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Figuring the Cost of Automobility:

Roadside Car Crash Shrines as the Materialization of Collective Trauma

Every year in the United States, around 35,000 people die and over 2 million people are injured in some of the more than 6 million car crashes reported to law enforcement agencies. Calculating not only the economic costs of crashes but also the “quality of life lost” caused by car crashes, including “lost market and household productivity,” the U.S. National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (2016) has estimated that these crashes have a “comprehensive cost to society” of US\$836 billion a year. They add up not only to significant economic costs, but also to the loss of a total of more than 3 million *individuals* killed in traffic fatalities in the U.S. alone in the last 100 years. Scholars such as Dahl (2004) have even claimed that the growing number of deaths to people because of automobiles should be considered a pandemic.

As we imagine a return to greater international and intra-national mobility after the great interruption of the global pandemic, it is important to remember the costs to human life

such a commitment to mobility entails, particularly the cost to life of the many automobile crashes that occur each year. That cost has been hidden from us—not through a conspiracy of silence, but through the operation of automobility itself as a cultural discourse that depends on our ongoing participation in automobility as an ordinary reality. Because they happen at isolated times and places, fatal car crashes never quite cohere into a recognizable *collective* trauma the way war, political violence, and natural disasters or even other actual viral pandemics do, which makes it hard to *figure* their cost, where figure means both “account for,” and also “give recognizable form to.”



Figure 1. *Soledad Canyon Road-East, Overlooking California State Highway 14 (Antelope Valley Freeway), Humphreys, CA, USA, July 2006.* Photograph by the author.

One way they do get inserted back into collective consciousness is through the many crash shrines on the roadside. Roadside crash shrines are places built by ordinary people to

mark the place where someone they know has died in automobile accidents, either while driving cars or motorcycles or being hit by cars as pedestrians, bicyclists, or motorcyclists. Prevalent for decades in the Southwestern U.S. and in Latin America, roadside shrines are now present throughout the U.S. and around the world (Anaya, Chavez, and Arellano 1994).



Figure 2. Top Left: *New Mexico State Highway 68-South, Embudo, NM, USA. August 2003.* Top Right: *Arizona State Highway 85-South, North of Why, AZ, USA. August 2006.* Bottom Left: *Arizona State Highway 85 @ Arizona State Highway 86, Why, AZ, USA. August 2006.* Bottom Right: *US Highway 285-North, South of Española, NM, USA, February 2010.* Photographs and Photo-composite by the author.

Many call them roadside memorials or roadside shrines, but I call them “road trauma shrines” because they are inseparable from both their traumatic origins in violent crashes and their physical and discursive location within the spaces of automobility, the dominant cultural system and structure that continues to make car culture central to American culture, which also

continues to produce car crashes (See Featherstone, Thrift, and Urry 2005). I have been studying this phenomenon in the American Southwest now for over eighteen years and have produced a number of photo-ethnographic works about them, including a recent book titled *Road Scars: Place, Automobility, and Road Trauma* (Bednar 2020).



Figure 3. Left: *Loop 1-North @ US Highway 183, Austin, TX, USA, July 2003.* Right: *US Highway 64-East, West of Taos, NM, USA, August 2003.* Photographs and Photo-composite by the author.

Here today, I will be focusing on the way roadside crash shrines serve as a dispersed material accounting of the cost of the United States' naturalized commitment to automobility. I believe that what I will say here today applies to other car cultures around the world, but it especially applies to the U.S., where automobility is thoroughly intertwined with citizenship. I

will argue that, one at a time and especially when considered in the aggregate, roadside shrines performatively demonstrate the costs of automobility by showing not only the lives lost but the ongoing trauma being suffered by the people who knew and loved those lost.



Figure 4. Left: *Interstate 70-East, West of Green River, UT, USA, July 2006.* Right: *US Highway 290 East at Interstate 35 South, Austin, TX, USA, March 2017.* Photographs and Photo-composite by the author.

Through their unique material form and location on the roadside, road trauma shrines always interpellate at least two overlapping collectives experiencing two different collective traumas: those who knew the victim and know the trauma of the sudden and violent loss acutely in their bodies, and those who know about trauma only because they see it figured in a shrine as they drive by it in public space. That means that roadside shrines figure the costs of automobility not only to those who already know then deeply in their own bodies, but to

everyone else, who might not (yet) know. It is not the same as the collective trauma that exists for the friends and family of the victims, but it is a collective trauma nonetheless, and it is one best understood by studying it through how the trauma is figured in objects placed in a very distinctive cultural form in a very distinctive place, at the site of death, right next the roads that continue to be used by people who may themselves one day also die in or because of a car. That is, as figures of the collective trauma of living and dying in a car culture, road trauma shrines also help us figure that cost: they show us something that otherwise would be hard to account for.



Figure 5. *New Mexico State Highway 76, West of Cordova, NM, USA. August 2003.*
Photograph by the author.

This abstractness is something road trauma shares with other forms of contemporary collective trauma, particularly the experience of being alone together as we live and die

through a global pandemic while also finally reckoning with structural racism through the Black Lives Matter movement. Like road traumas, these traumas form micro-collectives around individual traumatic events, but also only really register as part of a larger collective trauma when they are tied in some way to a pattern that is not necessarily itself sensible in a single event.

Indeed, the fact that they are experienced differentially contributes to them being traumatic to those experiencing that trauma in their bodies, because it amounts to a systematic denial and erasure of their embodied reality. Simultaneously pervasive and disavowed, these differentially-experienced cultural traumas nonetheless permeate bodies, stories, pictures, objects, and places. They are like scars on the skin of the culture, where some see and feel them every day and others are privileged enough to believe they do not even exist.

However, when these traumas suddenly emerge in material form in everyday landscapes, and especially if they draw a crowd demanding justice, everyone is forced to encounter them, regardless of how they feel about them. You see this most clearly today with the Black Lives Matter movement, where people have taken to the streets to not only demand recognition of the systematic traumas to Black bodies, but also to reclaim spaces and objects that systematically deny Black collective traumas, such as Confederate memorials, through strategies of re-placement, by tearing them down, spray-painting them with slogans, or projecting new images on top of them. Although the cultural politics are different, road trauma shrines have a similar material and spatial politics, countering the disavowal of trauma by putting it front of everyone, right there where everyone is. In the case of roadside shrines, that

place “where everyone is,” is the public roadside, which is intrinsically connected to the system that produces not only an ideology of personal autonomy through mobility, but also car deaths.

Reckoning With Road Scars

Roadside shrines form a set of materially and visually evident *scars* on the physical and discursive landscapes of automobility. Collected together, they give form to a massive collective scar that Americans have built up for over a century on the roadside like an endlessly replicating palimpsest of traumas endured in our entanglement with cars and car culture. I invoke the figure of the scar because a scar is a condensed metaphor for the material afterlife of both the initial trauma and the ongoing loss. A scar marks the presence of a traumatic wound in the process of healing. It is a healing wound that leaves a material trace of both the old wound *and* the ongoing temporal process of healing from that wound, so that it persists from the past into the present, like other relics. A scar thus is a physical reminder not only that a past trauma happened, but that it continues to be present *as* a trauma, not simply *as a memory of* an absent trauma. Finally, you can ignore or overlook a scar, but it is still resolutely *there*, materially evidencing the afterlife of trauma. Whether on a body or an object or a landscape or the body politic, scars have a kind of material insistence: they demand recognition; they demand witnessing.



Figure 6. *Spicewood Springs Road West of Loop 360, Austin, Texas, USA, July 2020.*

Photograph by the author.

Sometimes road trauma shrines build actual scars into their form, creating sites buzzing with intensity. This is especially the case with what I call “tree scar shrines,” where trees along the roadside carry evidence of multiple road traumas when there is a shrine built on top of the tree scar itself, as in this example from Austin, Texas, where a recent shrine has been built on top of layers of tree scarring. The scar from an earlier crash itself takes the form of a heart, so the new violent gashes across its surface from the more recent crash are even more poignant, especially as the shrine features an old snapshot of the victim and her friend as well as an icon of La Guardia, and both are right on top of a giant red cross spray-painted on the tree by police

investigators to mark the Point of Impact, forming a palimpsest of scars inscribed upon scars, there for all to see.

All road trauma shrines are made from *some things* that are *placed together* in a *somewhere* for *some time*. All of these makings leave material traces on these objects themselves, which remain there for all to see—the people who know the victims and carry the trauma in their bodies, of course, but also the rest of us, the strangers driving by, who have only the shrine to show us the trauma located there. Road trauma shrines thus not only *contain* and *consist of* an array of objects, but for strangers they also only performatively communicate whatever they do *with and through* these material objects.

At a roadside shrines, trauma adheres to the objects materialized in working-through it. It *stays there*, functioning simultaneously as an *eruption* of the past into the present and an insistent *interruption* of the present. There at shrine sites, trauma *remains to be seen*, meaning that it persists in material form so that it can be witnessed in the present, but also meaning that it also might not exactly be possible to be seen, unless you know how to look at it. But once you know what you are seeing, you are brought into a collective—a collective that recognizes shrines as a materialization of a collective traumatic loss.

David Eng and David Kazanjian (2002: 2-3) argue that since “loss is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained,” the way to “impute to loss a creative instead of a negative quality” is to attend deeply to the way material remains of loss find us in the present. In the same volume, Judith Butler (2002) argues that loss is constantly “bringing bodies to the foreground” in the “anachronistic” material form of “voiceless mimes” that both register loss and “become the means by which that loss is

registered” (470). Material remains perform a past trauma whereby the “past is not actually past in the sense of ‘over,’ since it continues as an animating absence in the present, one that makes itself known precisely in and through the survival of anachronism itself” (468).

Importantly, Butler argues that this recognition of shared trauma and loss remains a condition for *being together*. A collective that recognizes itself through loss is also always bound by loss; likewise, a place of loss is “a place where belonging now takes place in and through a common sense of loss.” At such a place, “Loss becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community *cannot* overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community” (472).

The problem is that such a “community” does not yet think of itself as a collective, much less a community bound by loss. The closest you get to this kind of *collective knowing of knowing you are in a collective* is among the people undergoing road trauma most directly—the people building, rebuilding, and visiting roadside shrines for friends and family. But where a community of loss knows itself to be a collective before a trauma occurs, road trauma shrines actually *produce* a collective by materially interpellating strangers into a public (Warner 2002). Road trauma shrines address strangers as if we are part of a different collective—in this case, a *collective of stranger drivers*, where each of us has something in common with the other strangers driving next to us as we drive alone but together, knowing that someone is asking us to see that their trauma has something to do with us here now, and not just to them “over there” or “back then.”

Refusing to Leave the Site of Trauma

In “Trauma and Experience,” Cathy Caruth (1995: 9-10) argues that the process of performing trauma produces its own trauma: “for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but the passing out of it that is traumatic, [where] *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*.” Consequently, “trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site.” Evidence of this process is palpable everywhere at trauma shrines—while they are being actively managed and revised, but especially when they are no longer actively maintained but still present. One day, the active griefwork will end. The matter will simply *be there* instead of *being (becoming) used* to maintain continuing bonds. Extending even further, if a shrine is allowed to decay into nothingness, it will be displaced entirely. This happens all the time to shrines to individuals, where you can watch them be born, live, and die—sometimes in the space of weeks, sometimes years.

But then there are those recalcitrant places, the ones that won’t go away on their own because people won’t let them die, even if it is clear that they are aging on the road. Their persistence materializes a different truth: that people using these sites refuse to leave the site—and not only for what it means to themselves, but what they want it to mean to everyone else: not only the ones who know the trauma, but also the rest of us driving by.

While they live their lives on the side of the road, shrines not only demonstrate elaborately staged “continuing bonds” (Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996; Maddrell 2012) between mourners and the victim at the site, but also generate what Kathleen Stewart (2019: 343) calls “the actual residue of people ‘making something of things.’” When that “residue” remains present over time at particular places, it gets seen by countless people. That is particularly the case with shrines like this one in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which has been

continually managed since the late 1980s, longer than the person it commemorates was even alive, and which I've photographed multiple times from 2003 to 2021 (see Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 7. Top: *Interstate 25-North @ Cerrillos Road, Santa Fe, NM, USA, August 2003 and February 2012.* Bottom: *Interstate 25-North @ Cerrillos Road, Santa Fe, NM, USA, February 2012.* Photographs and Photo-composite by the author.



Figure 8. *Interstate 25-North @ Cerrillos Road, Santa Fe, NM, USA, April 2021.*
Photograph by the author.

Conclusion

Road trauma is dispersed and ubiquitous, everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Its dispersal contributes to a kind of structural forgetting that the United States has been undergoing the cultural trauma of living and dying and almost dying in cars for over 100 years now. One way to recognize this is to know road trauma in your body, or to know people who know, or to read or hear or see statistical representations or stories about people who know. Another way is to study the material objects and structures at road trauma shrines themselves to see how they figure that trauma in a form that can be recognized in a very different way.

Because when things are placed somewhere for some time for some purpose, their purpose gets inscribed into their matter. And when road trauma, and especially the trauma of living with that trauma, gets inscribed into a site's matter and stays there over time, it provides evidence of the fact that every road trauma shrine performs two traumas at the same time, in the same place, through the same objects: the collective trauma of knowing trauma in your body with others who know it, too, and the collective trauma of being shown trauma you don't know, but are slowly coming to know, each time you drive by a roadside shrine and notice it, if only for a moment.

Embedded as they are in someone else's territory, radically tied to a particular location on the roadside, unable to police their own boundaries, heavily regulated and actually illegal in most states, and unable to make themselves officially known as cultural traumas, each road trauma shrine fights its way into collective consciousness individually, one by one. But when you start thinking of each one as part of something larger, you can see how they give material

form to the undeniable fact that many, many people have died, are dying, and will die in car crashes in the U.S.

The goal in analyzing road trauma shrines is the same there in analyzing any phenomena rooted in automobility: to see the complexity of intersections, confluences, convergences, anachronisms, displacements, and discord of our present moment and place, but also to see the continuities with other times, other realities, and elsewhere.

Put simply, crash shrines embody a refusal to accept car crash deaths as collateral damage within automobility and an attempt to generalize individual losses into collective losses. Roadside shrines perform a silent and implicit challenge to the systematic forgetting of car crash deaths as well as the dream of frictionless physical and social mobility that has fueled car cultures now for over a century. As they do, they bring the politics of collective traumatic affect into focus within the discourses and spaces of automobility, challenging drivers to remember that the everyday, ordinary traumas experienced within contemporary automobility are not an externalized by-product of automobility but are instead a central fact in and figure of the system itself.

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