Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture

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As Austin’s population and urban sprawl increases, more and more people find themselves commuting to jobs in the city, with as much as three hours a day spent in transit. Oftentimes their daily drive takes them past at least one roadside memorial. Between April 1997 and January 1998, I documented thirty-five memorial sites in and around Austin (Fig. 3.1). A number of these memorials have already been dismantled or significantly altered while new ones have been constructed.

As noted in the previous chapter, MADD markers, such as the crosses pictured here, have until very recently been the only roadside memorials approved for the Austin district by the Texas Department of Transportation. Jennifer Solter founded one of the first MADD chapters in Texas, the Heart of Texas Chapter, following the death of her daughter Sara Jayne Solter in 1981. In the early-to-mid-1980s, all MADD crosses in Texas were built by a Houston resident who had lost a son to a drunk driving incident. Solter erected one of these white crosses in 1984, under the canopy of a poplar tree at the edge of a residential area.

The red plaque at the crosspiece reads:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF SARA JAYNE SOLTER
BORN 10/20/61 & KILLED AT
THIS LOCATION 8/14/81 BY A DRUNK DRIVER
Friends and family place artificial flowers at the base of the cross in conjunction with Sara’s birthday, Christmas, and Easter (Fig. 3.2). Jennifer stated that, “Those are the three times that we always change out the flowers for.” The red tulips pictured here were left for Easter. Sometimes she finds items left anonymously, such as a rose with a red ribbon tied around it, or dried or artificial flowers.
Fig. 3.2 First MADD cross in Austin, erected in memory of Sara Jayne Solter
The front lawn of the nearby Dittmar Recreation Center, just over a mile to the southeast of Solter’s memorial, is the site of a MADD cross erected for Theresa Lynn Ellsworth Moore, killed a week after her thirty-fourth birthday. The incident occurred at the intersection of Dittmar and Forest Woods Roads, an area known by residents for poor visibility and speeding motorists. The cross is difficult to see as it stands parallel to the road. Conforming to MADD standards, the cross is inscribed thus:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
THERESA LYNN ELLSWORTH MOORE
BORN JULY 14, 1960 & KILLED AT
THIS LOCATION JULY 21, 1994 BY
A DRUNK DRIVER

Moore was fatally injured when her vehicle was struck from behind as she exited the recreation center parking lot. Although no flowers or other decorative items were in evidence at the memorial when I photographed it in January of 1998, an electrical pole across the street was adorned with a tattered pinwheel and plastic flowers. Pink plastic roses were attached to the base of the pole.

Farm to Market Road 2222 is well-known throughout Austin as an extremely dangerous roadway. It is also a popular one, for it runs from northwest Austin to a number of city and county park areas bordering lakes with sandy beaches.1 A weather-worn MADD cross sits high on a newly-constructed ridge on the north side of the road just at the city limit. Over a decade old, the fading plaque nailed to the flaking, white cross still bears the inscription:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
ROBERT CARTER MANLY
D.O.B. 1/10/66
KILLED ON THIS SPOT BY A DRUNK DRIVER
5/21/85
Fig. 3.3 Northernmost memorial for Daniel London and Beth Early
In May of 1997, two desiccated wildflowers were secured to the top of the transverse beam with a smooth, round chalk rock.

Two crosses not constructed through MADD memorializing a drunk-driving incident bear the first names of both victims, Daniel London and Beth Early. Daniel was driving Beth home from a date when their vehicle was struck head-on by an oncoming vehicle. Located on Brodie Lane, just north of FM 1626, both crosses stand parallel to the road. Several groupings of silk flowers surround the base of each cross. The northernmost, a white, wooden cross stands over white and red poinsettias, red carnations, and purple daisies (Fig. 3.3). A gold-tone angel, held fast with a band of red flowers, adorns the transverse, painted in two-inch, pine-green letters. The cross is also fronted by a plain wooden cross, about eighteen inches high. A pink bow and two pink silk carnations backed by greenery form a diagonal across its face.

Daniel’s mother, Ana Garcia, erected the wrought-iron cross handmade in her home state of Jalisco, Mexico (Harmon 1997). Anchored in concrete and painted white, Daniel and Beth’s names, in capital letters fashioned of clay, are separated by a five-petal flower of the same material (Fig. 3.4). The planter attached to the cross holds three clay pots filled with a profusion of flowers, among them daisies, black-eyed Susans, morning glories, and daffodils. Set back a couple of yards from the road, the crosses are obscured by the sharp curve of the road, and the high grass on either side of them as one approaches from the north or south.

An unmarked cross on FM 620 also commemorates a drunk driving fatality which occurred sometime after May of 1995 (Biggs 1998). Facing oncoming traffic, the white wooden cross with beveled ends shows signs of wear in the chipped paint and the almost colorless silk flowers deteriorating at its base. A rusted nail and a bit of string are all that is left of something that was once attached near the top of the south face of the memorial. A chunky, red wooden heart pendant hangs from the cross piece by a thin leather strip.

Another memorial not visibly connected to MADD has been
Fig. 3.4 Wrought-iron cross and planter handmade in Jalisco, Mexico
constructed on a median of West William Cannon Boulevard for former Houston resident and drunk driving victim Mark Travis Phillips. About two feet in length, the letters “M” and “P” spelled out in rocks decorate the ground in front of an eighteen-inch cross, fashioned of thin metal and painted white, held in place by a small pile of stones. A broken terra-cotta planter, still holding two dried stems, sits above the second point of the “M.” The Austin American-Statesman reported on February 26, 1996 that the driver, charged with intoxication manslaughter, had either fallen asleep or passed out at the wheel. Phillips, age twenty-two, was killed when the car in which he was a passenger skipped the curb of the median and slammed into a tree. Now part of the memorial, the scarred tree is ringed by stones. Inside the ring is debris from the wreck and a single, empty beer bottle.

Conjecture and Certainty, Curves and Collisions

Unlike Phillips’ memorial, those for which no additional information can be found pose an ethnographic problem—the cause of the signified accident cannot be ascertained with certainty. However, as part of Texas’ Hill Country, Austin and the surrounding area is rife with scenic, and treacherous roads that link urban congestion with glistening lakes and rolling hills. The views afforded a traveler are distracting enough in the best of conditions. A number of roadside crosses in the area informally mark blind or sudden curves, and often lie within several yards of an official highway warning sign.

State Highway 71 merges with United States Highway 290 as both intersect Interstate Highway 35 in the middle of the city, and the two roads run together for eight and a half miles to the west, separating again at the “Y” in Oak Hill. Just outside the city limit on US 290 is perhaps the oldest extant cross in the metropolitan area, measuring one and one-half by two feet (Fig. 3.5). Well-weathered and peeling, the white, wooden cross overlooks two lanes of oncoming traffic at a ninety degree angle from atop a small hill.
Fig. 3.5 Cross, possibly dating from 1970s, on Highway 71 west
Fig. 3.6 Looking toward Highway 71 west, cross with grapevine wreath facing westbound lanes
Pink and white plastic rose blossoms flank the cross on one side, and a rusted license plate lies face down in front of it. Turning the plate over, the words “Texas Truck” and the year “’72” are legible.

Highway 71 west, as it moves north of 290’s course, winds its way through some of central Texas’ more spectacular vistas. West of Austin, a white wooden cross halfway up the hillside bore a grapevine wreath, with a colorful array of flowers, greenery, and a large, white and blue patterned bow (Fig. 3.6). The wreath hung from the vertical piece, and from the transverse, secured with faded pink ribbon, was a sprig of six sunflowers. Closer inspection revealed car parts among the flowers at the base of the memorial. A windshield wiper, pieces of brake and turn signal lights, a radiator cap, and bits of tire and black plastic were scattered among rocks placed at a forty-five degree angle with the base of the cross.

Further toward Austin on the same highway, about twelve miles outside city limits, was one of the most elaborate memorials in the area. The two by three feet, white, wooden cross, simply constructed, was just one part of the large assemblage parallel to the four-lane, undivided highway. Hanging from it were three wreaths: a large Christmas wreath, approximately two feet in diameter, decorated with bows and ornaments; a ceramic Easter wreath (incorporating pastel-colored rabbits, flowers and birds); and hanging on the back side of the cross, a grapevine wreath upon which sat a ceramic angel (Fig. 3.7). Two rosaries dangled from the crosspiece, almost touching the angel’s face. Below the angel, on the ground, was a grouping of unidentifiable car parts.

The cross was topped with a gold-tone angel vase containing a silk lily. Two bunches of these lilies flanked the base of the cross. Large pink lilies sat beside a stuffed gorilla, and a line of single bluebonnets formed a soft front border ending with a bunch of poinsettias. In between these and one cluster of lilies lay a baseball cap, secured in the back with a rock, emblazoned with the Ford logo and the words “Bad Ass Boys With Bad Ass Toys.” Bordering the entire assemblage was a heart-shaped border of large, flat rocks.
Fig. 3.7 Memorial viewed from front, at edge of stone circle
Austin photographer Doug Powell has taken several pictures of the memorial. He told me that a few years ago, visitors used a magic marker left at the site to write messages to the accident victim on the cross. The marker was no longer there when I visited the site, and the missives had either been erased by exposure to the elements or a fresh coat of paint. Time, as well as the effects of sun, wind, and rain, take their toll on all memorials.

Roughly one-half mile west of the memorial, Southwest Parkway dead-ends into Highway 71. One mile east of the intersection is the white, wrought-iron cross bearing the name Kevin Attison. The name runs down the vertical of the structure, and the horizontal gives his dates of birth (“2-7-67”) and death (“7-18-89”), all in white clay figures. A wreath of faded silk flowers, red carnations, white impatiens, and greenery is affixed to the transverse with a length of rusting wire. Two bunches of similarly weathered silk roses lie horizontally about the base, along with a single carnation bloom.

Fig. 3.8 Newly-erected cross, adorned with floral spray and lapel pin, on FM 2222
Just west of Austin city limits on FM 2222, I photographed a cross that appeared to be newly constructed. A diagonal spray of yellow silk roses and greenery adorned a white styrofoam cross, to which had also been attached a lapel pin promoting a local restaurant (Fig. 3.8). Attached by a layer of white gauze tape to a thin length of unfinished wood, the structure was further supported by pieces of barrier support beams likely dislodged in the crash. The assemblage was fronted by the dented metal guard rail, sprayed red to indicate the need for repair work.

Back in the city proper, motorists travelling east on North Loop Boulevard between Guadalupe Street and Airport Boulevard encounter a blind curve just prior to an intersection populated by several small businesses. If concentrating on the road, they may not notice the four wooden crosses of various dimensions and finishes that border the fence line of a small state cemetery. The westernmost of the four, standing alone between two tall bushes, is neither painted nor decorated save for a rusted car part resting on the top of the vertical piece. Also constructed of unfinished wood is the easternmost cross, bearing no decoration or identifying marks. Nearer the other two crosses, it has been driven into the ground in front of a fire hydrant. Approximately one-and-a-half yards southwest of it is a similarly constructed cross, its frame attached to the cemetery fence. Faded lettering inscribed in black ink covers the surface of the cross. Still legible is the name “David Crowley” running along the vertical, and the phrases “Born January 16, 1965” and “Asleep in the Lord” across the horizontal. A small white teddy bear, placed between the horizontal and the fence just above the date, serves as decoration along with a ribbon which anchors the cross to the chain-link fence. A rusted piece of wire affixes the vertical.

The largest and most detailed cross of the four also bears Crowley’s name. A black and gold-tone plaque with gold lettering at the crosspiece reads:
IN MEMORY OF
DAVID M. CROWLEY
JANUARY 16, 1965 — OCTOBER 16, 1995
“You always have been, and forever will be, my friend.”

The cross is finished with a dark wood stain. A plastic Santa Claus ornament hangs from the transverse. Scattered among a number of large rocks supporting the base are a pine cone and two Christmas ornaments, as well as silk flowers and greenery. Threaded through the fence behind the two crosses are a number of items including a purple tassel, a withered bouquet of fresh flowers wrapped in plastic, a laminated photo of a young man in a tuxedo, a string of plastic Easter eggs, ribbons, a bungee cord, and a dreamcatcher protected by a plastic covering (Fig. 3.9).

Although two Austin residents mentioned the site to me, they had no knowledge of what had occurred there. Moreover, I was unable to find any information concerning David Crowley or any accident in the area near the date indicated on the cross.

Equally enigmatic are the crosses erected in memory of Mario Castor, who died on July 9, 1996. Located off IH-35 on Stassney Lane, they border the eastbound lanes passing over Williamson Creek. Attached to the bridge itself, the first is a small, unpainted cross standing just over a foot tall. The deceased’s name, along with messages, such as “I LOVE YOU,” have been printed with a black felt-tip marker. Other messages have been left on the bridge railing: “GOD LOVES YOU MARIO CASTOR,” and “MARIO, MAY YOU REST IN PEACE, LOVE YOU ALWAYS, YOUR AUNT, JANIE CANTU, FRIEND JUAN DOMINGUEZ.” Multi-colored ribbons affix funeral sprays to the railing—a wreath of blue silk carnations, greenery, two blue bows, and a lavender ribbon bearing the word “Father” in silver lettering; and a grouping of pink and red silk carnations, daisies, and greenery surrounding a red bow. A single, faded silk poinsettia is fastened to the center of the cross.
Two yards to the east, at the bridge railing’s end, a larger, white wooden cross sits amid a display of silk flowers including white and yellow chrysanthemums. Pink and white rose buds, purple lilies, and white and pink carnations sprout from a white vase attached to the vertical. At the top of the vertical, a wooden cut-out in the form of a open book bears the sentence “Thru the Love of God We feel Eternal Life.” The white plastic crucifix at the center of the cross is backed by a sprig of plastic greenery, and flanked on either end of the crossbar with wooden dove cut-outs also painted white. Black lettering on the transverse reads “MARIO CASTOR, 1963–1996.” In August of 1997 a nicho holding a small portrait of the Virgin Mary sat atop the vertical, but was gone by the following December (Fig. 3.10).
A similarly complex memorial commands the attention of westbound motorists on Slaughter Lane, just east of Austin’s Bowie High School (Fig. 3.11). The *Austin-American Statesman* reported that Heather Werchan, a few days shy of eighteen, was one of two passengers in a truck travelling west on Slaughter that veered off the road and crashed into a tree on May 10, 1997. The cross was constructed by the driver of the vehicle, Heather’s boyfriend, and another school friend. A few feet to the southwest of the cross, the driver and his mother planted a miniature rose bush (Werchan 1998).

At approximately four-and-one-half feet by four-and-one-half feet, the cross is the largest documented within city limits. As shown, “Heather” is spelled out in large, pine green letters which
hang across the horizontal piece. Strands of silk sunflowers, black-eyed Susans, orange marigolds, autumn-colored leaves, and other greenery are intertwined about both pieces of the structure. A stuffed teddy bear, with a plastic-covered photograph of Heather attached with purple ribbon to its right foot, sits on the horizontal near the transverse, along with a ring of purple silk miniature roses. Higher up and around the vertical, a visitor has placed a Bowie graduation tassel (in school colors of red and black). Sitting atop the vertical are five carefully placed pennies—one at each corner, and one in the middle.

The same green letters indicate her middle and last initials on the bottom half of the vertical. A holiday wreath, ornamented by pine cones, holly, miniature musical instruments, and presents,
encircles the “N”, for Nicole. The “W” is entirely obscured from view by silk poinsettias in a terra-cotta pot, flanked on one side by an empty flower vase and on the other by red and white silk roses stuck in the ground. A white porcelain angel kneels in prayer in front of the bouquet. Surrounding the assemblage are large, rectangular stones. Lengths of artificial ivy and small stones are scattered about the base, one securing a handwritten note, the words of which had been blurred by rainfall.

FM 1626, at the southern edge of the city, runs parallel to Slaughter Lane for approximately three miles, then turns sharply south toward the Travis County line. The memorial to Armando Carrizales, constructed in front of a barbed wire fence a few yards from the roadway, lies in adjacent Hays County (Fig. 3.12). A piece of barrier support beam is the five foot vertical piece; varnished pressurized wood, decorated with electrical tape, makes the horizontal piece of equal length. Two unfinished wood pieces, forming diagonal supports running from the lower half of the vertical to the crossbar give Carrizales’s date of birth, March 10, 1947, and death, October 10, 1995. The numbers, as well as the deceased’s name on the crossbar, are a result of careful wood burning.

Ceramic electrical insulators top the vertical and both ends of the transverse, while another is attached to the north side of the vertical nearer the ground. A black bandana encircles the post below the insulator, from which is hung a clear plastic bell. Two wreaths decorate the cross, the first formed of three strands of electrical wiring and lengths of mistletoe. An orange electrical tape bow, a miniature deer, and a pine cone adorn the wreath. Propped at the base of the cross, a grapevine wreath bears a bow of red ribbon and faded greenery. A century plant has been incorporated into the memorial by means of a ring of stones, which encircle it and the cross.

Ian Hancock, a university professor who initially described Carrizales’s memorial to me, passes it twice every weekday on his
way to and from work. He did not know what might have prompted it, however, nor was I able to uncover any relevant information or even a death notice for the deceased in the local newspaper. As indicated on the cross, Carrizales died in 1995. The memorial has been in place since at least early 1996 (Hancock 1997).

**Crossroads**

As one might expect, many roadside crosses are located at intersections, the sites of many accidents ranging from minor fender-benders to fatal collisions. Approximately two city blocks to the west-northwest of Sara Jayne Solter’s well-known MADD me-

![Fig. 3.12 Cross constructed from electrical pole, ceramic insulators, electrical and barbed wire for Armando Carrizales](image)
morial are two crosses at the intersection of William Cannon Boulevard and Manchaca Road. They sit in the drainage ditch of a large parking lot, adjacent to an arts and crafts megastore and a fast-food restaurant. That closest to the westbound lanes of Manchaca Road is constructed of wood painted white with beveled ends, and is covered almost entirely with multi-colored silk roses in the manner of the “flowering tree” used in rituals celebrating the Holy Cross in Mexico and the southwestern United States (Cantú 1991, 118-9, 125; see also McDannell 1995, 121). Two bunches of artificial daffodils sit at the base. No writing is visible on the one and one-half by two feet structure.

A yard and a half behind it sits a slightly taller, hollow metal cross, also painted white. The silver plaque at the crosspiece reads:

In Loving Memory
of
DAREL BRAD GONZALEZ
October 30, 1977 - June 3, 1995
We Love You
Dad, Anna, Brandon & Pee Wee

A ceramic vase at its base holds two bunches of pink and blue silk roses; another of red daisy-like flowers sits on the ground. Both crosses were erected by the family following the accident in which Darel, crossing William Cannon on his bicycle, was hit and then run over by a truck. Austinite Don Day, who witnessed the accident, confirmed that both crosses were erected in memory of Darel by the Gonzalez family.

Travelling east on William Cannon and crossing IH-35, motorists pass a white cross and floral display on the southwest corner of the intersection of William Cannon and Rockridge Drive (Fig. 3.13). Adorned with three red poinsettias and a red bow, a small, white wooden trellis, and a cross of similar construction form the southern border of the memorial assemblage. The silk
floral array includes large bouquets of white and red poinsettias, as well as yellow, white, and orange chrysanthemums. Situated next to a fading red fire hydrant at a forty-five degree angle to the roadway, the two-and-a-half-foot cross bears a wreath of multi-colored mums at the crossbar. Obscured from the view of passing drivers by the colorful poinsettias are car parts lying in a plastic plant tray at the cross’s base.

Although the cross is not marked in any way, judging from the condition of the wooden structures and flowers, it may memorialize a death reported by the *Austin American-Statesman* in September of 1997. Del Valle resident Joe Flores, 28, was driving a motorcycle east on William Cannon when he collided with a truck turning onto Rockridge.

Fig. 3.13 A white cross and trellis are fronted by several floral displays on East William Cannon Boulevard
In May of 1997, I photographed four crosses a mile and a half to the northeast of Darel’s memorials, in a median on Stassney Lane directly across the street from David Crockett High School. Seven months later only one remained, minus the myriad items that had encircled it—a small (not quite a foot and a half) white cross in memory of Jacorey Williams, an eight-year-old who was hit by a car on his way home from school (Osborn 1996). A picture of Jacorey was taped to the east face, above football cards and notes covered with plastic wrap, and a glow-in-the-dark rosary, all attached with tape (Fig. 3.14). Surrounding the cross was a large collection of stuffed animals, including teddy bears, rabbits, and dogs, as well as a white ceramic angel, an empty green pop bottle, a football on which is written “To: Jacorey, From: Zack,” three bunches of silk flowers including white poinsettias, and an unidentifiable plant set in soil in a yellow plastic cup. A miniature koala bear is perched on a thin wooden stick on the east side of the cross.

Gone by the following January were three wooden crosses, unmarked and unpainted, erected about two yards to the east of Jacorey Williams’s memorial on Stassney Lane. Not quite eighteen inches high, they faced away from each other to the west, east and south. The cross facing Jacorey’s memorial was adorned with a silk flower and greenery, and two gift bows. The one opposite it, facing east, was decorated with flowers and greenery as well. An arrangement of white poinsettias was placed in front of the third cross. The remnants of four potted plants sat amidst an assortment of stuffed bears, rabbits, dogs, and ducks. An ornate, pastel blue metal Celtic cross, rusted from exposure to a rainy Austin spring, lay across a grey bear, resting beside a small, yellow and black rubber ball.

On June 28, 1996, sixteen-year-old Paul Anthony Garcia was struck by two cars after exiting a city bus at the intersection of North Lamar Boulevard and Morrow Avenue. He was on his way to a baseball game at a nearby field. His mother, interviewed by
Nichole Monroe, stated that a cross would be placed at the site. I found the two-foot wrought-iron cross, tipped with silver fleurs-de-lys, at the northeast corner of the intersection (Fig. 3.15). The plaque crosspiece bears the deceased’s name and dates of birth and death in white lettering, as well as a small black-and-white portrait. Secured in the ground slightly behind the cross is a large two-dimensional baseball on which is painted Garcia’s name, baseball number, and the letters “RIP.” Red silk roses are stuck in the ground on both sides of the cross, the larger bunch secured by three large rocks.

Further south, near the intersection of Beanna and 26th Streets on the north end of the University of Texas campus is a white,
wooden cross, measuring one-and-one-half by two feet. Facing the east and westbound lanes of 26th Street, it is anchored in the median with concrete. Silver plates with black lettering run almost the entire length of each side of the horizontal piece, and read:

STEPHANIE MALMQUIST
1-11-74—11-24-93

Malmquist, then a sophomore at the university, died as a result of injuries sustained when her pickup collided with another vehicle on 26th Street (Granados 1993). I first photographed the cross in May 1997, at which time a large basket of woven straw bearing an arrangement of yellow and red silk elephant ears was held in
place on the west side by cement blocks. When I visited the site again in January 1998, the potted plant was gone and a bouquet of fresh flowers lay at the foot of the cross, protected from the elements by a plastic wrapping printed with the words “Feliz Cumpleaños” [Happy Birthday]. A prayer candle in yellow glass cast a dim light about the memorial that evening.

Louisana Hernandez Torres and Eloisa Trevino, two Austin women in their seventies, were killed on January 5, 1996 when their car collided with an eighteen-wheel truck at East Martin Luther King Boulevard and Comal Street (about three-fourths of a mile from Malmquist’s cross). The vehicles came to rest on the grounds of Oakwood Cemetery (Kelly 1996). It is here that two plain wooden crosses, each decorated with one white and one pink carnation, were driven into the ground in memory of the two women. Although the writing on the easternmost cross has faded so as to be illegible except for the faint abbreviation “SRA.” (señora) on the transverse, the other simply states in black ink lettering:

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DIED
1/5/96
SRA. TORRES
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A rock supports the base. The crosses are two feet away from the cemetery fence, and about the same distance from the roadway, facing Martin Luther King Boulevard at a very slight angle toward the eastbound lanes.

A mile and a quarter to the east of the assemblage for Torres and Trevino, slightly west of the intersection of Martin Luther King and Airport Boulevards, is a covered bus stop. Behind the north-facing shelter, stuck in the ground just beyond the cement is a wrought-iron, Greek cross just over two feet high. The rust forming on the cross is almost covered by the bright red wreath and floral display. Incorporating red ribbons, carnations, and roses, as
well as white roses, baby’s breath, and miscellaneous greenery, the wreath hangs slightly beneath a more weathered bunch of white silk roses. There are no identifying markings on the memorial.

On the southeast corner of the heavily traversed intersection, another wrought-iron cross sits in a cleared patch of ground some yards away from two fast-food restaurants. A gold bracelet graces the midsection. Blue, white, yellow, and red silk flowers extend from the base, which also includes a funeral spray of silk flowers spelling out the word “DAD,” and a blue and white plastic open Bible.

I did not uncover any background information about either of the two memorials at the intersection, or discern from informants that it is considered a dangerous area. However, with sixteen lanes of traffic facing each other here it is not difficult to imagine what might have happened. Passing through the intersection several times during the course of my fieldwork, I often observed drivers peering intently at one or the other of the crosses when stopped at the intersection.

Other memorials mark areas well-known for numerous accidents. Tara Biggs had almost completed her first year of high school when she was killed in an automobile accident on the way home from school. A cross now stands as a memorial to Tara on the northeast corner of the intersection of County Road 620 and Debbra Drive, where the collision occurred. Approximately three feet high, the wooden cross with beveled exposed ends and planter base was built by family friend Rockey Piazza (Thatcher 1995).

Several days after Tara’s death, Piazza took the cross to the scene of the accident, where a number of Tara’s friends and teachers from Lake Travis High School had gathered. One by one, they took turns applying white paint until the entire structure was covered (Biggs 1998). The cross faces westbound traffic on 620. Most noticeable from the road is the profusion of silk flowers that fills the planter and spills out over the sides—yellow, red, and purple tulips, pink dahlias, yellow daffodils, white irises, purple,
yellow, and pink pansies, and sunflowers. Almost obscured by the colorful display are a small, white ceramic angel, molded plastic “Lion King” figurines, and a unicorn figurine encased in a snow globe.⁴

A motorist may be able to see the black plaque with white lettering at the center of each side of the top bar, but probably can’t read the words:

TARA
NICOLE BIGGS
7/24/80 - 5/2/95
YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL IN EVERY WAY
WE LOVE AND MISS YOU

Above the plaque on the east side of the vertical piece is a sprig of sunflowers, and a note encased in clear plastic gives the following equation:

\[
\text{cara} + \frac{\text{tara}}{\text{b.f.4.e.}} \\
\text{[best friends forever]}
\]

Below the plaque, another note from Cara, similarly protected from the elements, is now virtually unreadable save for the final line and signature (Fig. 3.16). Photographs of Tara are thumbtacked to the top of the vertical: on the east side, Tara in dance team uniform; on the west side, above a sprig of silk buttercups, a more formal photo portrait.

**Winding Roads and High Speed**

Several yards west of Heather Werchan’s memorial on the same median stands an older structure erected in memory of thirty-
Fig. 3.16 Tara Biggs’s memorial facing oncoming traffic on Farm to Market Road 620 near Lake Travis
two-year-old Frank Beltran. The *Austin American-Statesman* reported that Beltran lost control of his vehicle while fleeing the scene of an accident. Encircled by large stones, the white, wooden cross bears a bronze plate at the transverse which states in black lettering:

In Loving Memories
Frank Beltran
8-31-64 - 5-5-96
R.I.P.

A black-and-white image of Jesus, encased in plastic, is affixed to the vertical piece above the plate with two white thumbtacks. Tacks also hold a similarly protected color photograph of Beltran on the lower part of the vertical, just above a spray of artificial sunflowers in a green plastic vase. Small stones surround the cross and flowers within the larger stone circle.

Three Hyde Park Baptist High School students were killed on May 2, 1991. As the teenagers headed back to school from a lunch break, driver Tammy Franklin lost control of the car on a curve of southbound Guadalupe and hit a tree head-on. The final resting place of the vehicle was marked by a white cross and a spray of flowers adorning the scarred tree. The three unpainted wooden crosses originally erected by classmates of the crash victims were removed twice, an action attributed to “non-believers” by local police (Franklin 1998). Finally, Susan Crane’s then-husband constructed an aluminum cross and set it in concrete (Crane 1998).

When I photographed the site in May, 1997, the engraved silver plaque was partially hidden from view by a bouquet including silk daffodils, white carnations, and buttercups (Fig. 3.17). The plaque bears the following inscription:
Fig. 3.17 Cross on Guadalupe commemorating the 1991 deaths of Nathan Crane, Tammy Franklin and Jeffrey Suggs
In Loving Memory

Tammy Franklin  September 19, 1974—May 2, 1991
Jeffrey Michael Suggs  August 27, 1974—May 2, 1991
Nathan Eugene Richard Crane  November 14, 1974—May 3, 1991

The cross is further surrounded with greenery including artificial pine boughs, probably left during the previous Christmas season. Margie, Tammy’s mother, and Susan, Nathan’s mother, usually place flowers at the site at Easter, Christmas, the anniversary of the accident, and on the teenagers’ birthdays. Susan occasionally finds other items at the site that she attributes to visits from Tammy, Jeffrey, and Nathan’s high school friends. The spray of pink and white silk lilies secured to the tree with a length of matching lace.
was left by Margie (Fig. 3.18). It is her custom to decorate the
tree, as it was the impact with the tree that killed Tammy.

Thomas Vannatta is an English teacher at the aforementioned
Crockett High School in south Austin, across the street from
Jacorey Williams’s memorial. Vannatta’s traffic safety concerns,
which have resulted in political activism (see chapter five), were
galvanized by a fatal accident he witnessed in August of 1989 on
Camp Ben McCulloch Road in northeastern Hays County. This
section of FM 1826 was described to me by one informant as “a
really curvy road where people drive way too fast and have lots of
accidents.” Tami Speir, a fifteen-year-old driver, lost control of
her vehicle as she approached a curve while travelling east. The
memorial constructed by family and friends for Tami, then a cheer-
leader at Dripping Springs High School, included a white wooden
cross, constructed of two-by-fours, and standing about a foot and
a half high (Fig. 3.19).

The maroon plates nailed to each piece stated in beige lettering:

TAMI L. SPIER
88-89
D.S.H.S.
Cheerleader

O-TAMI

When I got to hug you that night
I heard your body tell mine, “I know daddy
but really I’m OK.” That moment
and your little sister
is what keeps me going today.

♥ U-DADDY
A plastic bead necklace hung over the plates on the horizontal piece. The cross was fronted by a large cement paw print—the Dripping Springs High School mascot is the tiger—painted in school colors, maroon outlined in gold. Silk greenery and flowers in purple and pink stood in back of, and beside the cross.

Southwest Parkway, another infamous highway, provides a shortcut from one of Austin’s major north-south roadways, the Mopac Expressway (also called “Loop 1”), to the highways southwest of the city. It is known to area residents as a particularly dangerous zone due to frequent drag racing, including one that ended in the death of Robert Pickwell, age twenty-three. In an effort to avoid colliding with a vehicle he had come upon unexpectedly, Pickwell swerved, thus losing control of his car (Canales
His brother, Mike, and a family friend, Frank Mendez, erected the white, wooden cross in a parkway median near the accident site. Mike built the cross in the family’s garage.

The memorial is identifiable by the black plastic lettering on both sides. Each side of the horizontal reads “In memory of Rob Pickwell,” although the letters on the eastern side are almost entirely obscured by a faded Christmas wreath hung over the crosspiece and assembled from artificial pine boughs, pine cones, and poinsettias. A thin piece of string around the vertical is fastened to an empty wicker basket below a length of wide, striped ribbon. The letters and numbers arranged diagonally down the top half of the eastern side spell out “May 1970,” the month and year of Pickwell’s birth, while the bottom half of the western-facing vertical bears the month and year of his death, “September 1993.” Two bouquets of weatherworn poinsettias sit to the side of the cross, next to the remains of a potted plant still wearing its decorative, though faded wrapping. A plastic bunny and sunflower figurine lie among the dry, brown stems. On the other side of the cross, moulded black plastic pieces, perhaps the top and bottom of an air filter enclosure for a carburetor, rest in the tall grass.

Yet another of the area’s notoriously dangerous east-west thoroughfares is the previously noted county road FM 620, west-northwest of Austin. Just prior to a long arcing of the road to the north, a squat, white cross faces the northbound lanes. Unique among wooden crosses in the area in its structural embellishment, this two-and-a-half foot memorial was erected for Chris Ann Stackable, age twenty-four. Stackable was driving at high speed when she lost control of her vehicle on a curve and collided with oncoming traffic (Wright 1995). Her passenger, twenty-four-year-old Wendell Wayne Sauls, was also killed.

The cross’s vertical piece is topped with a conical motif (as on a white picket fence), and its horizontal ends by subtle cut-outs. The gold-tone plaque at the crosspiece, inset into a built-in frame,
includes Stackable’s name, dates of birth and death, August 17, 1970 and February 2, 1995, as well as the epitaph “ALIVE IN THE LORD—FOREVER IN OUR HEARTS.” A bouquet of pink, white, and purple silk flowers is attached to the bottom half of the vertical by a length of white ribbon.

FM 620 intersects FM 2222 in the hills west of Austin. Closer in to the city, on a sharp curve between Mount Bonnell Road and Loop 360, a cross stands in memory of Robin Conrad Gullacher (Fig. 3.20). Almost four feet tall, with a two-foot cross bar, the white wooden cross bears black etched lettering over much of its face, including Gullacher’s name, dates of birth (“12-31-69”) and death (“9-26-97”), and a series of three-digit numbers (e.g., 587, 586, 569, 501, etc.). The significance of these numbers is unknown. Five medium-sized stones encircle the base. Gullacher, driving a motorcycle, was killed when he lost control on the curve and hit two oncoming cars.

Another cross described to me by a university student flanks the northbound access road of Interstate Highway 35. She first saw the white cross in the fall of 1997, in the median between the on-ramp and the freeway itself. Gone after only a few days, the cross appeared in its present location about one month later. It commemorated the death of Carmen Cortinas Vela, age thirty-two, in a head-on collision on the interstate (Monroe 1997). Set back against the fence line and parallel to the roadway, it was situated in a stand of cedar trees.

The blue plaque at the cross piece was inscribed with white lettering, obscured from full view by a large red ribbon attached to the vertical, and a garland of artificial poinsettias adorning the length of the transverse. Visible were the words:

Carmen Cortinas Vela
Mother, Daughter, Sister
May 7, 1997
Fig. 3.20 Gullacher cross on FM 2222
Fig. 3.21 Wrought-iron cross at intersection of Westgate and William Cannon Boulevards. (Photo courtesy of Christie Everett)
Several sprays of silk poinsettias were stuck in the ground in front of the cross, as were sprigs of holly. Behind it was a tall bouquet of silk marigolds and leaves in autumn colors—gold, orange, red, and brown.

In a median of west William Cannon, about three miles west of IH-35, stands a white, wrought-iron cross, visible to all four lanes of traffic at a ninety-degree angle (Fig. 3.21). I was unable to connect this cross to a particular accident with any certainty. It may be related to a one-car wreck in 1992, in which two teenagers were killed (Lindell 1992).

**Murder Memorial**

Not much further east, and unique to the area, is the memorial to murder victim Shawn Albert Deolloz, a white, wooden cross near the intersection of William Cannon and Emerald Forest Drive. Facing the three westbound lanes of William Cannon, it is set in a cement base in the median with a miniature teddy bear tied around the crosspiece with multi-colored ribbon. The cross’s black plaque states in white, italicized lettering:

Shawn Albert Deolloz

We brought in a Diamond
April 13, 1975
God took an Angel
August 4, 1996

Though you can’t see or touch me—I’ll be near,
And if you listen with your heart, you’ll hear
All my love around you soft and clear

Mom, Michael, Karrizza, Monica, Family & Friends

Set in a plastic green vase and scattered about the base are white silk carnations. The clear glass vase next to the cross is empty.
The location of the cross is approximately equidistant from Deolloz’s former home and the scene of the crime, as reported in the *Austin American-Statesman* on June 8, 1996. William Cannon is the largest, most heavily traversed street between the two locations, perhaps indicative of the family’s desire to memorialize Deolloz in as public a manner as possible. While not connected to a traffic fatality, the cross is akin to the drunk driving protests that the MADD crosses represent in its very public and material commemoration of a crime victim.

**Patterns of Memory**

Deolloz’s memorial is part of one of the most remarkable patterns that emerged during the research period. On William Cannon Boulevard alone I documented seven crosses. The street, which runs for about fourteen miles across the city (southeast to west-northwest) does not have a reputation as particularly dangerous. Most markers have been erected since major improvements, including the addition of lanes and bridges, were made to the thoroughfare in the 1980s and early ‘90s. The distribution of crosses in the area, however, appears to support the general folklore of such markers as indicative of treacherous areas (Foote 1997, 171-2; Henzel 1991, 97-8; Hurt 1997).

Mexican-American Catholics do continue the tradition generally attributed to their Spanish ancestors, which is evidenced by memorials such as Castor’s incorporating the crucifix and, at one time, a representation of the Virgin Mary. Hispanic Catholics are by no means the only individuals who erect crosses, however. Nor are they necessarily the most creative or active. Crosses such as those erected for Tara Biggs and Heather Werchan reflect Protestant aesthetics—there are no crucifixes, rosary beads or holy cards attached to or left at these memorials (Milspaw 1986, 119-20, 132)—as well as the influence of the Hispanic culture of the southwestern United States.

People with whom I spoke did not consider the custom an
ethnically or denominationally exclusive one, nor did they voice adherence to any strict aesthetic principles. These views allow creative license in cross construction, decoration and maintenance. However, there are patterns that emerge from examination of the forty-four crosses described here.

The most widely used material for cross construction is wood, wooden crosses comprising eighty percent of the sample. Of these thirty-five, twenty-three, or fifty-two percent, are painted white. The remaining wooden structures that are finished in some way make up seven percent. Sixteen percent of the crosses are fashioned of wrought-iron or metal. Overall, sixty-eight percent of the crosses, whether wood, iron, or metal, are painted white. In correspondence with geographer Cynthia Henzel’s observations in northeastern Mexico, most of the crosses are between two and four feet high, with those smaller generally unmarked, unpainted wooden constructions (1991, 101). Except for a few whose vertical and horizontal pieces are of equal length (Greek cross), or whose horizontal is the longest piece, the crosses are usually Latin in form (1991, 100). Rings or similar borders fashioned of stone, or piles of rocks at the base of a cross were present at thirteen, or almost forty-three percent of the assemblages.6

Much less common are those seven assemblages which incorporate automobile parts from the wreckage.7 In these memorials, the grieving process encompasses not only the death site, but in a sense the actual instrument of death. Further, although MADD markers were the only approved memorial of this kind during the fieldwork period, they comprise only three out of the forty-four. Additionally, not all drunk driving deaths are commemorated with official MADD crosses.

Far more frequent than the use of political statements (i.e., the MADD plaque which states that the deceased was killed by a “drunk driver” and serves as a public plea for more severe DWI penalties) are religious expressions. In addition to the cross and its many signifieds, friends and relatives of the deceased have placed
magico-religious items (rosaries, angels, crosses) or verbal declarations (“Alive in the Lord,” etc.) at thirteen sites.

Eighty-seven percent of the crosses are accompanied by remembrances of some kind, from the wildflowers atop Robert Manly’s cross on FM 2222 to the stuffed animals and football trading cards left for Jacorey Williams. Most frequent, at eighty-four percent, is the proffering of plants, including flowers, grapevine wreaths, and pine cones, variations of which adorn thirty-seven crosses. Roses, even during the holiday season, appear to be the most popular flower, and are part of fifteen assemblages. Most offered are red roses, found at seven sites, with pink or white ones at four sites each. Carnations, the second-most utilized flower, were in evidence at thirty-four percent of the memorials, and were most often red as well.8

A number of my informants spoke about decorating memorials for certain holidays, especially in cases in which grave site ornamentation is restricted. Many of the assemblages, especially those photographed in December and January, bore evidence of holiday visits in their adornment. In addition to decorative elements associated with the Christmas season, some memorials incorporate items linked with Easter. Twenty percent of the assemblages, for example, included one or more bouquets of red or white poinsettias, often accompanied by ornaments, pine cones, wreaths, holly, or mistletoe. Two memorials were graced with Easter-themed wreaths, and the fence behind the two crosses erected in memory of David Crowley (Fig. 3.9) is decorated by, among other things, plastic Easter eggs. I did not observe any Halloween-oriented objects, such as pumpkin or black cat figurines, nor any items generally used in area Day of the Dead celebrations (candy skulls, skeletons, etc.).

At least one memorial site for an accident victim reflects a decision not to commemorate a death that occurred simultaneously. The accident that killed Chris Ann Stackable also claimed the life of Wendell Wayne Sauls, for whom there is no cross. As Barrera
notes, “sometimes the memory of how the person died may simply be too painful” (1991, 281). In other cases, family members have participated, in greater and lesser degrees, in memorials erected by others.

Neither do the crosses commemorate only the deaths of crime victims. As noted, in some cases the deceased were judged by city or state officials to be at fault in the accident, although family members may maintain otherwise. Absolute guilt or innocence is not always reflected in the construction or maintenance of the assemblages, however, as will be discussed in the next chapter, such questions or judgments often render the memorials active sites of negotiation. Family and friends often use crosses as a locus for conflicting emotions connected to a fatal incident. At each memorial, different understandings of people and events are constructed and consumed through an ephemeral confluence of item and image.

Items placed at many of the crosses reflect an ongoing dialogue with the deceased (notes, inscriptions on bridge railings), and the continuation of missed celebrations (toys, homecoming mums, graduation tassels). The memorials become representative not only of the mystery of death, but of the deceased themselves, encompassing aspects of both lived experience and abstract thought. Anthropologist Robert Plant Armstrong has written that, “such works [of art] exist in a state of tension between these two poles; being subject and object. It is perhaps in the energy of such interplay that a fundamental “power”—or energy—of the work of affecting presence is to be found” (1981, 5-6). Documenting the “affecting presence” of the assemblages extends beyond the cataloguing of their various parts. Centuries of tradition and innovation in cultural expression are embodied in the signs and symbols used to reclaim sites of tragedy.