but to family and friends, and often to the wider community.

Thanatologist Phyllis Silverman, in a study of widows, battered women, and young birthmothers who have given their children up for adoption, attributes the severe and often debilitating depression experienced by women in mourning to the inability of western society to acknowledge and support the bereaved. Grieving women, Silverman believes, suffer a double loss, losing the part of their identity based on their relationship with the deceased, and societal support at the same time (1981, 23). The key is to develop a new identity as part of the grieving process (Kammerman 1988, 72). According to psychologist Erich Lindeman, the timely completion of grief work results in "emancipation from the bondage to the deceased, readjustment to the environment in which the deceased is missing, and the formation of new relationships" (qtd. in Kamerman: 66). The work of those who have lost someone unexpectedly, however, is often rendered especially difficult (Charmaz 1980, 142, 289-291). Kamerman links the inability of many bereaved individuals to accomplish meaningful grief work

to the paucity of meaningful death-related rituals available in the western context.

His statements reiterate the pleas of Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson for either the ritualization of death customs already practiced to some degree in the United States, or more widespread acceptance of the rituals, whether grounded in formal religious or civil culture or not, that individuals and groups have developed for themselves in order to work through loss in a more timely and successful fashion (1976, 109-11). It may be, though, that the lack of codified mourning rituals in North American society bemoaned by psychologists and sociologists has left individuals cultural space in which to fashion their own.⁹ An increasing number of individuals, women and men, in Austin have adapted and reshaped a custom with roots in the European conquest of the Americas into an extension of the reproductive labor they are accustomed to performing in and around the home.

In south Texas, Turner and Jasper have found that Day of the Dead activities center on cemetery cleaning and decoration, which clearly “demarcate the difference between the living and the dead” (1994, 140). The authors stress the social impulse anchoring the annual event in community practice. While the dead are remembered and honored, so too are extant community ties between family and friends reaffirmed. In their self-assigned grief work, the individuals I interviewed have engaged in an analogous process of reifying relationships and personal convictions—acts of regeneration (Turner and Jasper 1994, 149). The construction and maintenance of memorial assemblages has allowed them to incorporate their memories of, and abiding affection for, their loved ones into the everyday life of their families (Zimmerman 1997, 5). Simultaneously, they have sustained the community ties the deceased may have had in life by (re)creating a public site which friends may visit anonymously and quickly, by simply driving past.

As memorials, roadside crosses are symbolically representative of on-going grief work. In contrast to the successful grieving pro-

cess envisioned by Kamerman, Lindemann, and others, however, they do not always reach a state of closure. This is not to say the assemblages, or those who create them, have been unsuccessful, or failed in any sense. As Silverman writes, “The past is not cut out of the person’s life and renounced, but rather the person changes [their] relationship to it. The gap between the past life and the future life is bridged more easily when elements of the past are incorporated into the present, but with an altered emphasis” (1981, 28). Indeed, the memorials depict a more fluid understanding of life, death and the respective role of memory in shaping both spatial and temporal experience. Vicki estimates that she drives past Tara’s cross an average of ten times as she goes about her daily routine, saying, “But I go by there so much, now, that, you know, I just—I know this is going to sound silly, but as I go by, I go, ‘Hi, sweetie!’ And I just keep on driving. So, you know, no, it doesn’t bother me, I guess. I guess, in a way, it makes me feel better. Makes me feel closer to her because she’s, she’s out here.” Tara is still an important part of Vicki’s life.