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Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture

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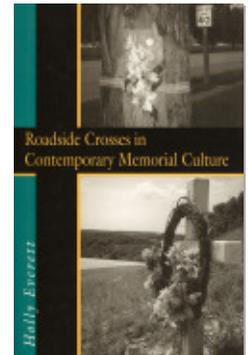
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CHAPTER FIVE



Cross Connections, Social Meanings

Folklorists such as William Bascom have emphasized the integrative functions of traditional culture—validation, the maintenance of conformity, education, and entertainment. In addition, many folkloric forms, such as roadside crosses, function as agents of economic integration and social levelling. It is important to note, however, the non-integrative, or subversive consequences of traditional culture as well.¹ It is precisely in such *counter-hegemonic* expression that grieving individuals often find voice. Thus, roadside cross assemblages require a modified functionalist analysis.

The following discussion is primarily based on data obtained from questionnaires I administered to approximately one hundred high school seniors.² Additionally, I drew from interviews with individuals connected to and employed by city, county, and state governmental entities, as well as a random sampling of area residents. The analysis also incorporates the words and ideas of individuals introduced in the third and fourth chapters.

Validation and Conformity

The crosses “perform” the function of validation in their public representation of generally accepted, or at least tolerated religious belief. As noted in chapter two, Travis County’s largest religious group consists of adherents to Roman Catholicism, at 48.4% of the total population (Ramos 1997, 489). Christian be-

lief and its general acceptance by area residents are manifest in the proliferation of religious symbols such as roadside crosses. The fact that they are infrequently vandalized is further evidence of tacit approval.³ Interestingly, however, only a small number of questionnaire respondents cited religious belief in their assessments of the crosses.

Some of these include high school student Jenny Stinson, who wrote that the crosses “remind me that I could die in a heartbeat and I have to be in the right standing with the Lord.” Another student noted seeing “crosses signifying that the person was or is Christian.” One individual defined roadside memorials as “a white cross with usually flowers or a picture of Jesus.”

More explicit statements of personal belief came from a student who wrote that she contributes prayers to such sites. Another stated that “when I pass a marker that I know something about, I usually say a quick little prayer of friendship.” Debbie Wimberly, a friend of Heather Lamay and Lisa Wendenburg’s, wrote “When I pass the site I turn off the radio and remember Lisa and Heather with a prayer” (1997a). Interviewed by phone, she elaborated, saying that she also prays “for everybody to watch after everybody else” (1997b). For Debbie, Jenny, and the other teenagers quoted above, the crosses function similarly to the *descansos* and traveler’s shrines described by Barrera, Griffith, Henzel, and West, as special places at which one may offer prayers not only for the deceased, but for the living as well, regardless of denominational affiliation.

American civil religion underlies the broad, tacit acceptance and validation of Christian belief as evidenced by the custom of erecting roadside crosses. While they may not represent the exact beliefs associated with their origins in Mexico and the American southwest (e.g., persons dying suddenly without the benefit of last rites require assistance, in the form of prayers, in order to find peace after death), those expressed by my informants are all basic to various Christian doctrines.

Conformity to the beliefs associated with roadside crosses, as well as adherence to traditional commemorative aesthetics, inform and regularize memorial design (Barrera 1991, 279-80; McDannell 1995, 120-123). As documented here, the most common roadside memorial in the Austin area consists of a wooden cross, painted white, with some form of identifying lettering at the crosspiece. The crosses are often accompanied by bouquets of silk flowers. Not surprisingly, questionnaire respondents and other informants frequently noted the pattern, writing “I see many small white crosses usually with flowers.” One student compared markers in Austin with others s/he has seen in Mexico: “Most of the markings I’ve seen consist of crosses decorated with flowers and religious pictures. I’ve also seen small chapel-like structures in Mexico which have a gate that open so that you can put gifts inside.” Another student described those she saw most often, along with variations, “They are white crosses about two to three feet high. They usually have [plastic] flowers around them or on them, and sometimes even stuffed animals or letters or dedications on them.”

Contributing decorative or personally meaningful items to the assemblages is another aspect of the custom. Several questionnaire respondents outlined their own participation, writing that they, or friends of theirs, had given money toward the cost of a cross or plaque, or left bouquets of flowers, candles, stuffed animals, or other toys at various sites. One student stated that she “wrote a little message on the cross” erected for Heather Lamay and Lisa Wendenburg. Debbie Wimberly recalled that friends of Heather’s once took a case of beer to the cross, and would sometimes drink half of one and pour the rest on the ground.⁴

Education

Certainly roadside crosses perform an educational role, serving as powerful, indexical signs of tragedy which emphasize the hazards of routine vehicular travel. Their presence on city streets

travelled by thousands every day underscores the danger that a society enamored of automobiles tends to disregard in favor of cars as symbols of “freedom and independence” (Steinhart 1983, 346). The intersection that now features a memorial for Tara Biggs was known throughout the community as a dangerous one for years prior to the accident that killed her. When I asked Vicki Biggs if she and Tara’s friends think of the cross as a warning, she replied, “It was so funny because after the accident happened, that cross was there, kids and parents would come up and say they would automatically slow down, every time, when they got to that spot. Not only because they wanted to see her cross, but because it was a warning.”

Vicki finds comfort in the fact that Tara’s cross may remind people to proceed through the intersection more cautiously. Whereas the cross’s initial purpose was to memorialize Tara, it became an important, informal road sign. Later in the interview, Vicki said, “You know, when something first happens, everybody is just really, you know, ‘I’m never gonna speed, I’m never gonna do this, I’m not gonna do that, I’m gonna pay attention, I’m gonna’—but then, as time goes along, you start getting back into your old habits and going right back into, you know, being reckless and thinking you’re invincible. And, it, I think it helps to bring that back to them. Every time they pass there they see that cross and realize ‘I’m not invincible, I do need to take care of myself.’ And if, there was a lot of positives that came from that, and those are a few of those positives, that as long as they continue to do that, then I mean, there’s a meaning behind everything that happens.” Viewing the crosses as cautionary and potentially life-saving helps those who have lost a loved one in a fatal collision locate meaning in an otherwise senseless death.

Shilah Lamay considers the element of warning an important part of the custom of erecting roadside crosses, and acknowledges that it was a factor in her response to the cross constructed for her daughter, Heather. She said, “I think sometimes too, some people

put them up because they think, ‘will it make somebody slow down, will it make somebody think before they go around that corner too fast?’ Now in our case, that’s a part of it.”

Although they did not participate in the construction of the original crosses erected for Heather and her friend Lisa, Shilah and her husband came to value the memorial’s educational, as well as its emotional value. Similarly, James Werchan said, “[H]aving it there is really good. You know, because it is a reminder for two things. Of Heather, of course, and the other is for people just to slow down and be more cautious, too, of people that are dying because of traffic accidents.” He regards his daughter Heather’s cross as both a memorial and a lesson.

Margie Franklin also expressed the hope that the cross for her daughter, Tammy, and her friends on Guadalupe Street will always be a “reminder to people to be careful.” Although it was not an integral part of her desire to erect a cross, Susan Crane now considers the cross to be a warning as well as a tribute. She said, “[I]t immortalizes them, so that they, even though you know that they’re not in your life anymore, nobody’s going to forget them. And, possibly, I think, and of course a lot of the crosses are DWI crosses. But even still sometimes a cross, and people, you know, like these they said, ‘Why do you have this ‘Ice on the Bridge’ sign, when you haven’t had ice here? And they said, ‘So that you’ll be aware of it.’ But a lot of times, by having it there, you take it for granted. But, a lot of times, too, a lot of people have told me ‘when I see that, I always say a prayer for my children,’ or for such and such children, or for the children, you know. It reminds them that, you know, that you have to be safe when you’re driving.” Susan recognizes that while they may also be read as cautionary, the roadside memorials speak in a markedly different way than official highway signage, inspiring emotional as well as intellectual responses.

Passersby draw their own conclusions regarding the message of a given marker. Questionnaire respondents who did note reac-

tions to the memorials wrote that the crosses reminded them to “slow down,” “drive safely,” or “to be a careful driver.” One discussed “the decline of responsibility when it comes to drivers” and wondered “what happened; if it was anyone’s fault; if it could have been avoided.” “[Seeing a roadside cross] makes me more alert when driving because obviously someone else wasn’t,” wrote another student. A similar sentiment was expressed by the statement “I get depressed because it’s hard to believe how careless some drivers can be and also how careless people walking or whatever can be.” Here, the writer extends responsibility for traffic safety to pedestrians and perhaps bicyclists. Further, to some respondents the crosses suggest the need for civic action, such as the woman who discussed the Jacorey Williams accident with her mother: “She [mother] thought it was sad and thinks the bus ought to stop on the other side of the road since that’s where the apartments are.”

Student Maegan Wheeler lost a relative to a traffic accident. As a result, she feels “weird” when passing any roadside cross, she says, because, “I mean, I’ve had someone in my family die in a car wreck. And it’s such a big deal to you and your family. But then, like, after it’s over and you know . . . everything’s cleaned up and all you see is that cross. Anybody else driving along, it’s like, ‘Oh, there’s just a cross.’ It’s so weird that it can mean so little to one person, and so much to . . . a whole family of the person that died.” Although a cross was not erected at the site of the accident in which her relative was killed, Maegan thinks such memorials are a good idea. “I think it is, because it makes you think about it. And also, when people are driving they see them. I think it kind of makes me, like, be careful. I think, okay, someone died there and it’s kind of dangerous. Because I know there’s one . . . down Manchaca, that two girls had just gotten their drivers’ licenses. And there was, like, a curve and they wrecked because she was trying to change the radio station at the same time as she was driving. And, whenever I go around that curve now I’m really

careful.” Further, Maegan believes that newer drivers—as opposed to cyclists, more experienced motorists, or people who travel mainly by public transport—pay more attention to roadside crosses, especially those memorializing young people.

The crosses also denote dangerous driving conditions or topographical features. In addition to crosses, one student recalled seeing actual “warning signs done by the mom, dad, or friend,” while another wrote, “I’m a little more cautious at these intersections and curves, I also tend to avoid them because I realize they are dangerous.” Here the crosses are read as overtly cautionary.

Diversion

While serving as stark advisories, roadside crosses simultaneously provide a somewhat paradoxical diversion from the tedium of routine travel, provoking a range of emotive responses from compassion to anger. Not surprisingly, many informants reported feeling sad at the sight of a cross by the road. Others noted sympathy for those dealing with a sudden death. Hannah Day wrote, “I tend to wonder what happened, who it was—did I ever see them in the store or did they wait on me in a restaurant?” Like several other respondents, Hannah speculates about the people represented by the crosses.

For a number of students, the crosses and the deaths they signify stimulate perhaps their first thoughts about the nature of death and their own mortality, as the person who wrote, “It gives me a weird feeling to think that at one time someone died right there, and now everyone just goes on with their business like nothing ever happened.” Similarly, another respondent was “sad, gloomy” to “realize that everyone is going on happily living while everyone who knew the person [who died] in the accident is dying inside.”

One student recounted seeing someone at the cross on Stassney Lane, “I saw this grown man kneeling next to the flowers and the toys, and he was crying. It was raining hard but he stayed there

crying and he put a new toy down and left. My heart went out to him and the little boy that died.” While many students expressed similarly empathetic feelings toward the family and friends of the deceased, one woman, who had recently lost three friends in two separate accidents, wrote that she also feels sad for the “person(s) who made the accident happen” upon seeing a cross.

Another young woman stated, “If I see them, it kind of scares me. It could have been me just as easily. A lot of them were my age,” while another responded that “It makes me wonder if that could ever happen to me or someone I love.” Still another student stated that seeing them caused her to realize that she was lucky to be alive.

The reactions of individuals who have lost a friend or family member also involve memories of the accident or of their deceased loved one. “Sometimes I get sad and sometimes I get angry and other times I feel happy ’cause that is how I can remember people and also it makes me think about my life and that I don’t want to die in an accident.” Following the death of her boyfriend’s brother in an auto accident, one woman stated that every time she sees a roadside cross, she is reminded of him. A student who witnessed the accident that killed Jacorey Williams wrote that upon seeing Jacorey’s cross, s/he sometimes cries. Another witness, describing her reaction, stated, “I get a flashback of seeing his little body laying in the middle of the road. I remember the sadness that I felt and that my classmates felt as we stood ten feet from them [emergency medical technicians] working on him.” In a moment, the crosses transport viewers from the mundane to the numinous through tangible memory.

Economic Integration and Social Levelling

The memorial aesthetic reflects economic integration and social levelling in both the decorative choices of assemblage construction and maintenance of the site. Whereas a cemetery may display an array of construction and decorative materials, from

crudely fashioned crosses and plaques to elaborately detailed granite headstones, the range of materials utilized in the construction of roadside crosses is generally limited to wood and metal. Objects commonly left at these memorial sites—artificial flowers, rosaries, Lion King figurines, wreaths—are inexpensive and easily obtained. Photographs and notes are simply but effectively protected against the elements by plastic baggies or sheaths purchased from supermarkets or drug stores. Stones found nearby help anchor the cross, or form a border. Thus, affluence is not essential to the erection of an eye-catching or appreciated memorial, nor is impoverishment an impediment.

Moreover, the egalitarian nature of the memorials, and indeed of vehicular travel in general (McLuhan 1964, 197-200), remind viewers that everyone, regardless of income or status, inevitably faces death, often unexpectedly. The tributes speak to the human condition, and provoke community response. Family and friends often combine their efforts in constructing and maintaining the assemblages, as in the case of the memorials discussed in the previous chapter. Individuals who witnessed the accident, but did not know the deceased may contribute as well. These public memorial sites, in which the sacred and the secular come together, provide a singular opportunity for social grieving independent of class or cultural strictures, and the collective confrontation of violence and tragedy.

Folklore, Functionalism and Counterhegemony

Although not one of the oft-cited four functions of folklore, the practice of incorporating aspects of traditional culture in efforts toward social change is not new. Past scholarship has focused on the use of folksong by unions and other organized movements, e.g., John Greenway's seminal *American Folksongs of Protest*, first published in 1953. Greenway presents the songs of textile workers, abolitionists, miners, and other formal groups, stating that "labor has used established songs from the earliest

times to carry its protest, and in so doing continues in a tradition that is as old as English folksong itself” (13).⁵ In a 1966 issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, R. Serge Denisoff, quoting Terence Qualter, details the similar efforts of singers of “propaganda songs” to “recruit supporters, arouse sympathy, to counteract the feelings of despair, to encourage or inspire with hope for a new and happier future” (582-83).⁶

The creation of the AIDS quilt, and quilting in general, represents a similar use of folklore, and specifically material culture (Lewis and Fraser 1996; Hawkins 1995). In the nineteenth century, quilts afforded women, who had no voice in the political sphere, a way to communicate socially critical sentiment. Examples of politically meaningful quilt patterns include the Radical Rose, the Drunkard’s Path, and the Underground Railroad. The Radical Rose, for example, which was “popular in the North during the Civil War, had a black center for each flower and was a wordless statement of sympathy for the slaves” (Hawkins 1995, 771). Today, the AIDS quilt, which Lewis and Fraser call “the largest piece of folk art ever created,” is a political tool as well a statement of profound grief and loss (1996, 434, 448).

Several factors unite uses made of customary folklife in protest song, AIDS-related projects, and social protest utilizing roadside crosses: the use of symbols with currency in a certain community, dynamic meaning behind the symbols, their connections to shared rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960), and the counter-hegemonic nature of the collective statement. Linked to traditional symbolism and customs surrounding death, political uses of vernacular expression acquire meaning and forcefulness.

Contemporary Halloween activities, for example, employ jack-o-lanterns, witches and skeletons—figures associated with liminality and death—as “personal statements made in a participatory group or community situation, using culturally valued and shared symbols, most of which are centuries old” (Santino 1983, 2). Likewise, as detailed in chapter two, the custom of marking a

burial site with a cross is widespread in the Americas, as well having a long history in Europe. The roadside crosses, imbued with at least four hundred years of shared relevancy, tell basically the same story now as they did in the newly-colonized Mexico of the mid-sixteenth century. As Jennifer Solter stated, explaining the rationale behind MADD's choice of the cross as a communicative symbol, "the cross would call attention to a death . . . There wasn't just an injury, but they actually had a death." Although passers-by may speculate as to the particulars of an automobile accident, the fact of a death is sure. Further, the cross may be interpreted as something of an appeal to God, as in the custom of embroidering the letters "I.H.S." on a religious habit intended for burial use—the initials representing the Latin phrase *In Hoc Signo*, or "In This Sign," (i.e., the sign of the cross) . . . a visual means of commending oneself to the mercy of Christ" (Buckley and Cartwright 1983, 13). In Roman Catholic belief, a sudden death requires such a commendation, as the individual has died without the benefit of last rites. As a sacred symbol appearing in the highly public and profane realm of the road, the cross is denotative of mediation, and thus liminality. Folklorist Gary Butler notes that "when a death occurs, the sacred enters into uncomfortable contact with the profane and is embodied in the deceased, who is suddenly neither profane nor sacred" (1982, 31). The cross is indexical not only of death, but of the deceased as well, and renders the loss that of the entire community (Hawkins 1995, 757).

Employed as a tactic for incorporating a particular death into the consciousness of a community, a roadside cross actively confronts "the bureaucratization, specialization and compartmentalization of modern death," (Narváez 1994, 289-90)⁷ another aspect of its counter-hegemonic capacity. Commuters pass crosses on major city and county thoroughfares at least twice a day. The memorialized death is not easily set aside after the funeral and burial, but remains a fixture of daily life. The tension between private grief and public rage is embodied in the memorial cross. It

not only represents a death, but in the case of the MADD campaign, an organized, political movement and sentiment—drunk driving causes deaths. Austin resident Thomas Vannatta proposed a roadside memorial cross program to the Texas Highway Department in the early 1990s, the message similarly cautionary; he “envisioned the crosses as warnings to slow down,” as well as a “comfort to the dead and their loved ones.” It seems only appropriate that such communication take place in the arena of city and county roadways; the symbolism of death and tragedy, and the hope for rebirth of some kind, moving from the privacy of church and cemetery to the street. As with the stark listing of names on black granite that constitutes the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, contrasting with the more traditional war memorial imagery of glorious, triumphant aggression, viewers find themselves face-to-face with the reality of death.

The negotiation of death necessarily involves one’s beliefs about life, and the expression of these beliefs is the complex result of conflicting forces (Primiano 1995, 43-45). While the particular message of a roadside cross is currently in flux, so too is that of the cross itself, both in the expressive behaviour of which it is a part, and in society at large. The use of the icon in popular culture, which incorporates Christian symbolism without obligation to the religious tenets usually accompanying it, is similar to its place in American civil religion. Crosses have long been a staple of popular fashion, from the punk (anti-)aesthetic born in 1970s England to current Celtic and Gothic chic, not to mention Catholic kitsch.⁸ As Jenny Stinson told me, “Crosses aren’t strictly religious anymore. Everybody wears them, whether they’re Christians or not.” The ambiguity and vigor of cross symbolism affords it a broad spectrum of meaning and importance in contemporary society.

The dynamism of publicly negotiated meaning mirrors the processes of separation and incorporation that grieving individuals must navigate. The liminal state of the individual, family or

social group brought on by death confers special status upon them (Buckley and Cartwright 1983, 8-10), and perhaps renders their actions more influential. However, whereas death customs such as those found in wake tradition provide a mechanism for both separation and incorporation, the custom of marking the site of a fatal accident with a cross renders the death, in a sense, permanently betwixt and between. At Halloween, “death and randomness are incorporated into family stability and routine through home decorations,” while “the street seems to be the arena for the airing of more topical fears . . . but the dread of the unknown and the uncontrollable continue to be addressed in both cases” (Santino 1983, 18). By focusing ongoing political activity on a public, tragic event and site, an individual simultaneously incorporates, yet refuses to passively accept, their sudden loss.

Several people I spoke with indicated puzzlement about the desire to construct such a public memorial. Tom Hurt, at the Texas Department of Transportation, said he would definitely *not* want a visible reminder of fatal accident involving a family member, even if its purpose was to make a political statement. Even those choosing to memorialize a death with a cross experience difficulty with its public nature. Solter said, “at first it really bothered me to go through the intersection. In fact, it took me several years to be able to go near William Cannon and Manchaca [a major intersection near the accident site].” The permanent liminality of roadside memorialization represents a counter-hegemonic approach to the contemporary “paucity of ritualistic conventions in the mourning period,” as well as the authority of civil culture (Blauner 1977, 174-209). Further, deaths caused by drunk driving or carelessness contradict the perceived natural order of the life cycle. Here, institutional religion’s assertion of “cosmological unity of life and death through the immortality of the soul” can be of little comfort (Narváez 1994, 285). Accordingly, many memorial participants do not identify the roadside crosses with

any codified religion, but have integrated them into their vernacular religious practice, as they have incorporated the deaths they memorialize into their daily lives.

Solter visits Sara's cross, and her burial site, at least three times a year—on Christmas Day, Easter Sunday, and Sara's birthday (20 October), leaving flowers at both locations. When other family members pass by the cross, they make sure there is at least one bunch of flowers present. While his political efforts were not as successful as he had hoped, Thomas Vannatta continues to honor the memory of the young woman whose accident he witnessed by warning other drivers of dangerous road conditions. "I flash lights and signal with the universal slow down arm out the window when some large hazard looms," he wrote.

Vannatta's concern for public safety was deepened following a collision in which he was seriously injured. Death statistics are not publicized as they were in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, he observes, except on "dangerous" holidays such as Labor Day and New Year's Eve. Attributing it to ill-conceived changes in public policy, he writes, "Highway safety awareness has fallen to the wayside and has been replaced by an internal reliance on automotive engineering—a faulty hope. So I theorize that the public has taken the problem of warning and memorializing into their own hands. Often, as in my accident and after \$25,000 in medical expenses and endless pain and treatment, there is no justice."

Jennifer stated that at the time she put up Sara's cross, the MADD members in Texas believed that a forceful public statement was necessary to combat the perception that drinking and driving was acceptable, and the tendency to blame fatal incidents on minority populations. She advocated the passage of legislation that would make Texas roads safer, and she feels that this helped her work through her loss: "Because when I went to change the laws and we lobbied, you know, for the first DWI law, and when we passed the first DWI law in fifty years, you know, I mean I felt like, that we really have accomplished something and I was doing

something good out of something bad that had happened to me. And when I stood with other victims, you know, it made me feel stronger and that I couldn't feel sorry for myself because I understood there were other mothers hurting as much as I was." In uniting with other victims of drunk driving—an act made material by the construction and maintenance of Sara's memorial cross—Solter found solace and renewed strength.

Solter concluded that "if those few crosses out there have made the difference, you know, for MADD, I think we did make our statement." Just as the AIDS quilt's "provocative appearance on the [Washington] Mall gave the project's leadership an opportunity to denounce the country's indifference to the AIDS epidemic and to rally for greater attention to research and support" (Hawkins 1995, 759-60), the MADD crosses, and roadside crosses in general, are a counter-hegemonic grassroots cry for greater attention to safe roadway travel and harsher penalties for vehicular carelessness and crime. As Vannatta notes, "the crosses are also an expression of the frustration people have with the justice system. People cannot simply let go of traumatic life changing events that easily." As powerfully positioned mediators of beliefs about life and death, the crosses inhabit an equally unique position between private and public spheres of conformity and protest.

While the cross is an ancient symbol with centuries of accrued meaning, it is also a dynamic reflection of grief, hope and guidance to a measureless audience. Victor Turner has written that, "Liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art . . . Each of these productions has a multivocal character, having many meanings, and each is capable of moving people at many psychobiological levels simultaneously" ([1969] 1995, 128-29). The crosses occupy a unique place in Austin's urban landscape, especially those that are extra-legal (not erected through MADD or the Texas Department of Highways). Their continued existence and increasing appearance

are highly-charged reminders of the dangers of vehicular travel, stricter driving regulations and technological advances in automobiles and roadway construction notwithstanding.

In agreement with the popular feminist maxim “the personal *is* political,” a number of Austin residents have attempted to use the memorial custom of the roadside cross to help prevent further tragedy, communicating with a largely unknown audience through the shared meaning of an universal sign. Political intent, rather than locating the roadside cross outside the realm of vernacular expression, confirms the objects’ informal communicative power, especially among members of diverse community groups. As noted above, for viewers of the crosses—Austin motorists and other travelers—such distinctions between manifest meanings are often not consciously made, or are irrelevant. Finally, while such crosses and their attendant assemblages often represent a community’s perception of the deceased individual, others have specifically chosen roadside crosses—like protesters have utilized vernacular song and AIDS activists have stitched quilt blocks—as active symbols of their hope for the future as well, and for their desire to prevent any further loss and suffering akin to their own.

Between Incorporation and Conflict

The examples cited here, however, should not be interpreted as indications of total acceptance or even familiarity with the custom throughout the area’s populace, further underscoring the practice’s interstitiality. One of my informants, a computer programmer in her late twenties, voiced strong opposition to the use of any religious symbolism in such a manner. As a clear violation of church and state, she believes that no religious symbol is appropriate to a public memorial. Similarly, the Oregon American Civil Liberties Union protested a senator’s efforts to legalize roadside crosses in that state in early 2000 (Courcey 2000). During a 1997 interview, Texas Department of Transportation spokesper-

son Hurt asserted that to be fair, the state should either allow the display of any religious symbol, including the Star of David and the crescent moon, or none at all. He noted further that his office had received complaints about the religious overtones of roadside crosses. In February of 1998, Hurt informed me that the department had issued revised guidelines for the MADD markers which stated that “markers may be various types of symbols.”

Several student respondents wrote that they had never seen or heard of objects by the side of the road marking the site of a fatal accident, in spite of the fact that there have been a number of memorial assemblages within yards of the school grounds. Thus one student stated that she had only *heard* of them, and described them as “yellow tape saying ‘Do not cross’ cones around the incident, etc.”

Others perceive the phenomenon to be a primarily rural one, although certain areas of the city, as noted in chapter three, are home to several crosses. One respondent wrote, “Most of them are out in the country—or at least the suburbs, and since I don’t leave the urban center of Austin, I don’t see them too often.” Similarly, another said “I’ve seen more of these crosses in desolate areas of wide open Texas roads than in heavily maintained and heavily signed areas of cities.” An amateur cyclist did not recall seeing any crosses on Southwest Parkway, a highway he travels often by bicycle, and home to at least two roadside crosses.

Urban planner John Hickman expressed disbelief when I told him that Austin area residents were familiar with the custom. In the development of area land for projects ranging from city bus stop shelters to downtown strip malls, Hickman added, contractors and sub-contractors must consult City of Austin manuals. None of the manuals, to the best of his knowledge, included guidelines pertaining to roadside crosses (MADD-related or otherwise) or other vernacular memorials.

The fact that roadside crosses do not register on the cognitive maps of all area residents, or civic and county site maps, further

highlights their informality and liminal status. Adding to the outlaw quality of the markers has been the absence of concrete guidelines for governmental entities in many areas, including central Texas. The city of Austin, for example, has a graffiti hotline which residents may call to report tagging and thus hasten its removal. Crosses, while occupying similar space in the city landscape, communicate in a less obscure and thus less threatening manner. It is difficult for city, county, and state officials to condemn emotionally charged objects that might encourage motorists to slow down, be more alert, or think twice before driving while intoxicated. It is perhaps equally easy to ignore them—as the student who wrote “I try not to look”—or become immune to them as have a number of other informants. Further, the markers represent an active locus for troublesome questions about the ever-present risks of injury and death in contemporary society. A questionnaire respondent poignantly expressed a sentiment with which perhaps all informants would agree, regardless of religious or political stance. Upon seeing a roadside cross, she feels sad and, she wrote, “[I] hope I don’t see any more.”

The assemblages may be distracting, and are certainly difficult to mow or build around. Nevertheless, city and state employees have been sensitive to their importance to families and communities, for which they are to be recognized and commended.⁹ While the public display of religious symbolism, not to mention the manifestation of intense emotion, creates problems of policy and enforcement which may ultimately affect or prohibit their existence in the future, recent circumstances have allowed area residents much-needed creative space betwixt and between regulation and reality, past and present, public and private, sacred and profane.

Roadside memorials are polysemic manifestations of a number of cultural threads, a transient, vernacular art form crossing religious, cultural, and class lines both in rural areas and in increasingly congested urban environments. The manner in which

such threads come together can be traced through the perceptions of area residents who make, decorate, maintain, and view the assemblages. Like formal tragedy and war memorials, vernacular memorials attempt to acknowledge and commemorate the unthinkable, as well as to address significantly different perceptions of the past and the present. Here, too, are struggles between the vernacular and the governmentally sanctioned—the private and public interpretation of tragic and sometimes criminal events. While the memorial sites analyzed here are not municipally constructed memorials, nor locations at which formal ceremonies have taken place, they are faithfully attended with a mixture of grief, reverence, and hope. Markedly different from the urban manifestations that surround them, they are treated accordingly by city, county, and state officials, as well as the community at large.

The cross, a powerful signifier, communicates on a number of levels as evidenced by informant response. The symbol's semiotic versatility allows the memorial sites to function as regenerative manifestations of both vernacular religion and grief work. Whereas contemporary funeral custom and landscape emphasize the difference between the deceased and those who mourn, roadside cross memorials present a more universally active, and thus affective, threshold.

