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Beyond Memento Mori:
Understanding American Religion Through Roadside Shrines

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Religious Studies

by

Allison Elizabeth Solso

March 2015

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Vivian-Lee Nyitray, Chairperson

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The Dissertation of Allison Elizabeth Solso is approved:

Committee Chairperson

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Beyond *Memento Mori*:
Understanding American Religion Through Roadside Shrines

by

Allison Elizabeth Solso

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Religious Studies
University of California, Riverside, March 2015
Dr. Vivian-Lee Nyitray, Chairperson

Using Daniele Hervieu-Leger's concept of a "chain of memory," this dissertation argues that creating roadside shrines to the deceased constitutes unique religious behavior, allowing collective memory to maintain vitality in a changing world and connecting generations through communion. That is, collective memory is enlivened by creating myths, rituals and performances aimed at transcending the pain associated with rupture and loss and facilitating the grieving process. In examining the sacred space, ritual life, identity politics and democratic ethos of shrines, this project asserts that shrine building and maintenance has long constituted an important public mourning ritual throughout American history, particularly in moments of dislocation and mass migration. This complicates traditional notions of public and

private in the US and grapples with questions about death and dying in modern America. This project is unique in investigating vernacular memorials, rather than governmentally-sanctioned monuments, and in overcoming decades of scholarship that has ignored shrines' deep religious significance both for those in mourning and those who interact with them in the public sphere.

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Introduction

For residents of Kingman, Arizona, a small desert town on the state's busy highway 40, April 21, 2007 is a date that continues to resonate, as the town bid a somber farewell to fallen sheriff's deputy Philip Rodriguez. Rodriguez had just completed a shift and was heading eastbound on the interstate when he lost control of his patrol vehicle, hurdled off the road and screeched to a halt. News of the incident spread quickly, as the Arizona Department of Public Safety (DPS) responded to the scene after many travelers alerted authorities to the accident. When Rodriguez did not respond on his radio, his colleagues in the Mojave County sheriff's office feared the worst. They were right to do so. The severity of the accident was enough to eject Rodriguez, who succumbed to grave injuries and died at the scene. That cool spring night remains shrouded in mystery; there was no obvious reason for the accident. The roads were no more hazardous than usual and neither was the weather on that particular evening. No real reason for Deputy Rodriguez's vehicle leaving the road could be determined and the community, including his surviving fiancé and parents, seemed to be at an utter loss.

I was not present to witness these events. I did not know Mr. Rodriguez or his family, nor was I a local resident to hear reports of his death in the news or read them in the papers. My only insight into this tragedy came as I too, made my way down highway 40, en route to Flagstaff. As I had become accustomed to doing, I kept a vigilant watch for roadside shrines, those material artifacts that I had come to identify as, on the one hand, beacons of hope, community and continued love in the face of

death and, on the other, as manifestations of confusion, ambiguity and vulnerability. Approaching a shrine was, and continues to be, a rather uncertain enterprise—I never know quite what I am supposed to do or how I will feel. And approaching Rodriguez’s memorial, this proved to be the case once more.

What first caught my eye was a modest white metal cross with hand painted lettering across it reading: “Deputy Philip “P-Rod” Rodriguez,” and “Protect in Peace.” Nearby a metal sculpture had been forged and painted the signature black and white of police cars. It read “P-35,” a still unclear tribute to this deceased officer. Around the base of the cross, tributes had been placed for Philip, presumably by his friends, family and, as became obvious, his colleagues in the Sheriff’s Department. An unopened, sun-bleached can of Natural Ice beer, silk and live flowers baked into the dirt by the desert heat, angel figurines and metal roses plunged into the earth, and toy police cars with gaping, plastic smiles encircled the base of the cross, which had been reinforced with PVC piping and rocks gathered from the roadside.

Trying to deduce the details of a person and a life from their shrines can be a difficult task. When I first approached the cross, I found it rather curious that I was looking at what appeared to me to be a Star of David, a traditional Jewish symbol, emblazoned on a Christian cross. This confounded me even further when I noticed that hung like a scarf around the arms of the cross was a pair of handcuffs. What did all of these things mean, I wondered, and how could I go about knowing this man by this stuff? It was only once I noticed the toy police cars and other law enforcement ephemera that I realized I’d mistaken the six-pointed star-shaped sheriff’s badge for a

symbol of Judaism and the handcuffs were likely a tribute left by a fellow officer with little else on their person to offer. It was likely also that someone without a brought offering or tribute of some kind, instead, created an impromptu art piece out of quartz and other rocks strewn across this roadside. This art installation, modest as it was, did well acting as a makeshift introduction to the space of the shrine, entitling it “P-Rod,” this man’s nickname.

Trying to deduce the details of survivors is equally as fraught as trying to construct an identity of the deceased. What could I tell about the people that took their own lives in their hands and pulled onto the highway 40 shoulder to remember their beloved friend or relative? After surveying this landscape for some time, I could come to only a few conclusions about those surviving Philip: many believed in an afterlife, many had been to this spot multiple times over the course of years and many sought a place to communicate with him. References to heaven, meeting again and resting were abundant, as were figures of angels and written prayers. Fellow officers left behind medals, badges and other police paraphernalia spanning at least four years. One friend even left behind a carved wooden sign reading: “Can’t believe its been three years without you. I miss you bro. R.I.P. P-35.” Evidence of communication was present in the notes and cards scattered by the winds, but maybe the most compelling and heart wrenching sign of a urgent need to communicate was in the presence of a small, stone garden bench near the cross, just far enough away to feel outside the immediate shadow cast by the cross, suggesting contemplation and perhaps even conversation. In my interpretation, this bench was likely placed by the

bereaved when they realized they needed a comfortable way to linger in this important spot. The bench provided respite for the weary of heart and spirit.

Driving away from the shrine, less than a half mile down the lonely highway, sits a more official monument to Rodriguez. Standing like an attentive soldier, guarding the roadside, is a state-sponsored metal sign reading: “Deputy Philip Rodriguez Memorial Highway.” Though I cannot be sure about the sequence of events, it is likely that the roadside shrine was built immediately after news of Rodriguez’s death was announced. Indeed, many seem to be built in the hours and days directly following deadly incidents. So, it caused me to wonder, why would a state-sponsored, official monument be necessary when a loving tribute had already been built by his friends, family and colleagues? His roadside shrine was not removed or, if it was, it was rebuilt with haste and has withstood the test of time. As if others had had similar questions, or had sought to personalize what might be interpreted as a rote memorial, a decaying bouquet of once lush flowers hung limp from the metal stake driving the memorial highway marker into the craggy desert floor.

For some reason, this roadside shrine, more than many others, stayed with me and lingered in my imagination long after I’d made it to my destination. I was intrigued by what I had found because it seemed so elaborate, intentional and it had clearly taken much effort by survivors to remember Rodriguez in this way. When I sought out more information about the victim, I was struck by the massive outpouring of support for the victim’s family, friends and colleagues, much of which was anonymous. Several websites play host to virtual shrines for Rodriguez, memorials

for the digital age. One particularly touching webpage is called Officer Down Memorial Page, which claims as its goal: “remembering all of law enforcement’s heroes.”¹ Although Rodriguez is said to have reached the “end of his watch” in 2007, the reflection page evinces the ongoing relationship survivors continue to have with him. As recently as May 5, 2014, Philip’s father left a poem for his son, ensuring his boy’s legacy lives on, all these years later.² As of December 2014, there were nearly three hundred written tributes on Rodriguez’s online memorial page, stretching back to 2007 and left by everyone from fellow officers, mothers of other fallen deputies, grief support groups, federal and state officials and, of course, family and friends. There are also several news stories detailing the accident’s horrific nature, which included his vehicle flipping, rolling and ejecting him. Many of which highlight his youth and short duration on the job before meeting his untimely demise.

Rodriguez’s roadside shrine remains intriguing because it is so multifarious: there is, of course, his shrine, and the sacred space it creates around itself, freezing time as it absorbs the emotion of the bereaved; there are also his other memorials, those official and digital versions that democratize his death, spreading its news and impact among the masses and inviting participation in a slightly different, less active, though no less efficacious manner. His shrine, in all of its complexity, richness and diversity really encapsulates the variety of responses brought about by tragedy and, really, this is

¹ <http://www.odmp.org/officer/18852-deputy-sheriff-philip-anthony-rodriguez>. December 2014.

² <http://www.odmp.org/officer/reflections/18852-deputy-sheriff-philip-anthony-rodriguez/>. Accessed December 2014.

what roadside shrines are: sites of disruptive trauma. They are landscapes altered by death that forever change the site, but also invariably alter lives. Shrines represent the last place a loved one was alive, and perhaps where their final breath was drawn. By their death, the land becomes sacrilized and can, then, act as a portal between survivors continued lives in this realm and the world of the dead. Survivors believe that they can best access their beloved dead in these spaces.

However, roadside shrines are also places that defy this type of easy classification. Like the trauma they represent, roadside shrines are complex. While, on the one hand, they are material manifestations of trauma, intended to help heal and continue relations between the living and the dead, they are also often physical reminders of intense despair and confusion. Sometimes they are crime scenes and evidence lockers. Sometimes they are quasi-cemeteries, home to death rituals and the creation of traditions. Noting this, the question that began to really drive this project is: *why do Americans tend to build roadside shrines in response to trauma?* The answer that I eventually came to is that trauma forces people into liminal states and that a shrine's materiality ultimately reflects and constitutes this liminality. I also discovered that sometimes this liminality is eschewed in an effort to "move on" and, at other times, liminality is embraced as a way of mitigating the affect of the perceived finality of death.

Before beginning field research, I imaged this project as one that might reveal the ways in which Americans appropriate religiosity when in states of mourning or bereavement. These, somehow, seemed like separate entities: religion and mourning.

I imagined I would investigate how religion influenced individual and group behavior among trauma survivors and, to further expand this to American culture, examine our various public reactions to the construction of these material objects. In this way, I imagined that this paper would substantially contribute to questions of religion and public policy and religion in the public square writ large.

However, as I went out into the field, I became haunted by questions about liminality. I found myself always in the uncomfortable position of outside observer, on the one hand, and a sensitive fellow human being, seeking to know the deceased. I quickly realized that those feelings were most palpable within the space of the shrine itself. Even looking back later at pictures and reviewing notes, that almost urgent feeling of uncomfortable curiosity vanished; it was really standing in front of so many shrines that those feelings welled up in me and I realized that it was because I was utterly powerless and vulnerable. I didn't really *know* what to do. I tried to act in what I considered to be an appropriate manner by lowering my voice, leaving a flower, touching things minimally and gently, never disturbing structures themselves and removing any debris that might be cluttering the space. However, I was perfectly willing to walk within clear boundaries, perhaps made of rocks or candles to reach something of interest, trudging mud and dirt across spaces, taking countless photos of things and people I did not know. My relationship to these spaces was always confused, even as I did my best to maintain respect and some modicum of decorum. The need to pay respect and tribute was deeply motivating because one point of clarity I did have was that this place was special: it wasn't quite the earth anymore,

and yet it didn't seem like the heaven. Instead, it was a different, more ambiguous, more chaotic plane that I now understand as a thoroughly liminal space.

As I began to write, I noticed myself drawn again and again to issues of defining what, exactly, religion is and, relatedly, how to define something like ritual behavior or sacred space. Realizing that these terms were becoming more and more imprecise and slippery, I opted to allow for complexity, breaking the false relationship I had created in my mind about mourning on the one hand, and religion on the other. Indeed, as I wrote and remembered and organized my field work and interviews, it became clear that, for people who build shrines, mourning and ritual are one and the same. Perhaps this gets at a now overarching theoretical construct running throughout the project, which might contribute a new facet to the ever expanding and always contentious definition of what I, or any scholar, means when we say "religion." For some, after surviving trauma, religion is a tool with which one (re)orients their universe, (re)constructs their past and present and attempts to forge a reconciled future after surviving trauma. The ritual activity at shrines is aimed at exactly these goals.

So because the shrine and the space surrounding it was clearly what was causing both myself and survivors so much angst, confusion and wonder, it seemed appropriate that they, as material manifestations of such ritual activity, be pushed to the forefront not as an example of a particular behavior, but as a phenomenon in their own right. Rather, this wasn't some sub-current of religious practice, but indeed a phenomenon that transcended place, time, race/ethnicity, language and culture and,

therefore, begs for deeper study and inclusion of how scholars conceive of American religions and American religious history. Therefore, the way I now conceive of the project has transformed. The research question that this work now answers is: how does material culture of religion act as a locus of liminality? Although my work has focused on my area of expertise, the United States, the same question could, and should, be asked of other global cultures and of new material phenomena.

While the intersection of material culture, liminality and memory is my focus, this project also makes other contributions to the study of religion in the United States. This study argues that Americans have an inclination to publicly proclaim their remembrance of loved ones, in ways different from how other scholars have approached this question in the past. In examining the literature on American commemorative activity, what is most often studied are what I have taken to calling “institutionalized” or “official” monuments to the dead, including statuary, architecture, plaques, etc. dedicated to figures of national or regional significance created by the government or other government-sanctioned bodies. These receive tacit endorsement from the public and, as such, acquire the ability to streamline and homogenize public opinion. These “built landscapes,” to borrow phraseology from material culture scholar Colleen McDannell, , are imbued with social capital, giving them voices with which to narrate American history and reiterate cultural myth.³ A variety of scholars are engaged in these types of studies, though perhaps the scholar

³ Sometimes these mythologies glaze over heterodox feelings that may exist, including ambivalence or ambiguity about some of America’s darker chapters. At other times, these feelings are front and center, speaking as a voice of protest against a checkered history.

from which the present work received most inspiration is Ericka Doss. Her seminal work, *Memorial Mania*, delves deeply into a synthetic history of memorials in the US, with which Americans have been pathologically “obsessed.” I have taken up the call, provided by Doss, for further investigation into “contemporary American memorials” by “consider[ing] commemoration within the relational dynamics of physical space, social practice, cultural theory, national identity, and public feeling.”⁴ I do so, however, by studying “extra-governmental” shrines that refuse this type of homogenization, and do so with the belief that these too, and perhaps in more interesting ways, speak to an American obsession with commemoration.⁵ In fact, the very nature of shrines as grassroots, populist, even *antiestablishment*, capture the voices of people who may not always have access to, but who are nonetheless integral pieces of, the story of our national heritage and identity.

It is important at this juncture to juxtapose my definition of “roadside shrine,” to Doss’, and from the majority of other scholars who have studied these memorials. While there is no uniformity in these displays and no conscious effort toward making them appear that way, there are a few basic features of shrines which, working in concert with one another, form a coherent definition of “shrine” as I use it in this study. First and foremost, shrines mark a place of trauma and violence that led to a sudden, unexpected death and, in so doing, provide a material site for mourning. They are intended to acknowledge the death of a loved one, and, for many, they act as an outlet through which mourners might channel their otherwise inexpressible grief.

⁴ Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 58.

⁵ Belshaw and Purvey, *Private Memory, Public Grief*, 67.

Even if somebody didn't draw their last breath at that precise spot, if they incurred injury there that eventually took their life, shrines are erected. Secondly, these shrines very often speak to the circumstances of death. This may include physical evidence of an auto wreck, a bottle of alcohol or a fleeting drug reference. Their placement alone often draws attention to important public issues like highway safety and traffic conditions. Even when such references are not made explicitly, the implication of danger is certainly there. Thirdly, shrines are, by their very nature, public proclamations. According to folklorist Jack Santino, before them, we are all equal; shrines are not respecters of persons. Because the public is "undifferentiated" in their contact with shrines, they possess a dual character: "the duality is expressly [in] that they both commemorate deceased individuals and suggest an attitude toward a related public issue."⁶ They are intended, in other words, to draw attention to political and social issues, while they *simultaneously* acknowledge the life and death of the deceased. Again, the circumstance of death can be gleaned when these public proclamations are overt. Fourth, these shrines are magnets of the public eye. In this regard, Santino is once again instructive: "once set out before an undifferentiated public, the polysemy inherent in these assemblages allow for a broad range of readings and associations by passersby, regardless of the initial intentions of the originators."⁷ That is to say, shrines are open to interpretation. Such interpretations are *not* subject to an orthodox hermeneutic, but rather, are complicated by competing public understandings. Simultaneously, and in tension with this recognition, is the

⁶ Jack Santino, *Spontaneous Shrines*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid*, 11.

fact that sometimes shrines go completely unnoticed in their ubiquity. Especially in some parts of the American Southwest, they are virtually omnipresent and, consequently, draw very little public consideration. Their public lives, then, resist easy pigeonholing.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly for this study, is that shrines create space for *communitas*. The term *communitas* refers to intense feelings of group solidarity, togetherness and intimacy—the very nature of community. Anthropologist Victor Turner elaborates this concept, explaining that *communitas* is most often felt by a group of people who experience *liminality* together, when they are in transitional phases of life, “betwixt and between.”⁸ Arnold van Gennep, on whom Turner builds significantly, explains this feeling as being “on the threshold” of a new phase of life: one is not the same as when the process began, and will be similarly changed when the process ends.⁹ In the liminal state, one is inherently vulnerable, as identity is rendered fluid and ambiguous and one’s orientation in time and space is uncertain. Relatedly, Hege Westergaard, a Norwegian anthropologist, reminds us that Van Gennep also “regarded grief as a period of transition, a liminal phase for the bereaved, in which the mourners and the dead person constituted a special group.”¹⁰ Grief, in other words, *forces* liminality upon people, much the same way that such sudden death does—this relationship is cyclical. Grief, as we will see in detail below, is mediated and processed by ritual activity and religious reasoning. This ultimately

⁸ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 132.

⁹ Arnold Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 168.

¹⁰ Hege Westergaard, “*Like a Trace*,” 155.

begs the question: can the activity at shrines be understood as ritual behavior? I argue that yes, it can and, for most participants, it is thoroughly imbued with sacrality. Shrines, in other words, constitute sacred space for those who have built and maintain them.

This feeling of communal togetherness manifests itself in various ways at shrines by building, reinforcing and maintaining a material entity together, thereby representing the ineffable social bonds undergoing a similar process. Shrines help people build and maintain a sense of continuity, especially as they share grief in the face of rupture. David Chidester, who writes extensively on death and dying in world religions, explains that these performances and ritual activities can be understood as aiming to “[help] reconstruct a community disrupted by the loss of one of its members, [as] the deceased continues to play an important role in restoring and maintaining the social order of the community.”¹¹ Scholar of religion Kathleen Garces-Foley, who argues that self-expression is key to continuing and reinforcing social bonds, explains that “the opportunity for self-expression is not only therapeutic; it also serves to bind together the griever, some of whom may be strangers, into a temporary community in a society where it is difficult to form intimate bonds.”¹²

Having defined shrine in this manner, I distance myself somewhat from other scholars, who use a range of other terms for this practice. I use the word “shrine” for the phenomenon under investigation, as it most precisely designates the space of the

¹¹ David Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence*, 2-3.

¹² Kathleen Garces-Foley, *Death and Religion*, 225.

built structure as *sacred* and highlights the communion that occurs there between the living and the dead. I am not the first to insist on the use of this label as opposed to others that have sometimes been applied, such as memorial and monument, though it may, in fact, be both or all three simultaneously.¹³ I interchangeably use the term roadside shrine and vernacular shrine, depending on the emphasis needed at the moment. Using the term “roadside shrine,” of course, is locational, physical and geographical, highlighting embeddedness in place. While not all shrines are near roadsides, when they are, this simple fact drastically affects how the public responds to them, as roads are almost always publicly held. This may also have important implications for the initial process of shrine building and the continued maintenance, especially when the road is treacherous, elevated, rocky, etc.

The term “vernacular shrine” is one suggested by Doss and bolstered by the theory of the vernacular espoused by folklorist Leonard Primiano. Although Doss ultimately uses the terms “temporary memorial” as her preferred designation, she also finds little fault in the use of “vernacular shrines,” which are “distinguish[ed] as individual, handmade, localized, and grassroots projects rather than officially sanctioned or institutionalized kinds of commemoration.”¹⁴ This bespeaks the unique, one-of-a-kind elements that characterize these memorials. No two shrines are exactly alike; though there may exist overlapping elements, these are fiercely distinctive, dynamic material forms. Their uniqueness derives from their highly localized nature,

¹³ For more on this debate see especially Ericka Doss *Memorial Mania* and Jack Santino *Spontaneous Shrine and the Public Memorialization of Death*.

¹⁴ Ericka Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 67.

right down to the individual family units and small social groups that preserve the memories of their loved ones in this way. Primiano reminds us of this key point, when he explains that the label “vernacular,” includes “features...native or peculiar to a particular country or locality.”¹⁵ The vernacular is capable of capturing shrines’ profoundly local nature—they are by and from a particular place.

The phrase “vernacular shrine” also indicates the fact that they are assembled without the oversight of official religious bodies. Although there are certainly circumstances in which these shrines have met with official sanction, most often, they are erected regardless of how religious organizations react, especially when those reactions are negative. Praising the term vernacular, Primiano explains that terms have become “derogatory [including] ‘folk’, ‘unofficial’ or ‘popular’ religion and have then [been] juxtaposed...on a two-tiered model with ‘official’ religion.”¹⁶ The suggestion here is that terms like “folk” is now a term of derision, something to be dismissed as an aberration against an established orthodoxy. He claims that this, then, “residualizes” the religious lives of the people and reifies the fictive “authenticity” of religious institutions.¹⁷ Shrines are assembled without recourse to ‘orthodox’ standards of religious behavior and ritual, and this generally holds true across religious boundaries.

The term “spontaneous shrine” is heavily favored in the literature on this phenomenon. While I understand the impulse to use this terminology, it seems to me

¹⁵ Leonard Primiano, “*Vernacular Religion*,” 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 39.

to better describe the conditions of death rather than the shrine itself. In other words, the death that the shrine commemorates certainly must have been spontaneous to be met with such ritual action and immense grief. However, the process of building a shrine itself is by no means a spontaneous practice. Yes, the decision to build may have been made in haste, sometimes immediately proceeding the death, but the spontaneity stops there. Builders critically consider, even agonize over, what should be placed at a shrine to create what I understand to be idiosyncratic deathscapes. Items are bought, collected, assembled, in some cases sacrificed and sacrilized, a process which takes time to plan, design and execute.

This term is even applied when families and friends have gone to extensive lengths to ensure that shrines are *permanent*, which doesn't seem to work with the implied rush and perhaps shoddy construction, of spontaneity. Early on in my fieldwork, I chanced upon a towering, glittering, seven foot tall purple shrine—it was hard to miss. It was immediately clear that this shrine was built to last. Forged out of solid metal, and anchored to the ground, it was built to endure the elements, vandals and anything else that might disturb it. Imagining the process of building and installing this hefty cross seemed overwhelming, nearly unworkable, when all of a sudden, something down the gully behind it caught my eye. A shovel, plastic tubs and an open, discarded bag of concrete remained in the ravine below—traces of the work, in this case the sweaty, physical labor, involved in shrine construction. Suffice it to say, the trips to the hardware store and lugging this imposing chunk of metal up a steep slope can hardly be characterized as spontaneous activity. This also calls into

question Doss' use of the term "temporary memorials." Certainly some are more permanent than others, but most strive for some semblance of durability.

Scholars themselves seem to acknowledge the issue at hand, even as they continue in the use of spontaneous shrine. Doss concedes that "however impromptu they may seem, temporary memorials are actually highly orchestrated and self-conscious acts of mourning aimed at expressing, codifying, and ultimately managing grief."¹⁸ She's exactly right to point out that there is orchestration to these ritual acts. Perhaps she is indicating that these take place immediately upon the death being remembered. On this, too, Doss has overlooked the solemn fact that families and friends of the deceased are often dealing with planning funerals, making financial and familial arrangements and other activities right after a relative dies. When the death occurs in public, and especially if multiple fatalities occur at the spot, there are often lengthy investigations of the site, which can become both crime scene and media circus.

Because vernacular shrines are just that, reflections of location, both in time and space, I have been met with an unrelenting diversity of material forms and messages, when examining them. In seeking to understand shrines in their rich complexity, I have employed a mixed methodological, interdisciplinary approach, reflecting the overall nature of education in religious studies. To begin with, I dove into field research from an ethnographic perspective. An advisor once asked me a simple, yet provocative, question: "when you look, what do you see?" To answer this,

¹⁸ Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 67.

I visited roughly 350 shrines in every corner of the US, with special attention paid to the American Southwest, both because shrines seem more prevalent there and because of my own embeddedness in Southern California. I drove and hiked rural back roads and urban environments alike, constantly seeking out shrines where they seemed to occur most: at dangerous corners and on long stretches of open road where accidents are frequent. When I spotted a shrine, I documented a description, took photographs, lingered on the land in an attempt to glean the conditions that lead to a fatality and noted my impressions and feelings. As I struggled with my own feelings of uneasiness at having trespassed on someone's sacred space, I decided to begin leaving behind a flower at each shrine I visited. I also got into the habit of leaving behind a hand-written note on the back of one of my business cards, which explained that I had been there, had been moved to reach out and would love to talk to whoever was maintaining the shrine. This technique ultimately produced twenty one interviews.¹⁹

Leaving the door open for family and friends to contact me seemed the least invasive and most respectful manner in which to approach such a delicate subject. This seemed the most humane option available, as my very presence in the community created by the shrine might not have been welcomed readily. Indeed, I did have some experiences in which people were offended by my inquiries. One such incident that stands out to me was visiting the Isla Vista neighborhood on campus at the University of California, Santa Barbara in the immediate aftermath of a mass

¹⁹These interviews were conducted according to UCR HRRB protocol number HS 13-048.

shooting there in June 2014. I got the feeling that people thought I was intruding on their mourning and their grief when I approached them to ask questions. This was confirmed by people refusing to speak with me. Or, if they did, they simply offered quick, one word responses and seemed annoyed to have to do so. Although I was not the first outsider to be shunned by the Isla Vista community, it certainly resonated with me just how invasive a project of this type can potentially seem to survivors.²⁰ I have the sense that their guilt at having survived, their inability to process grief and their paradoxical, ambiguous feelings of how to go on were only exacerbated by someone lingering with them, seeking answers.

These negative reactions were not, by any means, the norm, however. In fact, most people for whom I left notes and sought an interview never contacted me at all. I cannot say with certainty why this occurred, but I'd venture to guess that people simply didn't know what to make of me and my note. Thankfully, though, there were a few who were kind enough to respond to me, and this constituted the bulk of my interviews with shrine builders. Luckily for me, I noticed on a scant handful of shrines that builders had left their phone numbers. Each one had done so with instructions to call in the event that the cross or structure they had created needed to be removed. In these instances, I called these folks to arrange an interview, ultimately producing three more interviews with shrine builders. I also interviewed others that

²⁰ Residents of Isla Vista, especially small business owners and UCSB students earned a reputation in the news for shunning outsiders because, in their view, news outlets were exploiting their grief for social/political gain. In examining images of the aftermath of the massacre, posters and signs reading "news crews go home," "let us mourn," "remembrance not ratings," "let us grieve in peace" were prevalent, especially around the focal shrine. This general feeling of exploitation and invasion may have led to people's mistrust or irritation toward me.

offered insight into the shrine phenomenon. This included curators, historians, park service officers, city officials and scholars. In total, I interviewed thirty three people who had particular public insight into shrine building, even if they did not build shrines themselves. When possible, these interviews took place in person. Since the geographic area of study was so wide, however, participants were routinely interviewed over the phone. In total, then, I conducted fifty seven formal interviews.

I also made extensive use of less formal, unrecorded conversations that I had with people about shrines. Specifically, this included the staff and curators at Museums and archives, passersby, property owners, bystanders, business owners, and government employees. These conversations were not planned, but happened spontaneously and organically. Most often, their land or business had been some how impacted by shrine building activity, or they had known folks who had undertaken this ritual activity. While a few of these people are noted throughout the work by name, many of them are not. This does not speak to the quality of their contributions, but rather the brevity of our discussions. In many instances, these interlocutors provided clarity and insight that I would not have otherwise been able to access. The nature of fleeting conversation makes a specific number of these conversations hard to capture, but I'd venture to say that I likely had twenty to thirty such talks.

Historical research has added a substantive backdrop against which to study these shrines. First, I visited the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, to study the non-circulating collection of materials on shrines at the Center for Southwest Studies. This revealed a collection of interviews with shrine makers undertaken in the

early 1990s by scholars Troy Fernandez and Kathleen McRee. These acted as important supplements to my work in California, as all of their interviews had taken place around the state of New Mexico more than twenty years prior.

I also undertook archival research at the Littleton Museum in Littleton, CO, the site of the Columbine High School mass shooting in 1998 and at the Maryland Area Storage Facility, maintained by the Parks Service in Landover, MD. At both locations, I was given private access to the material and digital archives. In Littleton, this archive constitutes every item that was left behind and used in the construction of the roadside shrines for the shooting victims. In Landover, every item left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, DC is archived in a massive storage warehouse, where it is tagged, sorted and organized. Speaking with the employees and volunteers who work at these locations everyday was an invaluable experience that allowed me to glimpse what shrine building in the wake of catastrophe means on a national scale, and also, why we, as a people, feel it right to keep these discarded treasures safe in museums and warehouses.²¹

Finally, I travelled to Manhattan's ground zero to visit the National 9/11 Memorial and the surrounding area, looking for continued evidence of national mourning and shrine building.²² One of the most fortuitous aspects of this research was time spent at St. Paul's Chapel, home to the first responders and aid workers in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The chapel now maintains its own archive of

²¹ I was also invited to the archive at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC to visit the 9/11 archive, but was unable to attend.

²² I visited on September 10, 2013, before access could be granted to the now-open 9/11 Museum adjacent to the memorial.

material artifacts left behind as tribute to those remembered. It also invites public participation in remembering by offering spaces in which to pen handwritten reflections and say silent prayers.

Chapter one constitutes literature review on the construct of memory, with special attention paid to the *social* functions of collective memory and its tension with both individual memory and national historical narratives. This literature is essential when seeking to understand the ways in which shrines are *archival*. If shrines are treated as repositories of memory and affect, then understanding the social functions of these material entities not only becomes easier, but deeply enriched. In this chapter, I create a timeline on which I place the most relevant and salient scholars on memory of the last century, including many from the French neo-Durkheimian school of sociological and historical thought. Integrating their various contributions into a single theory of memory paves the way for behavior and activity at shrines to be understood as religious.

Once this foundation is established, chapter two investigates the ways in which shrines are loci for ritual and religious activity, establishing shrine ritual life as an attempt at what David Chidester calls “cultural transcendence.” I argue in this chapter that the erection and maintenance of vernacular shrines can be understood as both rites of passage and rites of maintenance or crisis—establishing their religious nature which has yet to be seriously considered in academic discourse. As I do in every chapter, in order to construct this argument, I consider a case study: that of the Fernandez family. I explore the ways in which they have consecrated their brother’s

shrine, committed themselves to exhaustive devotional labor, journeyed on pilgrimage and ultimately, maintained this significant bond, even in the face of death. In this chapter, shrines are understood not only religiously, but socially. Building a vernacular shrine, in other words, is not simply an exercise in acknowledging that someone died, there but in preserving the legacy of the deceased in material form. This chapter ends by drawing a distinction between institutional and vernacular shrines, asking the potent question to which I return subsequently: do vernacular shrines serve some function that institutional memorials cannot?

Chapter three describes and explains how shrines delineate sacred space in material form and the way that the bereaved make sense of the special feelings they experience there. This chapter interrogates the question of why place matters and argues that the activity and agency expressed in the safe space created by the shrines works in spiritually and culturally productive ways, often toward ameliorating grief, or, at the very least, toward the continuation of bonds forged with the deceased, even as that process continues to be a painful reminder of loss.

Chapter four explores the public lives of shrines, from the point of view of public policy, as well as my observations through field work and interviews. Unapologetically, this chapter illustrates the diversity of public policy relating to shrines, accounting for the varied public responses to them by onlookers and officials alike. Once state and federal policies involving shrines has been explored, my observations complicate the ways in which the law works on paper, putting a decidedly human face on laws which, intended for public safety, ultimately can be

painful rules to follow for those in traumatic states. In all, this chapter explores the variety of human responses to shrines, in all their paradoxical complexities.

Finally, chapter five recounts the history of shrine building activity in the United States beginning with the Spanish conquest, and moving through American history to the present. The theme of this chapter is movement and flux: people on the move build shrines. Whether the catalyst for movement is forced removal, war, manifest destiny or the transportation boom, all Americans who take to the road and die doing so build shrines. The depths of this tradition, which is generally traced only to the advent of the automobile, are demonstrated, leading to the conclusion that there is something perhaps “particularly” American about this tradition.

Ch. 1: Literature Review: Memory and Memorialization

Mid-November at Salton Sea State Park, a stark, yet eerily beautiful oasis in the southern California desert, is still blaringly hot and sunny, even as Autumn will soon give way to Winter. As I drove through the park, the sun shone so brightly that I was almost blinded and nearly missed one of the most moving shrines I have seen. No matter what I encounter, I constantly come back to the shrines to Timothy Vance and James Moran, two friends and train conductors fatally struck as they careened full speed toward another locomotive that had come to rest on the tracks. I was told the story by George, an employee of CalTrans, the California Department of Transportation, who inquired about my relationships with his friends and colleagues as I knelt beside their shrine, trying to piece together the details of what had happened.

Vance and Moran's shrine has stayed indelibly imprinted on my memory. The bleached clay earth, cracked and creviced by the unrelenting sun; the weathered wooden cross; the motorcycle memorabilia—these moved me, even if they are relatively common in shrine culture. However, two distinguishing features of this shrine in particular shook me, and continue to trouble me. First, their shrine sits directly below the train tracks where they met their fate, near a small CalTrans terminal. Because this service station is so close by, there is often a train stopped on the tracks. This creates an ominous backdrop to the landscape, reminiscent of the scene of the accident. The enormity and power of the train itself and the gravity of its force sinks in deeply for observers, especially when CalTrans workers encroach upon

the scene, highlighting the sheer scale of the railcars. The horror and swiftness of their deaths, then, becomes palpable, more real. When shrines are erected for automobile accidents, the images we conjure are horrific enough; but railway accidents, especially because of their infrequency and velocity, are all the more terrifying.

Secondly, and perhaps even more disturbing, at least in my imagination, is the easily overlooked assemblage at the foot of the cross. Sitting atop flat, metal rail ties are bottles of water. When I first saw them, I imagined that these were all that remained of flower arrangements or, perhaps, had been brought to keep a now long since removed memorial tree or plant alive. Either way, I didn't take much note of it. Water bottles, too, are fairly ubiquitous, and often function as makeshift vases and pots. However, as I looked at eight neatly arranged water bottles, I noticed a glove. This glove, still clutching one of the bottles, is the same kind worn by train conductors, including the two crash victims. A disembodied, phantom hand seems to still give the glove some fullness and body; the grip on the bottle seems assertive and intentional. Noticing my curiosity about this ghostly glove, George informed me that CalTrans employees who had known the men, routinely leave bottles of water, the same kind provided by the organization to their workers, for their friends who now eternally rest under in the harsh sunlight. "They get thirsty out here," George reminded me wistfully. Indeed, they must, I thought.

The glove and the train somehow haunt me still. The idea of being haunted speaks to the visceral, even bodily reaction one has when the horror or shock of the

commemorated event becomes clear. Haunting also implies a sense of lingering, the feeling of not being able to simply shake a reaction, as the ghosts of the past create imprints in the mind. Haunting, in other words, is intimately tied to memory—not just the cognitive process of remembering, but the emotional calling forth of reminiscences from the past, both immediate and distant and the social course traced as individual memories overlap and intertwine with collective memories. Shrines can be understood as repositories of memories, as physical manifestations of otherwise intangible feelings and thoughts. They make memories concrete and act as memorials, begging families, friends and the public not to forget. In other words, shrines are mnemonic devices designed to speak to the most intimate of issues, to contain immortal individuality and to reclaim and reinforce a group identity in the face of rupture and crisis.

The very concept of memory is, however, quite slippery and, as such, needs defining before proceeding forward. On its face, the concept of ‘memory’ may seem straightforward enough—we all have memories, barring some traumatic brain injury or amnesic malady, and we often call them forth for a variety of reasons, reaching into our internal repositories to bring to light things past. Most standard dictionary definitions make use of the term “process” to describe the various stages by which memories are built, archived and recovered. Often in our mundane experience, however, we don’t register remembering as a process; we don’t usually make conscious decisions to remember or forget, nor do we locate a place in our brains to store this coded information or thumb through a rolodex to find them again. The

elasticity of this term, both its meaning and usage, has become even trickier to account for since the publication of German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl's *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung*, a posthumous collection of writings on representational consciousness. The title alone suggests the plasticity and strata of meaning one can assign to 'memory.' *Phantasie*, much like its English cognate, is an adjective meaning make believe, wherein 'making' highlights the constructive, agentive nature of building memories, but does not account for the validity of things remembered. *Bildbewusstsein*, translates literally as "image awareness," from the root word 'bild' meaning picture, which implies a coming-to of consciousness. *Erinnerung*, perhaps with most import in English, translates variously as memory, memento, reminder, recollection, keepsake, and a slew of other synonyms. Perhaps more than these other words which contain something of 'memory,' *Erinnerung* may refer to a physical object that sparks the cognitive-emotive processes of remembering. Without belaboring the point or meditating further on the work of Husserl, whose concerns are more philosophical and linguistic than my own, it suffices to say that 'memory' as a category can be understood in a variety of ways, one of which accounts for the ability of social groups to share memories, or participate in what has historically been called "collective memory."

In order to understand this concept, this chapter delves into the scholarly literature addressing collective memory, especially as it pertains to the politico-social process of commemoration. I trace a timeline of scholars, particularly of the French Neo-Durkheimian school, and move through twentieth century history, as thoughtful

academics wrestle in defining collective memory, especially as it relates to commemoration and the writing of history, in the face of the unprecedented horrors of the First and Second World Wars. In constructing this timeline, I have focused on those sociologists and historians who have had the most currency in the academic study of religion. There are notable figures who remain unaccounted for, to be sure, but the following constitutes a review of the most cited and consistently read on the topic to date. Although few of them were working within the field of religious studies, all have had a tremendous impact on this discipline, and continue to do so.

Because many of these scholars owe a deep debt to Emile Durkheim, the French intellectual often deemed the first sociologist of religion, let us turn to his seminal work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, to understand the backdrop against which a neo-Durkheimian school of thought would arise. Durkheim (1858-1917) pioneered the field of sociology, including the sociology of religion, which he came to understand as a related and complementary, yet distinctive field from both philosophy and anthropology. Durkheim has been written on exhaustively, and, for many decades, came under heavy criticism, especially for the condescending tone in which he writes about “savages” and “natives” of the Australian interior and the totemic spirituality to which they ascribe sacrality. He is also met with accusations of reductionism of all religion to the social, a belief I will interrogate below. Because he has been written on at length, I will not attempt a full discussion here, but rather, highlight the major themes to which scholars since have been particularly attentive. In recent decades, Durkheim has experienced a rebirth, and while members of this neo-

Durkheimian tradition attempt to circumvent some of his most egregious, outmoded problems, they nonetheless continue to find resonance in his ideas, especially his insistence that religion is “an eminently social thing.”²³

Durkheim’s most significant contribution to the academic study of religion is his notorious delineation between the sacred and the profane. The core of all human religious thought, he believed, could be understood as drawing distinctions between one of two categories, the sacred, belonging to a “transcendental milieu,” and the profane, understood as simply the mundane, the everyday, the ordinary.²⁴ These two worlds never collide; they are wholly and rightly separate from one another. These are fixed, fully circumscribed categories from which things designated as such cannot move. Society, with its attendant institutions and structures, belongs to the category of the sacred, echoing earlier formulations from Old Testament scholar William Robertson Smith.²⁵ As noted theorist of ritual Catherine Bell explains, “as a social phenomenon, [Durkheim] concluded, religion is a set of ideas and practices by which people sacralize the social structure and bonds of the community. In this way, religion functions to ensure the unconscious priority of communal identification.”²⁶ Religion, in other words, not only designates the sacred and profane, but ascribes to the social sacred meaning.

²³ Emile Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Karen E Fields, trans. New York: The Free Press. 1995. 9.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 35.

²⁵ See Smith’s *Religion of the Semites* (1894) for a full discussion of his belief that ritual sacrifice acted as a form of communion between practitioners and their gods, cementing bonds between members of the social group.

²⁶ Catherine Bell. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 24.

For Durkheim, the social order is reflected in and reinforced by religious behavior and activity. He explains, “religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate certain mental states of those groups.”²⁷ These mental states, which later scholars call collective frameworks, create bonds between people and cement social relationships. These beliefs are the glue holding social groups together; while individuals may believe things on their own, they gel, Durkheim would argue, because there are embedded within substantial, agreed-upon patterns.²⁸ Individual religious belief, he argues, is collective belief adapted to the needs of the specific person.

Always, then, there is recourse to the larger social body to which one belongs. The peculiarities of social groups are passed onto the proceeding generations, continuing the further internalization and normalization of socio-religious behavior. He reminds the reader:

we speak a language we did not create; we use instruments we did not invent; we claim rights we did not establish; each generation inherits a treasury of knowledge that it did not itself amass; and so on. We owe these varied benefits of civilization to society, and although in general

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁸ See his definition of ‘church,’ which he divests of traditional Christian connotations, on p.41.

we do not see where they came from, we know at least that they are not of our own making.²⁹

Later thinkers such as Daniele Hervieu-Leger, whose contributions are discussed below, claim that it is these languages, feelings and patterns of interactions, or, in other words, traditions and institutions by which one connects him- or herself to generations past, present and future, that constitutes religious behavior. In other words, to take part in society is a type of religious commitment.

But what does this social dynamic do for people? Durkheim's answer lies in the concept of 'collective effervescence,' his conjecture that "in the midst of an assembly that becomes worked up, we become capable of feelings and conduct of which we are incapable when left to our individual resources...there is virtually no instant of our lives in which a certain rush of energy fails to come to us from outside ourselves."³⁰ In other words, communion with other beings makes us *feel good*. There is a certain enthusiasm and vigor that only a group can capture. For Durkheim, then, there really is no such thing as an individual religion, or, put another way, one cannot be religious on his or her own. While this is true of all social behavior, according to his paradigm, certain behaviors cannot even begin to be explained via individual agency. In fact, he would argue that some social phenomena, such as mourning, simply cannot be rendered comprehensible without other people.

Because mourning is often done in the context of religion, or is in some way understood as religious behavior, Durkheim seeks to explain it, especially its volatile,

²⁹ *Ibid*, 214.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 212-13.

violent incarnations in the Australian tribal communities he studies. In a rather controversial remark, he blatantly states: “one initial fact remains constant: mourning is not the spontaneous expression of individual emotions.”³¹ This seems a rather flippant remark on its face—indeed, when faced with the death of a loved one, our *natural* response seems to be sadness, which we manifest in various ways according to our cultural context. However, he insists,

...mourning is not the natural response of a private sensibility hurt by a cruel loss. It is an obligation imposed by the group. One laments not simply because one is sad but because one is obligated to lament. It is a ritual façade that must be adopted out of respect for custom, but one that is largely independent of the individuals’ emotional states.³²

Again, such remarks seem to be insensitive or, at the very least, problematic. However, the spirit in which such conclusions are offered is constructive—that is, demonstrating the ways in which society imbues individuals in line with its own shared values. He uses this idea as proof that social groups have mechanisms in place by which to collect and consolidate grief for the collective good. He explains that these feelings of sadness prompt people to come together and mourn, which he describes as “enlivening.”³³ In the event that a member of the group cannot relate, and is not grieving like the group, social pressure, he explains, is exerted on the individual until she/he falls in line with social expectations. He stresses, “for a family to tolerate

³¹ *Ibid*, 400.

³² *Ibid*, 400-401.

³³ *Ibid*, 403.

that one of its members should die without being mourned would give witness thereby that it lacks moral unity and cohesiveness: it abdicates, it renounces its existence.”³⁴

The link between Durkheim and the thinkers below is the insistence, once more, on the eminently social nature of memory and, consequently, of religion. These scholars take for granted Durkheim’s insistence on the bifurcation between the sacred and the profane, and mark memory with the sign of the sacred. Though he doesn’t directly address an epistemology of memory as such religion and memory are intertwined in his concepts of clan, church and totem, all of which are social units wherein people are tied together by means of memory. Beginning with Halbwachs, and culminating in the work of Hervieu-Leger, neo-Durkheimians continue to argue that it is by means of memory that people are religious.

Durkheim and his disciples, including Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) and others, continued to be felt reverberating through the social sciences, especially as the twentieth century began and the world found itself in an unprecedented situation of social and political upheaval. One of the foundational scholars who first posed serious questions regarding the very nature of memory, especially in relation to history and commemoration, is interwar writer Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945). According to French social psychologist and leading Halbwachs scholar Erika Apfelbaum,

Halbwachs, in delineating the social and collective dimensions of individual memory, tracing their dialectical links in the process of

³⁴ *Ibid.*

elaboration and transformation, in addition to analyzing the mechanisms and modes of dissemination of collective memory, laid the theoretical foundations for a comprehensive approach to the study of the social sciences, providing an integrated perspective from which to conceptualize the historical, social and individual components of human behavior.³⁵

Tragically, Halbwachs died a short twenty years after initial publication of his *On Collective Memory*, and for a time, remained somewhat marginal and obscure. However, his work has experienced a renaissance in recent decades, especially as his ideas became influential on modern historians, such as the prolific Pierre Nora and the rise of neo-Durkheimian traditions of French sociology. These scholars owe a great debt to his early considerations on the social function of memory that many of them have come to take for granted.

To make sense of Halbwachs' convictions, his personal biography is instructive. He was born in 1877 in Reims during the political and social turmoil of the Alsace-Lorraine region in the decades prior to the First World War. Living in liminal Alsace-Lorraine, fluctuating between German and French cultural peculiarities, the Halbwachs family chose French citizenship, while remaining committed to some holdovers of German culture, including the language. While we will never know for sure, it seems that this early exposure to the tense European geopolitical situation following the Franco-Prussian War may have concretized his

³⁵ Erika Apfelbaum. "Halbwachs and the Social Properties of Memory." Radstone, Susannah and Bill Schwartz, eds. *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010. 77.

belief that one's social milieu, including family, class and faith community affiliations, leave vivid, ineffaceable traces on one's subjective memory.

In his youth, his family moved to Paris. This brought an impressionable Halbwachs into intimate contact with the unimaginable trauma of mass death during the First World War. Indeed, Europe had never witnessed violence and dying on such an immense scale. During the war years, he lived and worked in Nancy, in very close proximity to the front lines. Comparing his work to the close examination and dissection performed by entomologists, Apfelbaum explains:

As he observed the difficulties experienced by war veterans on their return from the front—their struggle to restore 'normal' social bonds, their problems in reestablishing communication in their home environments, their reluctance to recount their traumatic wartime experiences—Halbwachs could not fail to notice the long-term disruptive psychological effects of trauma on communication and hence to question the complex relationships between uprooting, interpersonal exchanges, and the process of memorialization.³⁶

The question of "rootedness" continued to appeal to Halbwachs throughout the rest of his life, as he continually sought answers to questions about the extent to which one's rootedness in social life impacted his or her personal life experiences and, most significantly, the way individuals conceived their memories. His queries into such ideas ended prematurely, at the outbreak of the Second World War. Unsurprisingly,

³⁶ *Ibid*, 79, 82.

his constant seeking after social explanations for individual human behavior led him to outspoken support of socialism, for which he paid the ultimate price. He died of exhaustion after being sent to the Nazi labor and concentration camp at Buchenwald in 1945.

Despite the brevity of his career, Maurice Halbwachs has left scholars with much to consider when undertaking studies of memory. According to Halbwachs scholar and translator Lewis A. Coser, “Halbwachs was without doubt the first sociologist who stressed that our conceptions of the past are affected by the mental images we employ to solve present problems, so that collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in light of the present.”³⁷ The pages of *On Collective Memory*, published in 1925, are written in an effort to demonstrate the ways in which collective memory is, in fact, composed of individual references to the past, in which the past is recreated to cohere with the present. Importantly, Halbwachs makes clear that this does not mean history as such is endowed with an unadulterated purity; indeed, to reconstruct the past entails transforming it. He concedes that “society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess.”³⁸ That is, individuals are active participants in bringing the past into the present, and, as such, can choose to leave behind images and memories that are unnecessary, unimportant or that would compromise the necessary

³⁷ Lewis A. Coser, 34.

³⁸ Maurice Halbwachs. *On Collective Memory*, 1992, 51.

congruence of both individual and collective life. This is done in service of creating desired collective memories that reinforce social bonds and/or collective identities deemed important for particular groups, be they individual families, nationalistic governments, faith communities, etc. Rather than preserved and maintained, the past is essentially a social assemblage.

In order to make sense of the past, Halbwachs argues that we all utilize collective frameworks. These frameworks can be understood as “customs and modes of thinking within each particular [group] that equally impose—and even more forcibly—their form on the opinions and feelings of their members.”³⁹ In other words, these frameworks, witnessed in modes of speech, performances of commemorations and explanation of identity, help individuals make sense of their past along a single narrative arc shared by other members of their particular group. These frameworks are nontransferable; they cannot be shared, since their internal logical consistency is predicated on shared in-group experiences. He explains, “but this logic and these traditions are nevertheless distinct because they are little by little pervaded by the [group’s] particular experiences and because their role is increasingly to insure [its] cohesion and to guarantee its continuity.”⁴⁰

This is not to say, however, that such frameworks are static over time. There may arise the need for reinvention or reimagination of a collective past to meet immediate needs. This situation may occur when a society or group “deliberately ha[s] to forget the remote past, along with the entire order of values and the entire

³⁹ *Ibid*, 58.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 83.

hierarchy of persons and deeds dependent on this order, and become attached to the recent past, which was continuous with the present.”⁴¹ Within European history, this may have taken place after the fall of the Soviet Union and an entire country was faced with scrubbing clean the memories of communism and political atrocity, and replacing them, instead, with memories more streamlined for immediate geopolitical ends, including democracy⁴². Even these newer collective memories, Halbwachs asserts, do not remain fixed forever. Rather, flexibility and adaptability of memory is important to assure social survival. “Society cannot imprison itself within forms that it fixes once and for all,” he explains, “even during a limited period of time, society must ceaselessly adapt its rules to the social conditions it perceives behind each particular case.”⁴³ Ultimately, collective memory can be slippery, as we can choose to eliminate from collective memory things that cause rifts and drive wedges between people.

Essential to his larger formulation of memory is his contention that *all* of our recollections are necessarily collective. Because we constantly reproduce collective perceptions, because we are always engaged with our social frameworks, we do not really have memories of our own. However, he is careful to leave some space for individuality. He does allow that “the coherence and arrangement of our recollections

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 138.

⁴² An American example might be that after the Civil War, as reconstruction began in the defeated South and collective sentiment for the Confederacy began to wane. It may also account for why, for some, it is so painful and seems to run so afoul of American collective sentiment to see a rebel flag blowing in the heart of Dixie

⁴³ *Ibid*, 162.

do...belong only to ourselves, and are interior to us.”⁴⁴ So memory is essentially both collective and individual, with the former performing creatively and the latter performing organizationally. He seems to be pushing back against scholars who would overly rely on what he would label “individual determinism.” That is, not all memory is individual, despite the fact that it is, of course, individuals who do the active remembering. For Halbwachs, it is an inescapable truth that we make sense of our own experiences by the lens provided by the group.

In reference to religion, and religious memory, Halbwachs offers some initial thoughts. Religion, he eloquently surmises,

transports us into another world, that its object is eternal and immutable, and that the religious acts by which this idea is manifested—even though they occur in a specific place and at a specific date—imitate or at least symbolize this eternity and this fixity through their infinite repetition and their uniform aspect.⁴⁵

Religious ritual and performance, for Halbwachs, symbolically represent the eternal truth of religious ideals. In fact, Halbwachs believes religion itself to be, simply, various sets of collective memories that have met with robust systematization. Christianity, he explains, is simply a reflection of Jewish collective memory with various nonessential or compromising beliefs and actions sloughed off, creating a new collective memory for those who would call themselves Christians. This, he believes, accounts for Christianity’s global success. Outmoded traditions, such as

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 171.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 92.

circumcision, were left behind as God was recast and the needs of the present community changed.

Most interestingly, he considers the repercussions of religious systems of belief that are resistant to reimagination in light of the present. He rather harshly indicts Christian institutions for getting too wrapped up in and fiercely committed to an unchanging orthodoxy from which calcification and impotence result:

it is the nature of remembrances, when they cannot be renewed by resuming contact with the realities from which they arose, to become impoverished and congealed. Once dogmas and rituals have been formulated, they are used up and lose their luster from generation to generation to the extent that they are rethought and reproduced. The variations permitted them within the framework established by the Church remain limited.⁴⁶

Although Halbwachs did not formulate it as such, he surely intended to charge some with simply “going through the motions” and ecclesiastical authorities with resistance to necessary reorientation to the present. Because this sort of transformation through time is essential for his theory of collective memory, his frustration with the Church is palpable.

In sum, the major contribution of Halbwachs is his radical commitment to collective memory as the foundation of all human remembrances, achieved through the transposing of a collective framework onto individual memory. While he may be

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 106.

met with some charges of overly structured determinism, Halbwachs was writing in response to Durkheim, whose theory of religion and society rested squarely upon the social—a theory to which he unabashedly subscribed. Halbwachs’ work, though it did lay dormant for decades, experienced a rebirth in the 1980s and began to be read in academic circles including the most prolific thinkers in the field of history.

Historians in the 1980s, especially in France, were facing a crisis in writing history, including the historiographical process, problems of archival research and, most pressing for many, what they deemed an over-reliance on memory and commemoration in the writing and thinking about the past. Many questions began to arise for scholars about the nature of remembering and what that meant for historians who are charged with writing on change over time based on what Paul Ricoeur calls “traces,” which necessitate focusing on one event, one person, one thing, at the expense of something else. This raised questions about viability and authenticity regarding memory, and, perhaps most uncomfortable, whether or not commemoration, with its attendant social and political ramifications, was an example of something that tainted historical experience and produced an inauthentic, unrecognizable historical narrative.

One such scholar in this vein is Pierre Nora (b. 1931), whose encyclopedic work permanently altered the conversation on memory by coining the now inescapable term “*lieux de memoirs*,” or realms of memory, in the book by the same

title.⁴⁷ With both overt and subtle odes to Halbwachs, Nora's three volumes seek to demonstrate how the concept of French "history", with its attendant sacred symbols, traditions, locations and practices, has indeed been replaced with mere shadowy memories of a celebrated French past, while simultaneously divesting this collective memory of any real substance. Distinctly melancholy in tone, dripping with republican nostalgia, Nora mourns the loss of the unified object of "France," while helping the reader come to an understanding of how this cultural shift occurred.

To understand Nora, one must wrestle with the basic question, what is a *lieu de memoire*? A tool for maintaining critical distance on the part of the historian, a *lieu de memoire* is a site "in which a residual sense of continuity remains."⁴⁸ Continuity, that is, with an imagined historical past, which has become the basis of French collective memory and, for centuries, has been the glue holding together the very concept of "France." Helpfully, he juxtaposes these sites with *milieux de memoire*, or "settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience."⁴⁹ For Nora, we no longer live under the meaningful weight of "real" history, but instead, we live only with phantom memories of a past we can no longer relate to. He explains further that this sort of amnesia occurs because modern "societies organize a past they are condemned to forget because they are driven by change."⁵⁰ In acknowledging that

⁴⁷ While the word "lieu" is translated into English as "realm," this does not exactly capture the sense of rootedness and locatedness implicit in the French word choice. It seems this choice, however, was deliberate, since to use words like "place," "scene" or "locale" would too immediately conjure physical location. As Nora discusses not only physical places but also the mental "realm" of traditions, practices, symbols, etc, this choice seems well intentioned

⁴⁸ Vol 1. p.1

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 2. .

modern France is merely living in the shadows of the past, with memories instead of living historical continuity, he seems to be going through his own cathartic emotional release. For him, this state of affairs, while self evident, is nonetheless saddening. The very basis of French national identity, from gastronomy, to cathedrals, to war memorials is predicated on an irrecoverable history. He nostalgically proclaims, “if we still dwelled among our memories, there would be no need to consecrate sites embodying them. *Lieux de memoire* would not exist, because memory would not have been swept away by history.”⁵¹ These sites help us *merely* remember. They help create a sense of coherence of history, even as they prove that very task impossible. As Nora explains:

history...is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is always a phenomenon of the present, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, being a phenomenon of emotion and magic, accommodates only those facts that suit it.⁵²

We are bound to forget, or live only shallowly with the past, insofar as it can be made to gel with present conditions. In other words, these realms are “fundamentally vestiges, the ultimate embodiments of a commemorative consciousness that survives in a history which, having renounced memory, cried out for it.”⁵³

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 2.

⁵² *Ibid*,

⁵³ *Ibid*, 6.

One of the related questions Nora poses is why there seems to be a sudden, urgent desire on the part of the French population to commemorate. For Nora, commemoration is not an organic process, but rather a practice rooted in loss.

When certain minorities create protected enclaves as preserves of memory to be jealously safeguarded, they reveal what is true of all *lieux de memoire*: that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. These bastions buttress our identities, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need for them: If the remembrances they protect were truly living presences in our lives, they would be useless.⁵⁴

There is a natural trajectory that history follows, from verifiable, “real” history, to memory to commemoration. Because, he explains, the more history recedes into memory, the more it comes to rely on “external props” like commemorative activity for its survival in collective imagination.⁵⁵ For a history to be internalized, a people need material reminders. This process, however, strips away the authenticity of the past, reworking and refashioning it, akin to Halbwachs insistence that history is recreated, not simply reproduced. All memories are products of historical filtering and reconfiguring. It is this truth that, for Nora, makes *lieux de memoire* so seductive. They are, by nature, plastic. He explains that they “thrive only because of their capacity for change, their ability to resurrect old meaning and generate new and

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 8.

unforeseeable connections.”⁵⁶ Or, as he later puts it in volume two, *lieux de memoire* undergo “perpetual sedimentation of new meaning, [and] permanent metamorphosis.”⁵⁷

At its root, Nora’s text can be read as a desperate call for a reconfiguration of the academic discipline of history. In his introduction to volume three, Nora explains that, in France, “national memory has congealed into a historical tradition, a historiography, of landscapes, institutions, monuments, and language which the historian can treat as so many *lieux de memoire*.”⁵⁸ In other words, the idea of “France” has come to represent a fully incorporated, internalized monolith, and, from the deep sentimentality attached to the idea of France, a historical tradition took shape that studied and analyzed the country from that indoctrinated point of view. Although Nora is raised in this tradition himself, he is able to maintain critical distance, at least to some extent. His own contributions to the volume prove that the type of work that utilizes the category “*lieux de memoire*” in the way he imagined is possible and can help overcome the shortcomings of this French historiographical tradition. In his chapter entitled “Generations,” he argues that the concept of ‘generation’ is a social construct that can only be retroactively applied to groups, who then tend to internalize all that that generation has come to represent in collective memory, buttressed by this vein of historiography. In any given historical moment, in other words, people aren’t conscious that they are in a generation. However, this concept has dominated

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

⁵⁷ Vol.2 . xi.

⁵⁸ Vol. 3, xii.

historical studies and, he laments that French history could be written as a history of generations and of youth's revolt against their fathers, which would fit in seamlessly into larger collective memory.⁵⁹ In his characteristic biting manner, he explains that "the generational concept would make a wonderfully precise instrument if only its precision didn't make it impossible to apply to the unclassifiable disorder of reality."⁶⁰ Generation flattens, whereas Nora seeks the messiness and chaos of a complicated historical reality, which memory has conveniently filtered out.

It is also in his essay on generational history that Nora distances himself from Maurice Halbwachs and other sociologists, whom he believes reduce everything to the social. He insists, instead, that shared experience does not necessarily lead to shared collective memories. His sophisticated analysis focuses on generations as builders of *lieux de memoirs* "which form the fabric of their provisional identities and stake out the boundaries of generational memory."⁶¹ Although generational memory, by virtue of its collective nature, may seem able to create public sites in which history is revived, he finally claims that "centers of collective participation [are] nevertheless susceptible [to] immediate personal appropriation."⁶² How does this differ from Halbwachs? Nora would claim that Halbwachs and others under his influence understand "the social" as a real, concrete entity, separable from historical constructs. But for Nora, the very concept of the collective or social may be fictive or a mere shadow. It was never really "real" until after the historical event it purports to explain.

⁵⁹Vol. 1, 503.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 506.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 526.

⁶² *Ibid*.

“Generational memory,” he theorizes, “grows out of social interactions that are in the first place historical and collective and are later internalized in a deeply visceral and unconscious way so as to dictate vital choices and control reflexes of loyalty.”⁶³ Do generations provide convenient explanatory power? Yes, but for Nora, such explanations are disingenuous.

Perhaps most useful for the present work, Nora also provides his constructive distinction between private and public memories. Always suspect of commemoration, he protests that collective commemoration, because it is performed at *lieux de memoirs*, is suspect. He concedes, however, that “spontaneous, individual commemoration—where one person’s commemoration is not the same as another’s—still hold surprises” since, by their very nature, they rely on private rather than public memories.⁶⁴ Private memories are

mute historical experiences passed on through family and acquaintances, memories involving individual experiences and communal customs and associated with local, regional, religious, professional, or folk traditions, as well as memories of individual apprenticeship and proximity.⁶⁵

Individual and smaller group memories, rather than monumental national and collective memories, are more authentic and, for Nora, most importantly, they are what allow for a glimmer of a national memory to remain a possibility. While there

⁶³ *Ibid*, 530.

⁶⁴ Vol 3., 629.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 633.

may be one overarching national memory, individuals can more readily relate to what he calls “patrimony” or regional, familial or otherwise more localized contributions to a larger memorial framework. It is these, he claims, that are constantly reimagined and integrated into the present.

While there are some important ways in which Nora differs from earlier scholars of memory, ultimately one can hear traces of Halbwachs in Nora’s writing, especially concerning the role of collective memory in shaping present conditions. As noted above, Halbwachs arrived at the conclusion that the present was inseparable from the past, which is always reconstructed and reimagined in light of the present. In other words, collective memory continues to be deployed to make the present as meaningful as the past and also consistent with it. On this point, both scholars would agree and, furthermore, they would also each concede that such transformation necessarily entails alteration. One of the main points of departure is that for Halbwachs, this is natural-- simply descriptive of the course of human events. He seems to simply accept that this is the process by which humankind makes sense of present conditions. His tone is certainly not one of lament or loss. For Nora, however, there appears to be a truer, more authentic, ineffable past for which he longs. British postcolonial historian Bill Schwartz, who considers Nora’s work in terms of temporality and modernity, acts as mouthpiece for Nora and explains that “precisely because the past has no hold on the present the compulsion to commemorate is everywhere. Memory itself generates only a vortex of empty signifiers in which nothing can be signified. The ‘fetishism of signs’ is complete, and all are ‘enslaved to

memory.’’⁶⁶ As a sociologist and not a historian, Halbwachs undoubtedly wouldn’t go quite this far. Halbwachs would insist that malleability of memory helps keep it from stagnating and becoming fixed, incapable of adapting to the present.

While Nora’s massive three volume English translation is widely read and cited, it is certainly not without criticism. Aside from the rather overt melancholia, Nora has been criticized by some for being too narrowly nationalistic and focusing such a mammoth study of memory *only* on France. This challenge, of writing meaningful history, is one faced by scholars the world over. While acknowledging a great debt to his work, many have pushed back against Nora, especially his attack of all commemoration as somehow disingenuous. The legacy he leaves in his wake, however, is a rather simple contention: the various meanings and sentimentalities we attach to things have direct influence on the writing of history.

Memory, History and Forgetting, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s (1913-2005) major contribution to theoretical discussions of memory, is one of the most careful and critical semantic studies regarding the concept of memory published to date and he too, worries about memory’s tenuous position as evidence in constructing historical narratives. First and foremost, Ricoeur keeps the reader on track by providing key negative confessions regarding memory: it is not synonymous with imagination, which implies a lack of authenticity, nor is it the same intellectual process and commitment as memorization.⁶⁷ These are distinctions that are not unique

⁶⁶ Bill Schwartz. “Memory, Temporality, Modernity.” Radstone, Susannah and Bill Schwartz, eds. *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010. ____.

⁶⁷ Paul Ricoeur. 2004. *Memory, History and Forgetting*. 6-25.

to Ricoeur, however. His major contribution lies, instead, in his belief that the most significant task of memory is not to forget. He explains,

the duty of memory consists essentially in a duty not to forget. In this way, a good share of the search for the past is placed under the sign of the task not to forget. More generally, the obsession of forgetting, past, present and future, accompanies the light of happy memory with the shadow cast by an unhappy memory.⁶⁸

In order for the horror of forgetting to remain at bay, Ricoeur acknowledges the power and import of physical objects to mediate memory, and prevent the slippage he finds so offensive.⁶⁹ With his characteristic dry wit, he explains that memories “are found a second time in the form of external points of reference for recall: photographs, postcards, diaries, receipts, mementos (the famous knot in the handkerchief!). In this way, these signposts guard against forgetting in the future: by reminding us what is to be done, they admonish us not to forget to do it (feed the cat!).”⁷⁰ Material culture provides a key link here between remembering and forgetting, by providing tangible reminders. Virtually winking and nudging the reader, he warns that one must actively remember *not* to forget. Not only physical objects, but physical places can also safeguard against forgetting. “It is not by chance that we say of what has occurred that it took place,” he says, demonstrating how

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 30.

⁶⁹ Later in the text, he makes reference to the ‘power of forgetting,’ which may expunge undesirable memories from which one would seek liberation. However, this is a socio-political process that one actively chooses, rather than the spontaneous nature of unintended forgetting.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 38.

memory is intimately tied to place, and the manner in which place protects against forgetting.⁷¹

Continuing the theme of a focus on semantics, he distinguishes memory from reminiscing. Reminiscing, he concludes, is not individual activity, but necessitates a group: “this is a phenomenon more strongly marked by activity than reminding; it consists in making the past live again by evoking it together with others, each helping the other to remember shared events or knowledge, the memories of one person serving as a reminder for the memories of the others.”⁷² It is on the basis of reminiscence that he constructs his definition of collective memory, wherein memories of individuals mingle, and work in cooperation to reinforce what Halbwachs would have called subconscious collective frameworks⁷³. In a move similar to Daniele Hervieu-Leger, discussed below, he acknowledges that that these frameworks to which memories are attached provide one’s sense of continuity in the particular lineages to which one belongs. With respect to collective memory, he concludes:

it is to memory that the sense of orientation in the passage of time is linked; orientation in two senses, from the past to the future, by a push from behind, so to speak, following the arrow of the time of change, but also from the future toward the past, following the inverse

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 41.

⁷² *Ibid*.

⁷³ See pages 120-121, 229 and 393 for a discussion of his personal philosophical indebtedness to Halbwachs.

movement of transit from expectation toward memory, across the living present.⁷⁴

In other words, memories acquaint us with the past, adjust us to the present, and keep our gaze ever forward. One point where Ricoeur might distance himself from Halbwachs, however, is in his uneasiness with the extreme polarity drawn between collective memories on the one hand, and individual memories, on the other. He offers a middle path between the two extremes when he asks:

does there not exist an intermediate level of reference between the poles of individual memory and collective memory, where concrete exchanges operate between the living memory of individual persons and the public memory of the communities to which we belong? This is the level of our close relations, to whom we have a right to attribute a memory of a distinct kind. These close relations, these people who count for us and for whom we count, are situated along a range of varying distances in the relation between self and others.⁷⁵

Our close relations, including our friends and immediate family, provide complexity to the establishment of memory, since they are external to the self, and yet have more intimacy and familiarity with the individual than society at large, which tends to reduce the individual to mere demographic information. It is, after all, close relations who actively shape the memories concretized in vernacular material culture, especially as a therapeutic end during the process of mourning.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 97.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 131.

Relatedly, Ricoeur lingers briefly over the concept of mourning, and its relationship to memory. In a provocative declaration, he states, “the work of mourning is the cost of the work of remembering, but the work of remembering is the benefit of the work of mourning.”⁷⁶ In other words, these processes can be mutually constructive. Note his use of the word ‘work.’ Both mourning and remembering, because of the psychological, social and emotional tolls they can take on those engaged in these processes, constitute work, an exertion of effort. The payoff, though, is that when one mourns, they are remembering, which, once again, protects from forgetting, Ricoeur’s cardinal social sin. These processes, he acknowledges, are collective: “on the level of collective memory, even more perhaps than on that of individual memory, [the] overlapping of the work of mourning and the work of recollection acquires its full meaning.”⁷⁷ Bolstered by work in psychoanalysis, he acknowledges that memory allows for “working-through[,] in which the work of remembering does not occur without the work of mourning, through which we separate ourselves from the lost objects of love and hate. This integration of loss through the experience of remembering is of considerable significance...”⁷⁸ This rather insightful, sensitive comment demonstrates the interrelatedness of these two emotional-cognitive processes, and the extent to which their simultaneity helps what other psychologists have deemed “grieving work.”

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 72.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 79.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 446.

In the final section of this work, he composes a fuller, more nuanced description of the concept of forgetting. For as much as he lambasts unintended forgetting in the first part, he concedes that forgetting can also be an essentially positive act, “insofar as having-been prevails over being-no-longer in the meaning attached to’ the idea of the past.”⁷⁹ That is, memory can aid in recognizing something that once was, rather than only allowing for lamentation over a now-gone person, thing or event. Throughout his text, it is clear that Ricoeur believes this sort of willful forgetting is an involved intellectual progression, involving decisive action on the part of the rememberer to manipulate, or at least influence the remembered event, person, thing, etc., which he calls “configuration.” He explains, “the strategies of forgetting are directly grafted upon this work of configuration: one can always recount differently, by eliminating, by shifting the emphasis, by recasting the protagonists of the action in a different light along with the outlines of the action.”⁸⁰

One scholar who carries forth the torch of history, bereavement and commemoration in the American context is Jay Winter (b. 1945), whose extensive work on the cultural history of the First World War is provocative, sensitive and insightful. In 1995, he published his best known work on the subject *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, a detailed study of popular artistic representations of war and the various ways in which these can be understood as modes of bereavement. Furthering his research into the field, his similarly titled “Sites of Memory,” in the encyclopedic anthology *Memory: Histories, Theories and Debates*, elaborates one of his most

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 443.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 448.

important intellectual contributions: a definition of memory accounting for site-specific commemorative practices.

With impressive sensitivity and insight, Winter orients his study as one of a grand quest for understanding. He begins by acknowledging that the struggle of locating meaning in the mass slaughter of the war was real and constituted a genuine problem for those plagued by the guilt of survival. In trying to capture the ways in which this struggle occurred, he looks at various physical locations and cultural forms as well, always with an eye for how grief could be actively eased. For him, those that most successfully perform this necessary social function were “classical, romantic or religious images and ideas widely disseminated in both elite and popular culture before and during the war.”⁸¹ Whereas many would claim that the Great War opened the door for iconoclasm, he argues that such modern expressions were unsuccessful at bringing people any semblance of understanding or peace that familiar varieties tended to instill. His *modus operandi* is, then, to dissect these cultural outlets of bereavement, to understand how they helped war torn Europe deal with the total disruption of lives introduced by death *en mass*.⁸²

Winter has most import for this particular study in his definition of “sites of memory” in both his works on the subject. He explains sites of memory borrowing

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 3.

⁸² Unlike other scholars who have studied this event, Winter is committed to highlighting the rather traditional forms in which commemorative activity took place, especially various artistic forms such as prose, poetry, cinema, sculpture and statuary. Whereas many other scholars have positioned themselves within a tradition that stresses the essential modernism of the Great War, demonstrating how remembrances of it break with traditional cultural forms, Winter instead argues that because such commemoration was, in fact, a form of bereavement, traditional art forms seemed most appropriate for mediating grief.

from German scholar Jan Assmann, as “places where groups of people engage in public activity through which they express ‘a collective shared knowledge...of the past, on which a group’s sense of unity and individuality is based.’”⁸³ Most often, this public activity is some form of commemoration, informed by “a conviction, shared by a broad community, that the moment recalled is both significant and informed by a moral message.”⁸⁴ The sites at which people collect have either been sanctified by war-related death or by artistic representations of collective sentiment, in order to facilitate commemoration. For Winter, commemoration allows for significant catharsis: “grief, I believe, is a state of mind; bereavement a condition. Both are mediated by mourning, a set of acts and gestures through which survivors express grief and pass through stages of bereavement.”⁸⁵ Ultimately, the goal is to help people move through the various stages of bereavement as detailed by renowned psychologist of death and dying Elisabeth Kubler-Ross.⁸⁶

Once this goal is achieved, and those connected to the event have passed through the stages of bereavement or those with direct experience of the event have passed into history themselves, the need for commemoration may, in fact, dissolve. Winter explains,

This natural process of dissolution closes the circle on sites of memory and the public commemoration that occurs around them...since they arise out of the needs of groups of people to link their lives with salient

⁸³ Jay Winter. “Sites of Memory.” Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz. 312.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 313.

⁸⁵ Jay Winter. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*. 224.

⁸⁶ See Kubler-Ross’ seminal work *On Death and Dying* (1969).

events in the past. When that need vanishes, so does the glue that holds together the social practice of commemoration. Then collective memories diminish and sites of mourning decompose or simply fade into the landscape.⁸⁷

That is, sites of memory only earn that designation when some social group deems commemoration necessary. When that group no longer has such a need, the memories tend to fade and commemoration may stop. “Commemorative ritual survives when it is inscribed within the rhythms of community and in particular, family life,” explains Winter, and when that rhythm stops, decay commences.⁸⁸ For example, if families move apart, sever relationships or otherwise cease in performing rituals altogether, the likelihood of decay is high. The death of sites of mourning is an organic process, since these sites are often uncontrolled by any sort of institutional, administrative body to oversee their maintenance into the future. Instead, these sites are designated as such by the very people who perform commemorative acts. “Official certification,” Winter reminds us, “is not necessary when groups of people act on their own.”⁸⁹

Winter’s texts mostly deals with what he calls ‘historical memory,’ which he differentiates from religious and familial memories. However, the utility of his ideas and their application to studies aimed at precisely these groups, may be conceded when he states that historical memory “differs from family remembrance in its capacity to unite people who have no other bonds drawing them together. It is

⁸⁷ Jay Winter. “Sites of Memory.” Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz. 324.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 323.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 317.

distinctive from liturgical remembrance in being free of a preordained religious calendar and sanctified ritual forms. And yet historical remembrance has something of the familial and something of the sacred in it.”⁹⁰ Winter can be read in another way, wherein sacred memories contain something of the familial and historical. That is, false distinctions can potentially be drawn when attempting to separate out from one another the various strands to which our collective memory is connected. They all work in tandem, and Winter is attentive to that.

One of the most provocative current theorists of memory in the French neo-Halbwachian tradition is Danièle Hervieu-Legér (b.1947), whose work on memory and its relationship to religion is particularly instructive to the current work. Rejecting long held theories of secularization, she instead notes that religion is not static, and has, since its inception, been undergoing constant change. Rather than disappearing, religious belief has adapted to present conditions. To her mind, sociological processes occurs whereby memories are passed from the nuclear members of a group to those newly inducted, forming a sort of chain of belief, which orients the group in time and space. She asserts this definition of religion against the historical sociological conceptions she finds problematic and limiting. Ultimately, Hervieu-Legér is searching out a social definition of religion that might capture this sense of change over time, as well as other concepts crucial to the social role of belief: the role of religion as the basis of shared or collective memory and the ways in which these beliefs shift to accommodate new modes of being.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 314.

First, Hervieu-Legér is forced to grapple with secularization theory, which sociologists of religion since the 1980s have lauded for its explanatory power, especially in Europe, about the decline in church attendance specifically, and religiosity in general. She explains that, by the very nature of her work, she is heir to this tradition. She explains the trajectory of secularizing history as occurring thusly:

the process of rationalization which informed the advance of modernity went hand in hand with the process of ‘dismantling the gods,’ and the triumph of autonomy—both of the individual and of society—implied the ineluctable disintegration of the religion-bound societies of the past.⁹¹

In other words, in the modern, rational world, religion, which had been used for centuries to explain away the oddities and contradictions of the empirically verifiable world, would cease to be necessary. God and religion would be divested of ultimate authority and stripped of ontological significance. While this theory seemed seductive, she explains, it simply doesn’t work. Noting the global rise of fundamentalism, revivalism and the persistence of faith communities, especially in recent decades, she argues for the need of a different theory—one able to capture the unremitting presence of religious belief in a scientific world. She names this modern condition “amnesia,” referring to the human loss of religious imperative. She juxtaposes this to “utopia,” wherein religion not only perseveres, but flourishes, and a religious future is secure. Grace Davie, who authored the forward to the present

⁹¹ Daniele Hervieu-Leger. *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. Simon Lee, trans. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 1.

edition of Hervieu-Leger's work, puts the question to us this way: "through what mechanisms, then, can modern societies overcome their amnesia and stay in touch with the [utopian] forms of religion that are necessary to sustain their identity?"⁹² The remainder of the text is aimed at providing some engagement with this central question.

Hervieu-Legér begins by acknowledging that arriving at answers to these questions may be difficult. One reason for this is the modern way in which individuals construct a personal religiosity:

...this complex religious climate reflects the fragmented, shifting and diffuse nature of the modern imagination—an awkward conglomeration of beliefs cobbled together, indefinable bric-a-brac of dreams and reminiscences which anyone may assemble, privately and subjectively, as the situation demands, its impact on society being at the very least problematic.⁹³

This personal spirituality, she claims, is based on democratized memory, which may be assembled into something unique. However, people do not remember alone. She demands, even as she acknowledges some level of individuality, recourse to the social, as the process of assemblage does not take place in a vacuum. Religion is inherently social, and the individual must assimilate his or her experience within a larger social framework. In other words, people believe together.

⁹² Grace Davie. "Foreward." Daniele Hervieu-Leger. *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. Simon Lee, trans. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000. x.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 29.

She provides her own definition of believing, which supersedes the concept of “belief” and its implication of correct or orthodox thinking. She favors a more organic, populist process of meaning making and, hence, for her believing is:

a body of convictions—both individual and collective—which are not susceptible to verification, to experimentation and, more broadly, to the modes of recognition and control that characterize knowledge, but *owe their validity to the meaning and coherence they give to the subjective experience of those who hold them.*⁹⁴

Believing, then, plays a crucial social role: it allows individuals to incorporate their experiences within a shared framework that ultimately makes them meaningful. The danger, implied here, is that personal experiences of the sacred may in fact be meaningless *without* a collective referent. We can virtually hear Halbwachs in her ear—individual experience cannot be properly processed, internalized and appreciated without the apparatus of collective memory. Inching closer to her definition, she reminds readers that an appropriate sociological definition of religion will “...be desubstantialized so as to allow once and for all that a religious way of believing relates neither to particular articles of belief, nor to specific social observances, nor even to original representations of the world. Ideal-typically, a meaningful definition should refer to a particular form of organization and functioning of believing.”⁹⁵

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 72. Emphasis added.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 75.

Before finally fleshing out a definition, she also notes that believing itself is not enough. Or rather, belief does not exclusively refer to the sacred; one is capable of belief in a variety of things. However, religion, in her pointedly Durkheimian formulation, is oriented toward “the sacred.” She spends a substantial amount of time discussing the slippery concept of the sacred, criticizing scholars who conflate the sacred with the religious and the circular, analogical definitions such discussions produce. Rather, she claims “that sacredness and religion relate to two types of distinct experience which in most cases attract one another, but which may occasion tension and even antagonism.”⁹⁶

As she explains, “taken to its extreme, whatever has the slightest association with mystery, or with the search for significance or reference to the transcendent, or with the absolute nature of certain values, is sacred.”⁹⁷ How she might differentiate this vague conception of sacrality from religion is based on group affect. Claiming that religion is social, she clarifies that “once the act of conforming to a recognized lineage becomes a passionately felt obligation and finds concrete expression in observance as a believer, the possibility arises that one is dealing with religion.”⁹⁸

Any lineage of believing which is all-encompassing is then, by definition, religious. In other words, religion acts as a chain of memory, connecting people in a hereditary line and giving meaning to their present by linking it with past tradition. “Seen thus,” Hervieu-Legér says, “one might say that a religion is an ideological, practical and

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 58.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 42.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 98.

symbolic system through which consciousness, both individual and collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained, developed and controlled.”⁹⁹

Religion functions, then, to achieve connectivity and unity across time and place. When framed in this manner, her definition has immediate utility. Particularly for groups existing in diaspora, or who have otherwise lived religious legacies without a centralizing *axis mundi*, the maintenance and efflorescence of the group itself comes to represent the religious goal. For example, the chain of memory provided by the rich history of the Hebrew Bible, the midrash, the Talmud, rites of all sorts and a commitment to Hebrew language and Semitic culture continue to unite the global Jewish community, from the ancient past to the present. Although in Judaism there exists a strong tendency to conflate religiosity with linguistic and ethnic identifiers, the more important group unifiers remain a commitment to preserving the sacred texts, rituals, and, perhaps most importantly, memories that are capable of keeping the international Jewish community connected to one another. This does not mean, of course, that every single Jew or, for that matter, all members of any religion, will buy wholeheartedly into the memories that are passed from one generation to the next. However, the plasticity of this definition allows for those memories to mean different things to different people, so long as they allow for further bridges to be built amongst a larger community. The goal, once again, is social. Sounding much like Durkheim and Halbwachs, for Hervieu-Leger, maintenance of order is the

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 82.

essential component, even as this maintenance may involve necessary shifting and transformation. She explains,

it is not continuity in itself that matters but the fact of its being the visible expression of a lineage which the believer expressly lays claim to and which confers membership of a spiritual community that gathers past, present and future believers. In certain cases, breaking continuity may even be a way of saving the essential link with the line of belief.¹⁰⁰

Reimagination should not be viewed as a chink in the armor or break in the chain; this chain is forever changing, which is ultimately what makes it successful. It is when the chain becomes stale, static and rigid that a falling away from religion occurs. In other words, secularization, or at the very least, a marked lack of religious enthusiasm, may occur when religion becomes deprived of memory. She remarks that “the process is taken to an extreme when a group of religious experts assumes the monopoly of defining the legitimate memory of the foundation and its implications for the present.”¹⁰¹ When institutional authorities concretize memories in the present and declare such formulations “orthodox,” then the risk of a break in the chain runs high.

By way of conclusion, some major thematic similarities will be drawn here. Although these scholars represent decades of work in this field, they have much in common and borrow, transform and ultimately enhance the ideas of one another. The first point on which the major interpreters of memory in the French neo-Durkheimian

¹⁰⁰ 81.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 147.

school would agree, is “the fact that the social mechanisms for regulating reference to tradition are part and parcel of the dynamics of social relations whereby a society creates itself and creates its own history means that tradition is not simply a repetition of the past in the present.”¹⁰² Halbwachs, Nora and Hervieu-Legér all echo one another by insisting that while people look to the past to attain a certain amount of comfortable coherence between a shared conception of the past and the more individuated experiences of the present, that does not simply mean that the past is reproduced. The implication provided by each scholar is that rather than simply regurgitating a sense of identity embedded in past events, those in the present interpret new events in light of the past and, during such processes, transform, or even distort the past, making integration of such memories much easier. The end result of this type of human behavior is to achieve a seamless experience of reality, wherein there is logical consistency easily plotted along an often linear continuum. This is achieved by what they would each call, in their various ways, shared or collective frameworks, which amalgamate memory, shape it and pass it on. The overarching goal, then, is coherence of time and, therefore, maintenance of social bonds.

Secondly, these scholars each posit the powerful notion that material things and particular places protect against forgetting in ways that contain, yet also actively shape, our collective memories. While Nora highlights the ways in which such signifiers can be divested of meaning and, in turn, taint historical narratives, Winter and Ricoeur demonstrate that it is possible for ‘sites of memory’ to remain essential

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 88.

in processes such as grieving and processing other collective emotions. Both remind us that these are spaces that have been sanctified by death, the ultimate sacrifice, and, as such, acquire either a virtual or actual sacrality. The groups to which these feelings are oriented can be larger, national groups or, as Ricoeur reminds us, those of our “close relations”—our friends and family.

Danièle Hervieu-Legér provides the essential link between collective social frameworks, a desire not to forget and achieving coherence of the temporal by making these desires, and the behaviors required to execute them, essential to her understanding of religion. In a mode much akin to Durkheim, she explains that religion is a means whereby one links him- or herself to others, to attain consistency and unity of experience across generations. If, for Durkheim, the continuity of the social order is the function of religion, Hervieu-Legér provides a definition of religion that accepts, complicates and explains the process by which this is accomplished. It is to the ways in which these behaviors manifest at shrines to which we will next turn. By listening to the voices of those who build vernacular shrines to their own close relations, it becomes clear that they understand what they are doing in ways that may be understood as religious by such scholars. For those who build, though, this hardly needs announcing.

Ch.2: Construction and Maintenance as Religious Ritual

“It’s our space—I mean, I know the highway owns it, and that it belongs to the state, but that particular little piece of it is very much ours.” –Angela Fernandez

Introduction

On a January morning in 2010, the Fernandez family struggled to lift a six foot tall, solid wooden cross into the back of their pickup truck. They had waited six long months to head out to where their beloved brother and husband, Vincente, met his fate on one route 25 between Santa Fe and Albuquerque, New Mexico. It seemed fitting, they thought, to finally erect his shrine on his birthday, offering this cross and all its adornments as a posthumous birthday present. Angela, Vincente’s sister, had labored for months with the design plan for the cross; it was important to her and her family that this cross truly reflect her brother’s 6’3”, 250 pound frame and be just as big, burly and proud as he had been. Crafted by a local artisan, it met Angela’s specifications perfectly. Its Spanish style, complete with detailed edging and intricate carving, seemed a proper tribute. It’s a beautiful cross—and, carved from a solid piece of wood, it’s quite heavy.

As the friends and family fought to balance the cross in their truck bed, twisting and teetering as they vied for stability, two Jehovah’s Witnesses were making the rounds in their neighborhood, going door to door, as they are charged to do, to deliver the good news of Jesus and prepare the world for the Second Coming. Even though she always listened attentively and kindly to any person who had knowledge of God, on this morning, Angela was nervous. What, she wondered, would these people say when they noticed this clunky cross being loaded, rather

indelicate, into the truck? This was an important occasion to her family, so they didn't need anyone questioning them or, worse, trying to insinuate themselves into a situation that had become, for them, singularly sacred. The itinerant Witnesses picked up speed down the street and made a bee line right for the entire Fernandez clan. As they approached, however, their usually jovial manner quieted and their expressions became solemn, even knowing. They noticed Vincente's name carved into the cross and his date of death. Perhaps realizing they had intruded on a significant morning for this family, and understanding what they were looking at, they stopped, and much to the surprise of the group, began to incant prayers over the cross. Weeks earlier, the cross had been blessed by a member of the local Catholic clergy, who had doused it with holy water and patted it tenderly—a ritual that Angela felt was very important. Her brother-in-law had spent weeks preparing the cross for installation: baking the wood in the sun and treating it with oil, creating a protective sunblock against the raging desert sun. For the Fernandez family, these acts of devotion, these blessings, acted as reaffirmation that this cross was, indeed, a holy entity. Even more moving was Angela's interpretation of these small miracles—such signs proved that Vincente loved his cross, and appreciated his family's dedication to his memory.

The family chose to erect the shrine on the highway shoulder where Vincente's truck had eventually come to rest after blowing a tire and veering out of control. When they arrived at mile marker eight on Highway 25, they dug a deep hole into which they poured concrete, assuring the cross would remain upright and firmly in place, some of Vincente's favorite songs blaring from a car stereo in the

background. This was the last place he was alive, the last place he drew breath, so they couldn't imagine installing it anywhere else. After the shrine had been set in place, the family held hands around it and prayed together, wiping away tears for their lost loved one. Every June 22 they come together and repeat these same movements and assume the same ritual postures, as they gather to remember the anniversary of his passing.

Driving in any direction on highway 25 is a stark reminder about the deadly nature of automobile travel. Both shoulders of the highway have the highest density of vernacular shrines in a single geographic area I have ever encountered. I felt as though I could scarcely go a quarter mile without encountering at least one, but often two or three, near a single exit, ramp or bridge. Behind the wheel, the road doesn't seem particularly dangerous, just long and straight; but the sheer volume of shrines belies any feeling of security. While most of the shrines are rather small, delicate structures, Vincente's defies convention. It's hard to miss. Perhaps looking more like a sentinel than a memorial, the cross is immediately noticeable because of its sheer size—standing about four feet tall. The cruciform is particularly attractive to the human eye, as it is a shape that rarely occurs organically in nature, and one standing four feet is particularly rare. This immediately makes it appealing to other drivers, which was one of Angela's express goals in constructing it. It is upon closer inspection, however, that the shrine begins to speak not to other motorists, but to the family and to Vincente himself. The assembled objects are coded symbols—the charms, notes, even a miniature Oscar the Grouch, are lost on most viewers. How

could we know the import of these seeming trinkets to the close relations they represent? In other words, while the intention of a shrine may, for some, be to act as a venue for communication to the outside world, it is also true that these shrines act as a place of communion between the living and the deceased, as a place where social bonds are reconfirmed and family units come together in mourning and, hopefully, transcend their grief. It is in this way that the collective memories of the group are solidified in vernacular shrines, which act as material manifestations of family's social bonds. Even in times of rupture, including the trauma of death, these bonds cannot be severed. Creating and maintaining these physical expressions of continuity takes on religious significance, for the families who make it their mission not to forget. Even if the activities that take place at shrines are not expressly condoned by an institutional religious body, they are, nonetheless, religious rituals.

Religious Grieving

The process of seeking a religious outlet in times of grief is an entrenched part of the human experience.¹⁰³ People have a heightened sense of religiosity in times of rupture and loss, as religious institutions provide not only particular ways of dealing with the grief such events induce, but also provide tools for tempering or perhaps even transcending such grief. According to religious studies scholar David Chidester, “‘homo religious is homo symbolicus’—the religious person is a symbol-using, -owning, and -operating person,’ and it is through the symbolic forms of religion—

¹⁰³ Most scholars of death and dying agree that, historically, religion has helped people through time make sense of death. Scholars of death in modernity often refer to religion's role in grief management as 'therapeutic.' See particularly, Kathleen Garces-Foley's *Death and Religion in a Changing World*; Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*; and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' *On Death and Dying*.

symbols, myths, rituals and traditions—that the finality of death is transcended.”¹⁰⁴ In many religious systems the world over, humanity is tasked with understanding how to use the tools religion provides to mediate death—to make its power impotent and its finality merely fleeting. These tools, Chidester reminds us, come in many forms and take on different layers of significance for those who attempt this type of transcendence. Chidester continues, “if death appears as a limit, religion registers as the ways human beings have found to rise above or go beyond that limit.”¹⁰⁵ This is not to say, however, that religions necessarily deny the concept of death altogether. Religions don’t avoid death—instead, they give practitioners strategies for facing it and living meaningful lives in spite of it.

Mourners take it upon themselves to figure out their own most appropriate ways in which to mourn and grieve. The building of a vernacular shrine is a highly specified mourning code, which “work[s] to objectify and depersonalize grief, thereby assuring ‘that the psychic crisis engendered by loss, especially in its initial stages, will not plunge the mourner into sheer delirium or catalepsy.’”¹⁰⁶ This danger is not only individual, but collective as well, as this intense, liminal, unmediated state has the potential to threaten group stability and functionality. In other words, shrines are capable of taking one person’s grief and weaving it into a larger shared narrative. This doesn’t exactly remove, but instead, democratizes grief so as not to overwhelm any single individual.

¹⁰⁴ Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence*. ix.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 249.

¹⁰⁶ Erika Doss, “Spontaneous Memorials,” 307.

It is important to note, as Danièle Hervieu-Legér reminds us, that religion can be understood a means by which individuals attach themselves to a larger, collective chain of memory, which gives meaning to their life and orients their history. Therefore, one need not belong to a formalized, established religious body to participate in this type of religious activity. Instead, shrine builders constitute their own unique religious group, and they cohere as groups of mourners who construct their own identity based on the community to which they belong, assimilating rituals, myths, memories and traditions of their own, into a collective past and a hoped-for future. Vernacular shrines, then, become a sacred space by virtue of fostering communion between peoples, for whom this becomes a tangential place of worship in which it is safe to undertake ritualized grieving. In this setting, the religious goal of cultural transcendence overlaps with the social goal of group continuity and indeed, they become one in the same. “Ritualized bereavement,” Chidester stresses, “...provide[s] a religious channel for strong emotions of grief, sorrow, and loss that might otherwise destroy the community.”¹⁰⁷ The family and friends of the dead are linked together by their closeness to the deceased, their feelings of acute loss and their desire not to forget, leading them to enact rituals focused on achieving these goals. Though shrine makers may appropriate the various religious lexicons at their disposal, especially those immediately accessible in American culture, such as the cross, angels, etc., this is not necessarily devotional activity that would be sanctioned

¹⁰⁷ Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence*, 220.

by any kind of governing body and may, in fact, demonstrate a relatively quiet but nonetheless virulent strain of antiestablishment sentiment.¹⁰⁸

Scholars of death tend to agree that in the West, especially among Americans, religion is thought to provide a key mode by which people process, understand and ultimately overcome their anxiety and bereavement after the death of a loved one. Indeed, for many, religious institutions put death into cosmic perspective. The fact of dying, and the human need for answers to this universal puzzle, are taken up by trained clergy and other religious leaders in an effort to assuage survivors' guilt, trauma and befuddlement. However, it is when these answers are not satisfactory or, in some cases, when they are simply not provided at all, creative outlets come to serve this curative, restorative function. Kathleen Garces-Foley, who studies modern American funerals, explains that when such expectations are not met, and religious communities cannot provide a quick-fix to moderate pain, the reaction tends to be one of disappointment, confusion and rejection. She writes, "religion often fails to fit into its designated therapeutic role...the unsettled dead provide no consolation to grievers."¹⁰⁹ It is precisely when the dead are "unsettled," or meet death through violent, sudden, or otherwise tragic means that shrine activity seems to occur with the most frequency. The intensity of human emotion can become a stumbling block for many religious institutions and, as some shrine builders express, their communities are simply ill-equipped to deal with death, especially the excruciating nature of

¹⁰⁸ This topic will be taken up at even greater length in chapter six, where I consider why shrine building continues to grow at an unprecedented rate.

¹⁰⁹ Garces-Foley. *Death and Religion in a Changing World*. x.

mourning for suicides, victims of murder and other forms of spontaneous loss, and the always traumatic death of children and adolescents.

The question remains, however, *why* would religious institutions have trouble dealing with intense, emotive responses? Death is certainly not unprecedented, and has formed a central part of religion's function in the human mind and heart. An interesting theory is offered by Chidester, who explains that:

Generally, the unpredictability and instability of emotions have presented problems for religious *discipline*. In the case of the intense feelings experienced at the loss of a loved one, survivors might draw comfort from religion, but they also might come into conflict with the requirements of religious discipline.¹¹⁰

Especially in the United States, where many scholars would argue religion has become "protestantized," religious institutions tend to expect certain behaviors from mourners, as quiet, contemplative bereavement has been normalized.¹¹¹ While there are certainly exceptions, historically, Protestant Christian traditions have tended toward inner stillness and emotional reservation in virtually all aspects of life, especially in the face of death. Stoicism is a virtue; indulging in one's emotional pain is thought to be an extravagance, which is ultimately destructive to one's character and bespeaks a weak relationship to and understanding of Christ and his suffering for

¹¹⁰ Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence*. 221.

¹¹¹ See especially Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances and Visions* and Erika Doss, "Spontaneous Memorials."

humanity. Even in non-Protestant contexts, America's *de facto* Protestant establishment has played a key role in influencing death and dying practices.¹¹²

Catholicism is a religious tradition in which a marked tension exists between established mourning norms and popular devotional practices, which tend toward more extreme affect. Garces-Foley explains how some Catholic practitioners may negotiate such tension in their everyday life: “[such] popular devotions, piety or sacramentals [are] actions and texts that fall outside the official rites, but are still tangentially related, a ‘set of spiritual attitudes and cultic expressions which are variedly connected with the liturgy.’”¹¹³ Creative reinterpretations of expected behaviors, rituals and actions act as a salve by providing some semblance of freedom and flexibility to make faith work, even as they simultaneously strain to stay within the confines of orthodoxy. Such reimaginings help make an ancient tradition relevant and applicable to the circumstances of modern life.

In looking at Protestant death rituals, similar arguments regarding the need for creative reimagining become apparent, especially as Protestant churches, across denominations, have tended to move toward a systematized funerary tradition, from which very few depart. Within this funerary tradition, the space for personal and familial grieving tends to be narrow. Many scholars would agree that “there is no formalized mourning, but people turn to pastors” to mediate their feelings and bring

¹¹² Many political philosophers, etc. argue that while the US maintains a commitment to non-establishment, there has been a *de facto* Protestant establishment since the founding, whereby Protestant myth and ritual has largely been considered proper and, therefore, normative. Non-Christian traditions moving into the US in increasing numbers have been met with tension between fidelity to tradition and increased pressure in the US to acculturate. For more on this phenomenon, see for example, R. Stephen Warner and Judith Wittner's *Gatherings in Diaspora*.

¹¹³ Garces-Foley, *Death and Religion*, 95.

some sense of security and comfort in troubling times.¹¹⁴ Although some groups provide bereavement therapy, group counseling and other alternatives, these options sometimes fail to meet mourners' needs, and can result in further sorrow and frustration. Such problematic dynamics are further exacerbated when ministers or pastors are charged with leading large religious communities, and especially when members of these groups turn to religious officials to manage their spiritual health in times of crisis. Often "under these stressful conditions, there is much room for tension, debate, and disappointment, especially when the minister does not know the mourners well."¹¹⁵ Again, under such circumstances, mourners may find solace in non-prescribed, heterodox practice, even as they interpret such practices within "orthodox" frameworks.

From the perspective of religious leadership, there usually exists a different take on unsanctioned creative mourning exercises, like constructing vernacular shrines. The work of Diane Goldstein and Diane Tye provides an interesting glimpse into the point of view of a Norwegian Lutheran parson who became involved with a shrine built to a deceased youth and the friends who sought to commemorate him in this alternative manner. In their ethnographic work at this shrine, they concluded that the parson *does not believe* that the ceremonies at the spontaneous shrine express a need on the part of the youth for rituals and ceremonies outside those offered by the church. Through the parson's participation in the school gathering at the scene of the accident, the

¹¹⁴ Goldstein and Tye. "Spontaneous Shrines," 157.

¹¹⁵ Garces-Foley, *Death and Religion*, 135.

church was also present. The parson thus integrates the spontaneous shrine into the church's own ritualizations of [victim's] death.¹¹⁶

While his role as public auxiliary of the church was not in question, the authors are suggesting that he understood his participation in the ritual, his critical ecclesiastical oversight, sanctioned this ritual activity, and melded it with the worldview of the church. In so doing, the parson ignores any ways in which this practice may have reflected a shortcoming on the part of the institutional church. Interestingly, the parson was quick to add that he did not believe the tragic death of this young man served any divine purpose, and in fact, he admitted that this death had been meaningless. It is possible that when met with such a response, in the midst of utter confusion and darkness, this aloofness and detachment simply did not sit well with his bereaved classmates. So while a person in a position of religious authority may be quick to assert ownership over such practices, corralling them under his or her auspices, the griever themselves may understand their devotion quite differently.

In other, less confrontational situations, those in mourning and their religious leaders demonstrate cooperation, even love and tenderness, during such crisis moments. While the practice of constructing a vernacular shrine may for some be counter-institutional, for others, this practice serves as a recommitment to the cosmology of their particular faith communities, both materially and spiritually. That is, building shrines can also act as a means by which a set of "traditional" beliefs is codified and concretized. Not all shrines present a defiant voice. The Fernandez

¹¹⁶ Goldstein and Tye, "Spontaneous Shrines," 157.

family is one such family: they have an excellent rapport with the local Catholic clergy in Albuquerque; they are a devout family with strong records of church attendance; and religion has always been important in their lives. So when Vincente passed away, the thought of building a vernacular shrine was met with support.

Angela describes her experience this way:

Everyone that is aware of it, that has known about it...I can only say we were met with support and honestly, praise and prayer. I don't see it as a thing of sadness or, I mean, it happened because something tragic happened there. But you also know that if someone would just take the time and make the effort that comes out of love—there's no other reason you would park yourself along that dangerous stretch of highway and do that, trust me. He was totally loved.

The Fernandez family makes sense of their experiences at the shrine, by using the Catholic worldview with which they are most familiar. In this way, shrines reinforce the religious worldview of the family. In moving words, Angela explained that the shrine serves as proof that central Catholic beliefs, including miracles and the Holy Spirit, are present in the world and evince God's continued involvement in human affairs. She explains,

we've had some very powerful, spiritual moments [at Vincente's shrine]. If I tell people—I mean, the good thing is we have captured [some miraculous moments] in photo. But I tell my mom, you know, we've felt not only my brother's presence, very strong [*sic*], but we've

also experienced the Holy Spirit there as well, absolutely. And we have photos, I'm not kidding, that will confirm. I mean, things—that cross is just *absolutely* meant to be there—the Jehovahs' blessing it, the Catholic blessing it got from the priest, and everything, we feel, like, very protected, you know?

The shrine, and the experiences it facilitate for the family, act as concrete evidence that not only is their brother, son, husband ever-present, but that their religious beliefs are valid, along with this sacred ritual activity. While these feelings of validation are significant for people in mourning, the comfort that such validation brings, and the ways that these corroborate griever's sense that the deceased is still a part of their lives is, in fact, among the most powerful motivators for shrine builders.

Rites of Crisis

Death certainly provokes emotional responses from those who survive regardless of the circumstances. Even if death puts an end to a history of illness, pain or anxiety, whether it be of protracted agony or brief suffering, it nonetheless remains a painful event. These feelings are infinitely magnified when death occurs under what are considered “bad circumstances.”¹¹⁷ when it is unexpected, immediate and spontaneous. These are intensified further when the deceased is young. Death in such instances is often aggressive and brutal, failing to provide adequate time to understand and process its unfolding. Indeed, Ricoeur reminds us that “violent death

¹¹⁷ This is my own designation to refer to undesirable conditions of death.

cannot be tamed so easily.”¹¹⁸ After such events, the religious response most often sought are rites of crisis, which are particular rituals undertaken in moments of chaos or rupture, in order to recapture cosmological orientation and equilibrium. Rites of crisis, or as scholar of ritual Catherine Bell calls them, rites of affliction, can be further identified as “attempt[ing] to rectify a state of affairs that has been disturbed or disordered; they heal, exorcise, protect and purify.”¹¹⁹ If “every death is a sort of murder,” as Ricoeur suggests, rites of crisis provide an appropriate religious response to such catastrophes.

For most families in the US and elsewhere, the ritual activity most often marked as a rite of crisis is the funeral or memorial service. Funerals provide an important venue for religious intervention in the emergency situation death creates for loved ones. However, building a shrine can, in and of itself, be understood within this framework as well. In fact, most individuals who are memorialized in shrines have had a funeral, or some sort of memorial service.¹²⁰ This, then, begs the question: why do both? While I have found some variety in seeking an answer to this fraught question, generally, families explain to me that it is because *place matters*. The sites where vernacular shrines are erected are generally the last place someone was alive, where they drew their last breath, making it a significant site. Even if the individual did not die at that particular scene and even if their last breath was taken at a hospital, in an ambulance or elsewhere, it was the place where the deceased suffered the

¹¹⁸ Ricoeur, *Memory, History and Forgetting*, 360.

¹¹⁹ Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 115.

¹²⁰ Though there are some important exceptions to this rule. Please see chapter four.

irreparable injury or accident that would eventually take his or her life. This place marks the last place they were *themselves*. The space, then, by virtue of the blood spilled there, is sacred, and is treated specially. In this sacred space, most families and friends feel as though they have a greater amount of control and autonomy to grieve as they see fit, allowing the ritual activity that takes place therein to be equally, or sometimes more, efficacious than the funeral proper.

While Vincente's family had a funeral service for him, there was contention between Vincente's immediate family and in-laws regarding how his body should be treated. While his Catholic relatives wanted to see his body preserved in the ritual of burial, others believed he should be cremated. Eventually, he was cremated, leaving some members of his family without a grave to mark his final earthly resting place. This, along with an innate desire to mark the spot, motivated Angela, her mother and a few others, to build his shrine as their own personal rite of crisis. Even beyond this, the context in which the Fernandez family built Vincente's shrine was emotionally fraught. This was a time of utter catastrophe—the family had reached an emotional impasse. Angela explained,

You know, you never think that your whole family, your whole life will change...my brother's passing in 2009 was actually one of three immediate losses my family and I unfortunately had endured. My dad passed in 2005 and my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, who we always say helped raise us because she absolutely did...you know,

in [our] upbringing? We lost her in 2007 and then my brother followed in 2009. My family and I are at a loss...we didn't expect that.¹²¹

While the deaths of Angela's father and grandmother were certainly painful, the pain may have been partially obviated by expectation: these were older individuals who had been ill. However, the family was totally unprepared for Vincente's death. He was a young, healthy man with small children. Coping with his passing, then, was much more challenging for this already emotionally compromised family. Other shrine builders have expressed similar feelings, as vernacular shrines on the whole tend to be built to young men, who sometimes participate in reckless activities, but who aren't otherwise expected to meet death so suddenly.¹²² Building a shrine may help untangle some of these emotions, and focus in on the deceased individual *as an individual*, differentiating Vincente, and the conditions of his death, from that of other family members. The spontaneous nature of his death and the family's passionate response bespeaks the inability of "traditional" mourning to mediate grief.

In the introduction to this chapter, I recounted the circumstances surrounding the erection of the shrine, including the labor, both devotional and physical, that went into its construction. How is such action on the part of the family to be understood as a rite of crisis? The answer lies in the family's belief that the cross is the only possible stand-in for their dear Vincente, and that the presence of the cross acts as his bodily proxy, allowing the space of the accident to be imbued with him. In other words, the cross *becomes* Vincente; his actual presence becomes infused into the

¹²¹ Angela Fernandez, interviewed by Allison Solso, March 29, 2013.

¹²² This is a general pattern. Please see chapter four for more detail on this topic.

carved wood. According to his family, and many other shrine builders I have interviewed, the deceased is thought to be instrumental in shrine construction. They family presents the deceased as aware of the goings-on, and defers to the opinion of the person being memorialized in making design decisions. In thinking about how the cross really reflects her brother, Angela explains,

He was just, you know, a big guy and I always told my mom that that was the reason too that we wanted the cross to be very, um, masculine. We wanted it to be very sturdy and strong; that's how we always saw him. We wanted a sturdy cross, we didn't want to just an old piece of wood, or you know, anything like that. It had to be solid because that's how we saw him. You know? *He would want that...* You know, he was very—we have a term in Spanish that we use, *machismo*, you know, very macho. And that's so the cross—we tried to make it symbolic of who he was.¹²³

The family felt compelled to honor Vincente in this manner. They all also agree that they felt obligated, even required, to build the shrine, even before thinking through its specific design. In some respect, the shrine was begging to be built, or, to put it differently, Vincente was demanding that it be built. Angela explained that her mother is “very proud of the cross. And she feels the same way I do—she felt totally compelled to do this; to erect a memorial; to make sure we honor it; keep it clean; and

¹²³ Fernandez, *Italics added*.

do things that we think he would like.”¹²⁴ Before they conceived its blueprint, the very concept of a shrine itself helped fill the void left by Vincente, bringing some semblance of order and control back into the Fernandez family and, by extension, their world. David Chidester might call Vincente’s shrine a *symbol of transcendence*, which is “not merely [a] symptom of denial, avoidance, or numbing, [but] allow[s] a healthy affirmation of human connections to family, community, culture, nature, or perhaps the universe even when those connections seem to be broken by death.”¹²⁵ Rites of crisis make use of symbols of transcendence to help place death in the larger cosmological scheme of the universe. While regaining control may initially be an impulse for many shrine builders, often the building process and personal reflection offer a mature resolve: control doesn’t seem possible for most and the act of building releases control back to God, the universe or whatever source of ultimacy the family and friends imagine is ultimately responsible. In so doing, a buffer against pain begins to be built.

Rites of Exchange and Communion

Understanding the erection of shrines as a rite of crisis is certainly fruitful, but begs the question: why, then, do friends and families have *continuing* relationships with the shrines they build? After the initial shock of death begins to fade, shrines are not simply abandoned. Rather, the meaning of them may shift from an initial physical manifestation of grief concretized in material form, to a desire for reincorporation of the deceased into the community and a concerted effort at sustaining and

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence*, 34.

safeguarding social bonds, better understood as rites of exchange and communion. Catherine Bell explains rites of exchange and communion thusly: “religious rituals in which people make offerings to God or gods with the practical and straightforward expectation of receiving something in return.”¹²⁶ Bell owes a theoretical debt to early anthropologist of religion Edward Tylor, whose “gift theory” gives logic and coherence to this practice: “one gives in order to receive.”¹²⁷ At shrines, we certainly see these types of rituals at play. The dead are brought “gifts,” ranging from their favorite flowers, drinks, and foods to clothing, toys, and memorabilia. The living often bestow gifts of peace, comfort, solidarity and affection. But how does this process work with a seemingly inactive agent? This definition implies that families, then, perhaps view their deceased loved ones as super-human or saintly in some capacity. While no interview subjects have overtly expressed this view, I do notice that the deceased gain mythic status in the minds of mourners, becoming manifestly significant figures in the lives of the bereaved. Stories of the newly-dead often contain larger-than-life details and their memories are generally treasured and passed on, even to perfect strangers. As in many religious traditions around the world, special spiritual, even intercessory powers are granted to deceased loved ones. Shrines, then, become important, as they are often thought to “house” the dead’s spirit or soul. While they may not proclaim the divinity of the deceased, many shrine builders do acknowledge that at shrines, they have special access to the deceased and

¹²⁶ Bell, *Ritual*, 108.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

they can, then, successfully begin to reincorporate them into their lives. The “gift,” in other words, is a sustained familial relationship for both the living and the deceased.

These types of rituals may involve fewer people than initial construction, may be more demure and solemn occasions, less often marked by intense emotional display, and may continue indefinitely, as long as the social unit remains local and intact. Other scholars have noted this pattern of ritual movement as well, including Canadian ethnographers John Belshaw and Diane Purvey, who explain that “this transition from anarchic, effusive, even raw material mourning to something more modest, reflective, perhaps even dignified was recorded” at many of the vernacular shrines they studied in British Columbia.¹²⁸ As time progresses, mourners relationships with shrines undergo a transformation toward more inclusive, social yet still somber ritual activities aimed at making sure the social bonds of the group are not slowly severed. The Fernandez family’s shrine to Vincente acts, again, as a representative case study of typical facets of rites of exchange and communion: pilgrimage, devotional labor, communion with the deceased and solidification of social groups, including one’s individual role therein. Each act constitutes interaction between the living and the deceased, and represents reciprocity, continued devotion and a commitment to memory.

¹²⁸ Belshaw and Purvey. *Private Memory, Public Grief*, 91.

Pilgrimage

One of the ways that builders tend to understand their relationships to the shrines they construct is through the powerful devotional term “pilgrimage.” Pilgrimage is more than simply a journey to a predetermined sacred space. Pilgrimage implies extreme effort and devotion—it is an undertaking. It takes planning, dedication and, in some cases, physical, mental and spiritual discomfort, all in service of a larger goal against which individual effort, even suffering, seems merely trivial.

The category of “pilgrimage” resonates deeply with the Fernandez family, as they understand their commitment to Vincente’s shrine to involve personal sacrifice, primarily because of the immediate physical dangers presented on the highway. It is not lost on Angela, her mother or most other shrine builders that visiting shrines is, indeed, to set foot in a spot marked by serious violence. Some shrines are built close to the road where constant streams of cars whiz by in rapid succession; others are removed from the street or highway, but may involve hikes up steep hillside, risking slips on icy foot trails, wading through thorny grass or venturing into canyons and ravines, all of which increase the risk of bodily harm or worse.

Angela: ...always be careful with traffic because that’s always our big concern when we pull off the side of the road. There, I mean, we know we are taking a chance and risking our lives doing that.

Interviewer: Right.

Angela: So, but, it means enough to us, so we’re going to take that risk, so...

Interviewer: Do you think the risks involved makes you feel even more dedicated to your brother?

Angela: Oh yeah, yeah, because he knows that determination, absolutely—that we’re going to do it, even if it means you know, unfortunately, risking our own lives doing it. But, yeah, absolutely. He knows we would do it one way or the other.

Interviewer: Yeah, I’ve always wondered that, so it’s nice to hear someone confirm that. That’s interesting to me.

Angela: We’re as safe as we can. We pull off as far to the right as we can. Put on our safety hazards. And my mom goes out the passenger side, make sure she’s never into the roadway or anything. It’s kind of steep down there, so getting my mom—she’s going to be 66 next month, so...it’s hard for her to go. Um, she says, “until the day that I can’t walk, I’m going to keep coming here.”¹²⁹

Some families, including the Fernandezes, also have to travel to reach this destination. Many shrines are close to people’s homes, as most fatal accidents occur very nearby, usually within a couple of miles. However, this is not always the case and especially when a special trip is required to be in the vicinity of the shrine, the allusions to pilgrimage become even clearer. Angela understands the trips she and her mother, nieces and nephews make in this term. She explains that, “we’re—my mom likes to call it the ‘old rugged cross,’ so...she says ‘we’re going to the old rugged

¹²⁹ Fernandez.

cross.’ So yeah, we definitely see it [as pilgrimage].” The economic, physical and emotional expense involved demonstrate the powerful spiritual capital acquired through these actions, both for the pilgrims themselves, and for Vincente. Spiritual capital, which can be likened to merit or good deeds, is earned through these actions, and is valued as a powerful tool uniting the family. Because the Fernandez family is Catholic, they operate under the belief that this capital may pay dividends in the afterlife for Vincente and act as a buffer from punishment, while adding to their own spiritual wealth and vitality here in this life.

Devotional Labor

The concepts of pilgrimage and devotional labor can be understood as related, yet separate rituals of exchange and communion within the shrine building community. Devotional labor is work in service of a devotional goal, usually oriented toward a commitment to maintenance and preservation of a relationship with a particular entity, like a god, saint or martyr, or a sacred space. So while pilgrimage is a form of devotional labor, perhaps best representing the physical, embodied nature of such activity, there are other ways in which the sacrality of a space is maintained through personal and spiritual effort. A vast majority of shrine builders acknowledge the sacred nature of the physical place of death. As mentioned above, by virtue of the ultimate human sacrifice, the space is rendered sacred to the family and friends most affected by such extreme loss. It is the activity that they undertake within that space, including erecting the shrine, maintaining it and keeping the area around it clean, that

best demonstrates devotional labor. A commitment to undertaking such works bespeaks the lengths to which families and friends will go to dedicate themselves to remembering.

As mentioned above, there are some instances in which simply installing a shrine becomes treacherous work. Long before Angela began thinking about a shrine to her brother, she had taken an interest in New Mexican history and realized the extent to which the shrine-building tradition had taken root there. Her interest was piqued on a trip to Taos, in northern new Mexico, near the Colorado border and Rocky Mountains, where the terrain, while beautiful, is characterized by caverns and cliffs. She recalls:

I'll tell you what, if you go further north, up towards Taos, it's rocky. It's mountainous and rocky and you'll see, if you look up, literally, you've got to look up, because there [are] cliffs and rocky cliffs that lie alongside the road up to Taos, you will see [shrines] on top of those rocks.

Interviewer: And you just wonder how the heck people even managed to put them up there?

Angela: They scaled, you know? They scaled the mountain on one side and they were determined to put them up. That just goes to show you what kind of love and dedication they have—what kind of drive, they're just absolutely driven. I'm sure, again, they felt compelled to put it up, you know? That spot—maybe putting it up higher too, like

that, um, is more significant too, because it kind of watches down,
looks down into the area, you know what I mean?¹³⁰

Her suggestion that undertaking a dangerous hike to place a shrine right in the appropriate place may be “more significant” is telling. There is a general ethos among shrine builders, and particularly the Fernandez family, that because this type of devotional labor is so dangerous, it means more. It means more to the devoted themselves, but, shrine builders would say, it also means more to the deceased. It honors their memories in ways in which “easier” ritual commemoration simply cannot compare.

Devotional labor is not simply limited to the first time shrine is installed. Again, shrines are rarely simply abandoned once they are built. Instead, the space becomes one over which the close relations of the deceased assert ownership. Families and friends often explain a sense of responsibility, almost obligation, to take care of the sacred space the circumstances of death created. One of the most common ways that shrines are maintained and made ever more personal, is by decorating. Shrines tend to have a central structure around which smaller structure or adornments are added, either at installation or at later dates. The Fernandez family and nearly every other family I interviewed, makes it a point to decorate as a form of devotional labor. Angela explains that, “we go on the anniversary around the hour that he passed, and we actually will decorate it with tea lights? The um, flameless tea lights that, you

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 19.

know, are powered by a little LED light?”¹³¹ This is done every single year on the anniversary and involves several steps that, again, speak to the effort they are willing to put into this activity, including their purchase, placement and semi-permanent affixing to the central cross structure, all of which takes place in the dust and underbrush mere feet from speeding passersby. These LED lights were intended to make people take notice—to assert to the world that while Vincente is gone, he is not forgotten. They illuminate his memory.

Placing objects at shrines is another form of devotional labor that most shrine builders participate in. One of the biggest challenges facing shrine builders is the ephemeral, impermanent nature of life in the outdoors and great lengths are sometimes taken in order to make sure the elements don’t get the upper hand. Many shrine builders sweat to install crosses or other religious icons, fencing or signs by digging deep holes into which structures are sunk. They toil to mix concrete out in empty fields or on freeway shoulders to ensure structures are immovable. They cut their fingers and get splinters. They bruise their bodies lifting and placing items into the perfect configuration. To work at a shrine is to return dirty, sweaty and tired. Many objects personalize the shrine even more, asserting the identity of the deceased and the individual family members that love and remember, a theme to which we will turn in the next chapter.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 9.

Aside from decorating and personalizing shrines, cleaning and other physical maintenance are also important forms of devotional labor.¹³² Keeping shrines' sacred space sacred often involves purification through removing trash and other debris blown in by the wind, trimming bushes and wild weeds that would obscure the shrine and painting, oiling and other aesthetic measures. I have watched families lug jugs of water up embankments, replace now-dried flowers, rake away leaves and spider webs and replace solar lights upended by occasional reckless drivers or wild southwest winds. Evidence of years of this type of labor can be seen on shrines with rainbows of peeling paint, heaps of discarded seasonal bouquets and dated notes, scribbled on shrines with sharpies or sealed in plastic bags. The Fernandez family has a set of maintenance rituals they do every time they visit Vincente's shrine. Angela recalls that,

When we will go up, we actually take trash bags. We'll take those little ones and I don't know what you call them, "litter pickers," you know, those little claw things that people pick trash up with? We have to clean up the area around there, and cut back some of the heavy brush that grows near it.¹³³

¹³² Cleaning and physical maintenance find important corollaries in two notable traditions: Mexican and Mexican-American *Días de los Muertos* celebrations and the Buddhist-Confucian holiday Qing Ming, both of which concentrate on tending the graves of ancestors. In both traditions, food, drink and personal effects are brought to gravesites, which are cleaned and decorated. In each tradition, it is assumed that the merit acquired from this effort will manifest in bountiful blessings for the living who have devoted themselves to labor for their deceased loved ones. One important departure that can be observed at shrines is that sometimes the effects left behind are *as much* for the living as for the deceased, and are intended to comfort *both*.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 9.

These are done on a consistent basis. Other routine maintenance for this family include smearing the cross in varnish, to keep it looking its best, and gluing, taping or otherwise adhering the objects they have assembled onto the shrine's base. Other maintenance and cleaning are done on an as-needed basis.

Communion

Rites of exchange and communion are as much for the living as they are for the deceased. Ricoeur, who is instructive in this regard, writes: "as for loss, separation as rupture of communication—the deceased, someone who no longer answers—constitutes a genuine amputation of oneself to the extent that the relation with the one who has disappeared forms an integral part of one's self-identity."¹³⁴ Communion, then, the reestablishment of this communication, and the belief that answers from the deceased are possible, is central to ritual life at vernacular shrines. That the living and the dead can continue to be a part of each others' lives, whether on earth or on a different spiritual plane, is a key reason that shrines are built at all. To have a space in which such communication can take place is key.

For the Fernandez family, achieving communion with Vincente brings them a special peace and joy that they cannot find in other spaces or under other conditions. Angela expresses:

I feel like we're at peace. We all feel very peaceful. And we can definitely sense his presence, my brother's presence. And that brings

¹³⁴ Ricoeur. *History, Memory and Forgetting*, 359.

us a lot of comfort. Comfort and peace, that's what we feel there. And I know it's crazy, because it is on the side of a, the most chaotic highway in the state (laughs). I mean, we get into our zone and our circle around that cross and, just like, our impenetrable circle when we're around there, you know?¹³⁵

At this place, Vincente's presence is felt by his most intimate relations. He has once again achieved unity with this family. At the shrine, the channels of communication between Vincente and those who continue to mourn his passing are more open than they are at any other place.¹³⁶

The communion between Vincente and his family that the shrine facilitates also serves to prove not only that he is present in their lives, but that he is as active, even in death, in shaping their life experiences. This belief takes on significant spiritual meaning in the lives of those who loved him. The following story illustrates this concept well:

This past June 22, the anniversary of when [Vincente passed away]—I try to get there about the hour when it happened and we usually say a prayer. Well this last time we captured, actually, one of the most beautiful images anywhere. I mean, the sun was shining right behind the cross, through the trees, because of course there are some trees along the frontage road there. Well the sun was just coming through

¹³⁵ Fernandez, 8.

¹³⁶ This is especially the case with the Fernandez family, since his body was not buried and they do not have a cemetery to visit. In the end, Vincente's mother keeps his ashes at home, since there was some disagreement between Angela and Vincente's wife about what should be done with them. Angela has turned that decision over to her mother.

the trees, right through the center of the cross. And the beams coming right off the center of the cross [were] just amazing. And we were all very, very moved. And, you know, it's very strange, we actually leave the radio on, or we'll play songs while we're there that we think he would like, you know, or songs that are moving. And I mean, I kid you not, at that moment, Sarah McLaughlin's "Angel" came on the radio. You just—it was bizarre. It was bizarre and beautiful. And we were just like, "are you kidding? This is amazing." As soon as we got my mom's phone, we were able to snap a photo. [On] my sister's camera and mine, they kept coming out blurred, or like somebody was standing in front of the camera, it was just the strangest thing. But, sure enough, we get my mom's phone and we were able to capture the image. And we knew, we knew at that point that it was, again, our confirmation or reaffirmation that my brother was happy we were there and we don't forget. You know, that we go up there every anniversary, that we remember. That we remember the moment that he went to heaven, and the moment that, um, our lives changed forever. So yeah, that, so far, is the absolute most moving moment we've had there. We knew we were totally meant to be there, do you know what I mean?..It was just like, all the stars aligned. And we were like, "Oh my

God,” you know? I mean, it was like he was all but there. It was powerful.¹³⁷

The shrine is a locus of ritual power—it is at this spot that Vincente can come though and demonstrate his continued existence. The family continues to visit not just because this is where he met his fate, but also because this spot is *better equipped* for communion by virtue of that sacrifice. Here, Vincente can exchange love with his family and evince this, they would argue, with a miracle of nature.

Shrine builders take comfort in such communion. At least for a fleeting period of time, mourners can feel confident that communion is real and, beyond that, that they are fulfilling a higher purpose or duty to the deceased. Although such stories are ultimately about loss, they also tend to have triumphal overtones. Angela makes sense of the communion she achieves with her brother, even through her pain.

My brother, it was meant to happen for 34 short years for whatever reason, and, um, I just...I tell you, I know he’s glad we marked that spot because it’s as sacred to him as it is to us. I think we’ve done what he would have wanted us to have done. We’re never going to feel doubt about the things I am compelled to do in his honor. To memorialize him, I mean, I feel that it comes from a place, where I knew it, you know? It comes from the most sincere of places.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ *Fernandez*, 6.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 17.

Solidification of Social Bonds

Because communion is possible at shrines, it assures all involved that death does not sever the social bonds forged in life. That is, Vincente doesn't simply stop being a brother, son, father or husband. And likewise, his family members do not forget that he has played such central roles in their lives. Shrines are a physical place at which old memories can be concretized, new memories can be created and the presence of all assures that continuity is achieved. The group is bound to one another in their quest not to forget; the various rituals of exchange and communion, including the pilgrimage, devotional labor, and communion required to guarantee that goal is met are undertaken in the spirit of continued bonding.

One of the important functions served by solidifying social bonds is overcoming the inexplicability or seeming meaninglessness of such abrupt, violent death. In other words, many shrine builders can make sense of this practice by explaining the greater social purpose served: to rebuild a disrupted family compromised by loss. The effort made to go and visit is most often done in groups. While I have met some people, particularly bereaved mothers who make a point of going alone to commune with their deceased children, friends and family often go together, as it seems that their grief is lessened when they know it is shared.¹³⁹ The Fernandez family operates under this premise, as do many others I have come to know. Angela explains “we drive up there and we make sure we invite the people that we know he would have wanted to have gone. And we'll go up and we'll take stuff

¹³⁹ This is especially true of Oralia Romero and other mothers I will discuss in chapter four.

from my sister-in-law: cards, letters that she writes to him and we place them there by his cross.”¹⁴⁰ Even if some family members aren’t physically there, their presence is felt in the things they leave for the deceased. Notes left at shrines are prevalent and particularly touching, as they give voice to the excruciating grief so many suffer at the loss of a loved one. While some find it too painful or otherwise problematic to make the trek to the shrine, they nonetheless offer something of themselves to promise the deceased that they are not forgotten.

One feature common to most shrines is that they change with the seasons. Adding holly and wreaths at Christmas, planting flags on Memorial Day, or assembling smiling Jack-o-lanterns and fall foliage at Halloween speak very powerfully to the ability of shrines to perpetuate community, even in the face of death. Adorning shrines for holidays invites the participation of the dead. If shrines are a universe unto themselves, decorating orients that miniature world by recalling what was important to the dead in life, and so often, the material dimensions of holidays resonate deeply and happily. The holiday is removed from the home; or rather, the home is extended to include the area of the shrine, and decorated with the same care. The deceased are invited to celebrate alongside their living close relations, ensuring they are not forgotten during the most festive times of year.

Interestingly, most shrine builders understand themselves to be not just socially attached to the deceased they memorialize, but also to other shrine builders in their communities. In other words, constructing a shrine helps forge *new* social bonds,

¹⁴⁰ Fernandez, 6.

not simply maintain existing relationships. Almost without fail, shrine builders claim to have respect, intimate understanding of and empathy for others who build shrines.

Angela's response to my question in this regard is typical. She explains,

Um, if it's one that I haven't seen, or it's a new one, I feel that sense of sadness, sense of loss. Um...I completely sympathize. I can sympathize with the people that put it up and I totally get it. I totally get it. And I, honestly, tend to bless myself, say a prayer for the person and the people who put it up. We all do, we all do. That's just something we tend to do, you know? We see a cross, we bless ourselves and in that particular, that situation, you send a prayer their way. I always tell my mom, you know, all my brother's neighbors, because, you know, like you said, the whole stretch of highway is just one cross after the other. So I always tell my mom, every time we notice, "oh, he has a new neighbor!"¹⁴¹

When asked about why other people build shrines, she imagines she and her family are not alone in their thinking about why they have engaged in this practice. She told me, "I think we probably all have the same desires, the same inclinations and reasons why we put them up. I mean, first and foremost, it's representative of the people we loved and lost and, you know...*it's spiritual*. It's who we are. It's who my brother is."¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 15-16.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 13.

Conclusion: Chain of Memory

During our interview, I asked Angela some difficult questions, to which she responded with ease, candor and grace. So it was surprising to me when she paused, even momentarily, over what I assumed would be a straightforward question. I was curious about why she and her family built Vincente's shrine in the first place. After taking a moment to consider out loud some of the various reasons, she fell silent. Eventually, she finally and plainly responded, "but really more than anything [the shrine is] to tell the world, 'my brother was here, he was loved and he is absolutely not forgotten.'"¹⁴³ In its simplicity, this answer crystallizes the general ethos of the shrine building community. Perhaps other unconscious motivations persist, but on the surface is the feeling among mourners that shrines are able simply to declare to the world that they have not forgotten. They will not forget—to do so would be to commit violence against the very memories they fight to preserve.

I have not found that shrine builders are a group prone to forgetting. On the contrary, they are a group characterized by an urgent sense of obligation to remember. For most people, there doesn't seem to be a danger that they will forget the deceased, the circumstances of their death or the multitude of ways in which their lives are now different. This begs the question, then, of why a material entity is necessary to concretize memory if forgetting isn't really a major concern. The answer is not a simple one. However, by way of conclusion, I'd like to offer some initial thoughts regarding this question.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 5.

If we think back to chapter one, Nora, Ricoeur and others seem to suggest that it is the fear of forgetting that motivates the creation of sites of memory, which the sacred spaces created by shrines certainly are. However, Jay Winter's designation of *sites of memory* more immediately resonates with the situation encountered standing before a vernacular shrine. Winter imagines these as "places where groups of people engage in public activity through which they express 'a collective shared knowledge...of the past, on which a group's sense of unity and individuality is based.'" ¹⁴⁴ In accordance with this definition, shrines act as physical loci around which people participate in this collective memory, giving continued meaning to their lives, even when death's ultimacy renders this task difficult and painful. The shrine is not simply a place—it is *the* place where such activity is safe to undertake, where vulnerability and emotion are safe to express and collective memory comes to once again be engrained. In this way, shrines act as a manifestation of unity. However, they also assert the individuality crucial for Winters' formulation. This group is not like all others. Every shrine is fiercely unique—that is what renders them capable of such affect. Each group's own shrines are a reflection of who they are and what makes their friends, their family, their ancestors special. Shrines are not just about the space, though, they are also about the *stuff*. It is really the things left behind, that provide material evidence of this individuality. More than the space, which is not of their own choosing, the embellishments are simultaneously univocal and multivocal: they communicate a differentiated unity within a group held together in mourning.

¹⁴⁴ Winter, "Sites of Memory," 312.

As suggested above, in instances in which groups come together to participate in and reaffirm a collective memory, that activity is religious. Vernacular shrines can be thought of as another link in the vast chain connecting ancestors to present families to imagined future generations. Shrines rather seamlessly summon all three temporalities. Victims, those who have been rendered past, are brought into the present, to mimic the words of Halbwachs, and their shrines provide a physical location around which their children, grandchildren and others in the future, may also seek out familial remembrance.¹⁴⁵ The rituals through which such coming together is achieved is, by definition, religious activity. David Chidester reminds us that “religion is the context within which the most crucial symbolic activities of human life are conducted. Religion is not merely a matter of belief; it also involves more dynamic practices that act out what it means to be a human being in relation to other human beings.”¹⁴⁶ Building shrines is simply one of these symbolic activities that invokes the social as a response to the pain of the human condition. Shrine builders, then, constitute a unique religious group, by undertaking specific ritual action. Transcending the borders of institutional religion, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, shrine builders are a community bound not to forget their own, and, as Angela demonstrated, not to forget each other.

¹⁴⁵ Again, we can see clear ties to Qing Ming and Dias de los Muertos.

¹⁴⁶ Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence*, 34.

Ch.3: The Construction of Sacred Space

“To say they only mark the scene of a fatal crash is far too rational, too bureaucratic, too realistic, too modern; rather, the relationship with place should be seen in personal and spiritual terms.”—Jennifer Clark and Majella Franzmann

“Sometimes I’m like, ‘it’s not a grave, why am I doing this?’ But, you know, it’s got him written all over it, so I just want it to mean something.” – Sheli Vavao

Introduction

The first warm weekend of Spring seemed like a fitting time to mourn the untimely death of Paul Vavao, a 23 year old hit and run victim from Lake Elsinore, CA. His family and friends gathered at his vernacular shrine in Hemet, CA, undeterred by the 90 degree heat, dust devils and swarming bugs. Sheli, Paul’s mother, asked me to arrive around 1:30 or 2:00 to attend the family ritual taking place there. Although I had never done so before, I decided to stop and purchase yellow daisies for the bereaved mother, since it was, after all, a mere six months since her son’s passing. Sheli had received a message from friends earlier that morning that they were going to “ride out” to Paul’s memorial, so she, her husband and their youngest son Martin piled atop motorcycles and, with the rest of their gang, headed out on the half hour pilgrimage.

As I waited in my increasingly sweltering car, I took note of my surroundings. I was on a very busy main road through the town, Dominigoni Parkway, a street so notorious for speeding and racing that the *Fast and Furious* movies had been filmed there. Needless to say, these activities sometimes result in road fatalities, and, in fact, shrines line the parkway on both sides and in the median. Most of them seem to have been forgotten by time—they are broken and decayed. Paul’s, however, is different.

His immense cross rises proudly from the northbound embankment. It is roughly six feet tall and is painted an eye-catching primary red. It is topped with a Santa hat, dripping in ornamentation and covered from tip to base in hastily scribbled messages, the discarded Sharpie laying nearby. Messages from Paul's fiancé Shelby are particularly touching, as she writes tributes not only to the man she loved, but to the father of her eight week old daughter. "Lippie," as his friends and family called him, was a bit of a paradox: he was devoted to his family, but was also a bit of a rebel and relished an unruly streak. Bottles and bottles of alcohol form the base of his cross. He apparently also enjoyed motorcycles, or at least motorcycle culture, as Harley Davidson paraphernalia ornaments his cross, along with a red bandana tied around one of the cross' outstretched arms. Holidays past had been celebrated at this particular shrine—remnant Christmas and Halloween decorations remained in a half circle around the base of the cross, delimiting sacred space, creating separation from the road below.

Suddenly, a flock of about a dozen motorcycles roared up behind me. About twenty of Paul's friends and family members were present to celebrate the six month anniversary of his death, nearly all of them dressed in black tank tops and jeans. Most wore motorcycle jackets or vests, sporting long hair, tattoos and relentless Harley Davidson swagger. A bit of a rough crowd, the spitting, cursing and drinking never stopped. Cigarette butts were ground into the desert floor, and heavy leather boots were unafraid to climb the embankment up to the cross.

Before I could find and introduce myself to Sheli in the sudden throng, music was blasting from the radio of one of the motorcycles. “Angels’ wings gonna carry you away,” sang a brusque voice, as a man and a woman began removing dead flowers from a deep bucket sunk behind the cross. Others began climbing the embankment and simply watched. Still others hugged and kissed in gestures of camaraderie. I noted that nobody confronted the cross, approaching it always from the rear or the side. To walk right up to it and interact with it straight on, face to face, so to speak, simply didn’t happen. It may have broken an unspoken code of ritual ethics to approach the cross in such a blatant manner. There were, in fact, rules, which made the unmistakable sound of beer cans popping open all the more shocking. I wondered how they would all drive home with alcohol on their breath, but nobody else seemed too concerned. Coors and Budweiser were imbibed with gusto.

One of the younger men in the crowd approached the shrine with an offering for Paul: a tee shirt. He lumbered up to the cross, his cut off tank top and ponytail both flapping in the desert breeze, and secured the shirt with a zip tie. Unsatisfied, he twisted and turned the fabric until the logo on it was clearly visible. “Support Your Loco, Riverside,” the tee shirt read, an endorsement of a local motorcycle club. Shaking his head in affirmation, the young man reminisced “he was a good kid, man, a good kid. A real good kid.”

Others added more to the shrine. A bar mat with “Jameson” scrolled across it made it’s new home in the dirt below the cross. Once it became clear that zooming cars would send the mat fluttering into the street, a few of the brave ones crossed

Dominigoni, and walked to the fence line. Once there, they apparently ripped fence ties from the ground and brought back the pilfered tools to secure it. They drove the ties into the ground on all four corners of the mat. When someone asked where the ties had come from, one of the men pointed across the street. “Nature provides,” someone yelled, as the crowd erupted in laughter.

Sheli continued her devotional labor of refreshing Paul’s flowers. “Go help your mom, Martin,” bellowed Paul’s father Tom, as his son made his way up the embankment with a marked lack of balance. The first to be carefully placed in the bucket were my happy little daisies. Sheli was careful to collect the plastic wrapping, and made it a point to clean up any trash. This is part of what she always does when she visits the death site—she cleans. Once they arranged a beautiful bouquet of live flowers in the bucket and added adequate water, they descended into the embraces of their friends below. They were both offered beer, and both accepted. As we stood talking, gazing at the shrine, one of the many unnamed young men poured beer from his can onto the bar mat. Indeed, he could still share a beer with his friend. Communion, I thought, never ends.

Subtle mourning tributes made for Paul were visible everywhere. On motorcycle helmets had been placed “RIP Lippy” stickers. Motorcycles themselves also had such decals, complete with his photo. I wondered, did that make these bikes sacred? Martin wore a red Oakland A’s baseball cap that looked relatively unremarkable. Upon closer inspection, however, “RIP Lippy” had been stitched onto

the side. I got the sense that such tributes were the daily norm, rather than simply done in honor of the anniversary. These people carry Paul's memory with them daily.

Once the crowd had regrouped on the roadside below, Paul's father gave a short, sweet speech in remembrance of his youngest son, regaling the crowd with tales of Paul's childhood antics. The commemorative tee shirt he wore, emblazoned with Paul's photo and dates of birth and death acted as his memorial vestments; his broad chest became a sort of bodily marquee. "I love you son," he concluded, and taking a drink declared, "now, I have a drink for him!" Numerous cars speeding past on Dominigoni honked and waved in solidarity, sending their audible approval our way.

As the event wound down, after more conversation, alcohol and hugs were exchanged, Paul's father announced to us, "Thank you. This means the world to us." With that simple gesture, some left and some dispersed. People took photos, left notes and flowers for Paul, but most simply lingered on with one another, lending support to the small but intimate community that had formed there, especially Lippy's parents.

Whether examining the shrine built by the Vavao family or the countless others I have visited, one pattern remains undeniable and, in fact, informs most families' understanding of the purpose served by the shrine itself: this space, which had once been unimportant, even irrelevant in their lives, is now understood as *sacred*, made so

by the unimaginable trauma experienced there and the recourse families seek in reclaiming it as their own. Sacrality—a vague, ineffable concept, is, in various ways, made concrete by families through the installation of religious iconography, highly individuated adornment and behavioral changes and religious postures assumed there. I argue that all of these work in concert to create a special feeling, separate from everyday existence, yet crucial to one’s ability to deal with it. That is, affect, the intense emotion people bring to this space, and its ability to help friends and families concertize and streamline their memories, release otherwise unexpressed affect and, above all, ameliorate their grief, is culturally and spiritually productive.

Why Space/Place Matters

In his study of lost places, those that have been erased from the annals of history or have otherwise been culturally discarded, Peter Read argues that “an individual’s sense of continuity of person and community was intimately bound with spatial identity.”¹⁴⁷ That is, place mattered and, in fact, still does. The accident of being born in a particular place, to particular parents, speaking a certain language, immersed in some religious milieu continues to be fundamentally determinative of one’s future identity. Who we are and how we imagine ourselves is intimately tied to place. Many of our first memories are of particular places from childhood—smells and tastes transport us to those places instantly. Place helps us relate to others, orients our behavior and suggests modes for living, sometimes prescribed, sometimes fluid.

¹⁴⁷ Qtd in Clark and Franzmann. “Authority from Grief,” 594.

Sacred spaces, including those forged by the creation of vernacular shrines, certainly achieve these as well. The question is, how?

Shrines are capable of these actions because they encapsulate and draw sustenance from our memories. Understanding vernacular shrines as “traumascapes,” Catherine Ann Collins and Alexandra Opie explain that “these are natural landscapes that temporarily are transformed from profane to sacred space because they are sites of memory. As Pierre Nora notes: ‘memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events.’”¹⁴⁸ Although these authors highlight the transience of many vernacular shrines, an argument that evidence doesn’t always bear out, they are certainly correct in asserting that the sacrality of these landscapes are, indeed, made so because memories are attached to them. Memories are often inseparable from the place where they were made, or the people with whom they were generated. Place provides the contextual glue by which individual memories, thoughts and feelings congeal. As English and rhetoric scholar Elizabethada Wright reminds us, “what is remembered is directly connected to where it is remembered. A memory must have a place where a memory can crystallize and secrete itself; it must deliver the rhetorical goods.”¹⁴⁹ Vernacular shrines, at their best, do this seamlessly, integrating not only personal memories, but collective ones too. In this way, they are multivocal and univocal simultaneously.

Because shrines rely on memory for their sacred meaning, this space becomes one in which it is “safe” to grieve. All that one needs to be an engaged participant in

¹⁴⁸ Collins and Opie. “When Places Have Agency,” 107.

¹⁴⁹ Wright, “Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places.”

this ritual space is memory of the deceased. It is this that links each member of the community to one another and creates the *communitas* that can, in time, lead to healing. In most global cultures, death, especially trauma and violence, is considered volatile and dangerous. The creation of sacred space creates an area in which to harness some control out of the utter chaos unexpected death brings for survivors. In other words, “sacred space offers time and place for engagement in the traumatic memories.”¹⁵⁰ Not only traumatic memories, but also other memories, good memories, are equally powerful at expelling pent-up grief when expressed in the proper environment.¹⁵¹ This creates order, which is done by “acknowledging the site [and] looking and seeing it differently—not as the place of violent death but as space for remembering and honoring.”¹⁵² Shrines provide the *axis mundi* around which the rest of the sacred space is delimited.

But how does memory engender sacrality, exactly? The crux of this question rests in survivors’ ontological orientation. Clark and Franzmann remind us that “the sacred space of the memorial is often built upon a strong and explicit cosmology that incorporates a belief in this particular space as a kind of threshold between the world of the living and the world of the dead.”¹⁵³ Memory provides an ongoing link to the deceased, making continued communion possible and creating sacred feelings. In other words, the bonds created in life are not simply severed in death; they continue

¹⁵⁰ Collins and Opie. “When Places Have Agency,” 110.

¹⁵¹ Irish wakes, for example, demonstrate the delicate interplay between both grief and celebration that can exist in ritual settings related to death. Wakes often attended by the families and friends of the deceased and involve storytelling, celebration of life and mourning. These expressions are often simultaneous and undifferentiated.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Clark and Franzmann. “Authority from Grief,” 598.

on into the future and, thus, require maintenance, which ongoing ritualized communion facilitates.

Consecration and Agency

To borrow terminology from Emile Durkheim, in the context of building a vernacular shrine, the space previously belonged to the world of “the profane.” Almost without exception, roadsides, cliffs, and other shrine locations had not previously been sacralized—no clergy had blessed them, no rites had been performed there.

Sometimes these sites are those of the grossest kind of profanity: discarded chewing gum, cigarette butts, broken alcohol bottles, the occasional lingering pieces of auto wreckage. However, this space is transformed through consecration, made possible through by the affect of intense grief, and the behaviors society generally allows those in mourning to enact. “Grief can empower by possessing the mourner with higher moral knowledge,” allowing them to cleanse and purify this profane area and make it sacred, whether or not they have any formal religious ordination, training, or even the most basic know-how.¹⁵⁴ The bereaved are, then, suddenly endowed with a vast amount of freedom to express that sacrality how they see fit. This is perhaps one of the biggest reasons people do not usually feel that they need to seek outside religious counsel when building vernacular shrines. In many respects, they become their own clergy.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 588.

According to Australian scholars Jennifer Clark and Majella Franzmann, such an understanding should hardly surprise us. They explain that,

the construction of memorials and the link with a new-found personal authority may fit within a larger program of decreasing interest in, and belief in, the authority of the state and traditional churches generally, a failure to see importance or meaning in church based rituals, and an increasing tendency to see spiritual authority resting with the individual conscience.¹⁵⁵

As outlined in chapter two, those in the shrine building community certainly seem to feel this way. The Fernandez family relies on themselves to make that space their own, and in fact, they assert that the space of Vincente's memorial *belongs* to them. Even if Vincente's memorial does, to a certain extent, reflect the Catholic milieu of his family and of New Mexico historically, that space would have been ritually consecrated by Angela regardless of whether or not it had been blessed by a priest. In other words, that cross is their own sacred space, regardless of their religious community's reaction. They have made visiting and caring for his shrine a sort of family religion. The Vavao family ritual that is recounted at the beginning of this chapter reflects this pattern as well.

Another feature of the sacred space of shrines is that this sacrality is completely without oversight and, therefore, can be suited to the victim's close relations and their sense of what is and is *not* an appropriate way to express grief.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 582.

“More and more families and friends...assume authority to express their grief in ways that implicitly and explicitly challenge the authority of church or state,” and, I would argue, they also challenge traditional conventions of taste, should that suit their particular worldview. Traditional mourning rituals are not for all, and evidence suggests that they leave something to be desired for those in mourning. They simply don’t provide the level of personal and familial specificity that helps assuage grief. It is also possible that these death rituals simply do not allow time to pass in the survivor’s desired mode. In other words, rituals are temporally delimited, but grief does not operate on a fixed chronological timeline and, in fact, it often requires revisiting. Unlike some world religious traditions, like Judaism or Chinese folk traditions of reburial, Christianity offers a one-time ritual of mourning and funerary passage. The Vavaos and their friends illustrate this concept brilliantly, as they have pushed the boundaries of what might be considered “appropriate” behavior in sacred space, which the above anecdote illustrates.

The Cross

By far the most omnipresent symbol on vernacular shrines is the cross. Very often, crosses act as centerpieces, orienting the way we read, understand and decode the shrine. Everything else, including other built structures like landings, fences, alcoves, etc. usually just accent the boldness and centrality of this immediately recognizable, heavily freighted and historic symbol. A major tension, however, exists when confronting the ubiquity of the cross. For most onlookers, this symbol reads

immediately as Christian, evoking centuries of iconography of the world's largest religion.¹⁵⁶ This association is virtually automatic, reflecting our visceral response. When considering how space is made sacred, installing a cross calls forth these centuries of tradition, imbuing the space with resonant reminders of the sacrifice of Christ for the sins of humanity. However, many in the shrine building community would balk at the characterization of the cross as inherently Christian. Some admit a marked lack of religion in their lives, especially any form of denominational affiliation, and argue that while the cross may have particular import for the world's Christians, it has come to be stripped of this meaning for others. Instead of bespeaking the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, for them, this is the only symbol potent enough to conquer the intense psychological and emotional pain they experience. The cross, for them, is the ultimate symbol of tragic death and humanity's ability to overcome.

Nearly every scholar who studies these shrines arrives at the same conclusion regarding our understanding of these crosses. Clark and Franzmann summarize the field particularly well and succinctly when they say that,

...where the crosses signify something more than a convenient structure upon which to hang flowers and cards, they are general markers of death and sacredness rather than purely Christian symbols. To characterize the sacred aspect of the roadside memorial, we are, perhaps, more correct in deeming it to be spiritual or religious in the

¹⁵⁶ While there are certainly other global faiths that make use of the cruciform, in American cultural and religious life, it's Christian implications are paramount.

general or broadest sense, rather than explicitly linked to any particular church or religious institution.¹⁵⁷

For most, shrines then achieve a sort of universal, nonspecific sacrality and spirituality when a cross is installed. Rather than encapsulating the Gospel narrative, they speak to a general desire to locate cosmological meaning in dying. Keith Suter, the renowned Australian humanitarian and expert in international affairs, asserts that crosses are “actually an attempt to find culturally appropriate symbols to express death,” which people desperately need when met with tragedy.¹⁵⁸ The question remains, though, *why* this particular symbol seems the appropriate symbol for spiritualizing death.

It seems problematic to divorce the gravity of the cross from its relationship to the story of the Gospel authors. This symbol draws meaning from the story and vice-versa. In fact, many Christian group’s refusal to use the symbol illustrates this well. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for example, eschews this symbol, which members generally regard as highlighting the torture and death of Christ, rather than his resurrection. Furthermore, for Mormons, the redemption achieved through his spilled blood occurred not on the cross, but in the Garden of Gethsemane. When a crucifix is used, and Christ’s body is displayed, some believe this symbol to be fraught with the persistent memory of his earthly suffering, sometimes depicting an anguished Christ, bloodied and emaciated, and seems a rather grotesque reminder,

¹⁵⁷ Clark and Franzmann, “Authority from Grief,” 591. One might consider, by way of example, the way the image of the “Red Cross” operates in our collective imagination. This is a humanitarian, non-sectarian group.

¹⁵⁸ Suter, “Roadside Memorials,” 55.

rather than a moving tribute. The symbol of the cross is met with competing interpretations from within the Christian fold. It certainly is not a monolithic representation, and it would be problematic to think about it as such. However, these differing contentions only work to lend this symbol more persistent Christian meaning, as Christians are those offering these varied opinions, reifying the Gospel narrative according to their unique understandings. In this way, the circular path back to the New Testament seems unavoidable. The symbol has import because of the story attached to it, but this clearly isn't the case for some non-Christian or only nominally Christian shrine builders. So again, the question is, why is this the chosen symbol?

The cross carries much figurative weight, and it seems to be used by shrine builders who are looking for something to bear the burden of their pain, even if they don't acknowledge the reasons why this symbol is capable of such a significant assignment. In other words, they do not *actively* divest the cross of Christian meaning; they simply utilize a symbol that has been used to mark death for centuries. Many shrine builders are committed Christians who recognize this history; however, many are not and, frankly, don't seem to bother themselves with what they consider trivial matters when facing grave trauma. They are reaching out for available modes of grieving. Especially in the last century, cemeteries have moved toward a streamlining of the material culture of death, opting for simple, uniform crosses,

rather than elaborate, individual statuary and adornment.¹⁵⁹ Sometimes the cross is nearly invisible, even when present, in the form of in-ground plaques that do not mar park-like grounds or disrupt otherwise unimpeded horizons. Because of this, the cross may simply be the symbol that most immediately registers. The cross makes space holy for them, whether that directly reads as Christian or not.¹⁶⁰ The group's unique read of the symbol is most important and, when pressed, many of them don't ultimately admit that it is used because of its Christian import. In fact, it almost never arises. Where scholars see tension, shrine builders see creativity and elements of personal taste and style.

Sheli Vavao offers some insight into this. In describing her four boys, including Paul, she warmly concedes, "granted, they weren't perfect kids, but their hearts were good."¹⁶¹ Even though he was raised by Christian parents, Paul didn't go to church, and instead embraced life in the fast lane, often to the chagrin of his parents. When directly asked about whether Paul was a religious young man, Sheli laughed and had to just say, "Honestly? No...." This made me wonder, then, why a cross would be erected at his memorial. When I asked her about it, she explained that she just *knew* someone would build one:

¹⁵⁹ For more information on this phenomenon, see Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death*, Kathleen Garces-Foley's *Death and Religion in a Changing World* and *Decoration Day in the Mountains* by Alan Jabbour.

¹⁶⁰ For example, military cemeteries and monuments make heavy use of the image of the cross, but these can often be "customized" to include other religious insignias, such as stars of David, crescents, dharma wheels, etc.

¹⁶¹ Vavao, 5.

Sheli: I know somebody would have. I didn't think that they would right away, but I figured that one of my other boys and their friends would have done something.

Interviewer: Do you think he likes being remembered like that, with the cross out there?

Sheli: I think so. I think so.

Interviewer: It means something to him?

Sheli: Uh huh. I think it would because [Paul] was the one that [would always say] "ok, I've got to do something. I've got to go do this for them. I've got to go do that with them." Because if it was somebody else, he would have been—

Interviewer: Out there himself?

Sheli: Yep, because he was always there. And, I mean, we had a lot of struggles. He had a lot of anxiety. And he had struggled. That's why I was so proud of him. But I think he would. And I think he would be like, 'oh my God.' ...so yeah, I think he would have [said] in his words, "yeah, this is cool..." maybe not so cool about what happened, but I think [his friends and family] did it right. And I think he would be happy. And I think yes, he would like that cross...totally.

Rather than describing the cross as being installed for overtly religious reasons, Sheli alludes to a larger trend noted in much research on shrines and my own interviews:

this seems the most appropriate form of mourning. This *intuitively* feels like the right thing to do for someone who was loved and cared about. Because Paul would have deployed this symbol for someone else, Sheli feels it is an appropriate way to mourn him, and something that would resonate with him.

Above, Clark and Franzmann suggest that the cross is not merely a convenient structural decision on the part of shrine builders, even though its extended arms make ideal displays. Something else, rather than mere reflections of Christian history or convenient design may be fueling this tendency at shrines. On the three separate occasions I visited Paul's shrine, it appeared in various stages of dress—it often wore a hat, a tee shirt, bracelets, necklaces, belt buckles and bandanas. Interestingly, and a bit eerily, the cross began to look like Paul. It became a stand-in for his lost corporeal form. Paul's six foot two, 190 pound frame is somehow able to be captured by this image—matching his height and weight almost exactly. It seems that crosses *feel* like the last appropriate place for these personal effects—things that literally would have been on one's person. Crosses, in their vaguely human-looking construction, are personified by mourners. This is a sentiment echoed by Vincente Fernandez's sister Angela and countless others.

For onlookers, the use of the cross on a shrine like Paul's may meet with disapproval. Is it wrong, we might ask, for a cross to be flanked by bottles of alcohol, smiling Jack-o-lanterns and biker paraphernalia? This tension only seems to be there if we force the Christian read onto the cross, which I have now argued we should not. Even if that is how the symbol *can* be read, it is perhaps not how it *should* be read. In

other words, Paul shouldn't be thought of as a committed Christian—his own parents deny this seemingly plausible conclusion. Instead, if we understand the shrine to stand in for his body, to give physical presence to his lingering social and cultural connections, then, of course, it shouldn't surprise us that it looks like him. So if he drank hard liquor and tied bandanas around his head and loved Halloween, then these symbols at his shrine seem appropriate. Although this may conflict with some standards of traditional taste, they have significance because each object had significance for Paul and/or his relatives.

Another reason reading crosses can be a rather tricky venture is because of the regularity with which they are figured alongside potent, traditional material symbols from other global religions: medicine bundles, sacred animals like turtles, phoenixes, coyotes and sage bundles from Native American traditions; prayer flags, dharma wheels, images of the Buddha from global Buddhist traditions; doves and angel wings from Christianity; crescent moons from Islam; and the myriad other bits and pieces of sacred symbolism appear surprisingly often. One of the more striking examples of a multireligious shrine I encountered was near Algodones, New Mexico not far from the San Felipe Pueblo. While it may not be shocking to see a Native American vernacular shrine combine the sacred mythologies of Christian and Native spiritual traditions in seeking appropriate grieving tools, I was shocked and excited to see one particular shrine adorned not only with a small leather medicine bundle, elegantly tied with a feather, but Buddhist prayer flags fluttering between the many crosses that had been driven into the roadside. Was this person a sort of New Age seeker, peering into

every shop in the American religious marketplace? Were they simply nonexclusive believers in every faith traditions? Or were they calling on the centuries-old transcendent symbols that most directly spoke to their needs? I will never know for sure. However, based on this and like shrines, especially around the American Southwest, I would venture to argue that these culturally and religiously saturated things help manage affect and grief, while speaking to an individualized spirituality that perhaps couldn't be neatly compartmentalized.

In examining other traditionally Christian symbols on vernacular shrines, John Belshaw and Diane Purvey, who study those in British Columbia, maintain that “crosses are *the only* nod made by most British Columbian roadside death memorials to Christian symbolism.”¹⁶² While this observation may hold for certain Canadian provinces, the same cannot be said of vernacular shrines in the US, which employ not only the cross with regularity, but also angels, heaven, scripture, rosaries, votive candles, and other highly charged Christian symbols, or codes of mourning. Allusions and direct appeals to heaven and angels are particularly common, especially on shrines to children, the elderly and those in public service positions, which we will see in chapter five. However, these too seem more democratic symbols of mourning, rather than *only* speaking to Christian sensibilities. Rosaries and votive candles, for example, have central places in Catholic worship, but are present on virtually all shrines, even those with clear non-Catholic religious affiliation. Such objects are cheaply and readily accessible to almost anybody, speaking more, I think, to the

¹⁶² Belshaw and Purvey, *Private Grief, Public Mourning*, 123.

universality of these objects than traditional religious import. Their importance in some faith traditions, however, lends them sacrality in a literal sense—it borrows from that history.

Sacred Space, Mundane Stuff?

The sacred space of vernacular shrines is not only made so by the presence of obviously if contested, religious symbols. Quotidian objects, those everyday things that are assembled at shrines, also have symbolic character when placed in this sacred context in a ritual manner. As the above sections demonstrates, it is tricky enough to read sacred symbols on vernacular shrines; mundane things, even in their familiarity and utility, present even more of a challenge. The countless teddy bears, candles, coins, vases, wreaths, rocks, flowers, solar lights, notes, cards, beverage cans, bracelets, keychains, toys, holiday decorations and lawn ornaments are only the most common. Almost every shrine has something unique, something personal, something that defies easy characterization or understanding. This ineffability works to add to the heightened levels of sacrality in the space. Certainly these things are there because they mean something, but the question is, always, *what*? Generally, this stuff can be drawn into four discrete categories, and yet the considerable overlap between them only serves to enhance their vivid, multivocal nature. These categories include: personal effects, social items, political objects and utilitarian things. Most shrines contain objects that fit into some or all of these categories, and occasionally, one object that simultaneously fits all of them.

Personal effects are commonly found at vernacular shrines, as they lend concrete materiality to the memory of the dead. These are things that once belonged to the deceased, or that he or she was known to have enjoyed. Paul's shrine includes two of his beloved baseball caps, one of which he is seen wearing in a photo tacked to the cross. These are often what give crosses humanoid shapes. Arranged as on a scarecrow, sun baked helmets and hats give the appearance of a face, sometimes complete with sunglasses; ratty, weathered tee shirts seem to contour bodies. Personal effects need not be limited to clothing, however. They also include things that the deceased may have had on their person, or rather, what others assume they would want close to them—things that they cherished: a childhood stuffed toy, a personalized bracelet, an identification card, a set of keys. Still other things speak to personal milestones and accomplishments: a diploma, a wedding ring, an award, an AA or NA chip. These things, rife with personal meaning, can only truly be understood by the deceased. Though something like a wedding ring is made of precious metal, unpacking its significance is a highly specified act, and constructing its meaning is virtually impossible to do without abandoning preconception.¹⁶³ In this way, these objects are elusive—they certainly are not unknown, but in this context, their meaning is. Every such object provides visual cues to trigger memory of the

¹⁶³ Relatedly, I have suggested that shrines feel like “safe” or “secure” spaces for the families and friends of the deceased. One of the most powerful examples of this is manifest in the objects themselves that are left behind. These objects often have value, both monetary and emotional, and the fact that people feel able to leave them behind suggests a feeling of security not otherwise felt in the world around us. It seems many assume that most people will not steal from the deceased or from a shrine, which itself may seem an irrational presumption. In this way, shrines create a certain amount of safety by demanding that all who enter will share a sense of community and choose not to disrupt the scene.

dead. This can include allusions to taste, appearance and style. However, and more significantly to friends and family, these objects lend personality and character to people who might otherwise remain mere statistics.

Social items are, by far, the most common element found at shrines. These are objects that speak to the ongoing relationships families and friends have with the deceased. One of the central problems in decoding and interpreting anything “vernacular” is the question of intent, especially since shrine construction is done after spontaneous death. I have found myself wondering, is that thing left behind for the dead or the living? Does she like that thing, or do her friends? Does this speak to the taste of the dead? These answers are difficult to ascertain unless speaking directly with families is possible, and even then, competing claims almost unavoidably erupt. Memory can be contested in these objects and, consequently, they carry enormous symbolic weight. However, when considered altogether, they work to reestablish and reabsorb the person as part of the ongoing community. They mean something to the friends and family.

Paul’s shrine is overwhelming in its references to the social world Paul left behind. Even from a distance, Paul’s shrine is rendered social because it is covered on every flat surface, from base to tip top and on every note, photo or piece of fabric, with messages to him from friends and family. They all left indelible marks on the cross in permanent marker, spilling out their emotions and grief in black ink. Even before deciphering objects, it becomes clear that this has been a place of continued communion, and that the cross has been lovingly cared for by those who survive him.

They have personalized it, both making it reflect Paul and the social groups he will not live to be a part of.

Objects at his shrine are also socially charged items. Paul's shrine is particularly heart wrenching because, at 23, he was a young father to a beautiful baby girl named Sage. A plaque affixed to the center of the cross reads "world's greatest dad," and a photocopy of him cuddling his infant daughter, affectionately kissing her forehead, demonstrates this sentiment. As Sheli tearfully recalls, "Paul was the youngest and sometimes he was the most headstrong. That's why I was so sad is [sic] because he was just coming to a place with the baby. And I felt like, 'ok, now's his leveling out.' He's starting to get his emotions in check and that stuff."¹⁶⁴ Sheli and her family seemed happy that Paul was taking his responsibilities of fatherhood seriously, taking care of his daughter and making a life for them together after his rather rebellious adolescence. His fiancée's tender messages, photos and other mementos speak loudly, declaring to the world that Sage will know how much her father loved her. His relationship to her will remain ongoing. His continued relationship with his family, motorcycle culture, his hometown of Lake Elsinore and more are well established by the dozens of items others have left behind. The Vavao family is certainly not unique in trying to resolidify social bonds by placing objects at shrines, but they have done so on a larger scale than most.

Political objects are those that are imbued with freighted messages of cultural-political import. While some of these are subtle, many of them scream out, begging

¹⁶⁴ Vavao, 5.

for public attention, even beyond the immediate friends and family expected at shrines. They send messages that other objects just cannot—this does not, however, guarantee that those messages can be decoded, even by those who place such objects. When I returned to Paul’s cross for the second time, an American flag fluttered in the breeze, tied to the top of the cross with blue painter’s tape. The American flag is rather ubiquitous at all type of memorials, vernacular shiners included, but this one was different. Attached to the flag is a set of ominous cartoon eyes, representing the Lake Elsinore local AAA baseball team, the Storm. This symbol, however, has come to represent the city as a whole. It is a symbol of local pride that can be seen on bumper stickers and license plates, and now even local businesses. This was Paul’s hometown.

The gravity of this object and its message, however, didn’t register fully with me until I spoke with Sheli. She explained that in the media coverage surrounding his death, his identity remained anonymous until the investigation surrounding his fatal car accident was well underway. To her surprise, when reading initial reports, Sheli said, “when I was reading it, I said, ‘Paul’s probably going, ‘I’m not from San Jacinto! I’m not from Hemet!’ Because it said, ‘a Hemet man,’ ‘San Jacinto man.’” Because the reporting had merely focused on the scene of the accident, which occurred in Hemet, Paul’s connection to Lake Elsinore had been obscured. Sheli imagined that this oversight would have caused Paul much dismay. Cheerfully remembering her son’s boisterous nature, she remembered telling, “one of my sons and Tom, [my husband], ‘he’s probably flipping out,’ thinking, ‘hey! They need to

change that!”¹⁶⁵ Being from Lake Elsinore was a key part of his identity, and was something Paul clearly valued. The overly political symbol of the national flag with a local reference superimposed speaks to his commitment to place and calls into question the way we as individuals and the media, assert identity. In this case, mistaking his identity was an affront to his person, his individuality. The flag helps communicate that.

Other shrines have overtly political messages, such as the shrine to Kelly Thomas, a local homeless, schizophrenic man brutally beaten to an untimely death by local police forces. His shrine includes warm winter hats and coats, brochures for shelters and other objects that confront the issue of homelessness. On most shrines to military personnel or police killed in the line of duty, objects such as medals and awards speak to the danger of their duties and the stakes of their service. However, by far the most contentious political objects I see are pieces of auto wreckage that become integral pieces of the built structures of shrines. Virtually unrecognizable, misshapen fenders, cracked headlights, and melted steel are often used to delineate sacred space or adorn the shrine in some way, giving voice to the horror of drunk driving and hazardous road conditions. Sometimes the message is very clear: fix this road! Or arrest and prosecute the person who did this! Sometimes the message is unclear and no direct response is expected or really even possible.

The last category of objects found at vernacular shrines are utilitarian in nature—they are used to construct or reconstruct these memorials, which often have

¹⁶⁵ Vavao, 11.

to contend not only with the elements, but with vandals¹⁶⁶, curious animals, invasive plant life and a host of other unexpected things. It is not uncommon to see various implements left at shrines for the purposes of routine maintenance: rakes, clippers, screwdrivers, markers, etc. On rare occasions, discarded shovels caked in dried concrete and empty bags can be found within walking distance. Interestingly, utilitarian objects can also be those assembled from the roadside. Found objects sometimes make their way onto shrines for purely utilitarian purposes: rocks are used to create boundaries around spaces and pin down notes and cards, tree branches give support to a leaning cross, cups tossed from car windows make impromptu vases for flowers. All of these lend a handcrafted feel to memorials. The presence of tools, both those purchased and those that are clearly makeshift both speak to the durability most shrine builders wish to achieve and the lengths they go to for some modicum of permanence.

Ritual Postures

Kathleen Garces-Foley reminds us that “these artifact assemblages are sacred by virtue of the actions and intentions of the people who create and tend to them” and, so far, we have seen how both sacred and quotidian objects help create a sacred space.¹⁶⁷ However, it is also what people *do* in this space that creates a heightened sense of sacrality. Erika Doss highlights this in her article on Littleton, Colorado, scene of the

¹⁶⁶ I have encountered vandalism of shrines in my own fieldwork and have read news reports of shrines being defaced, removed or otherwise met with community ire, these instances are few and far between. Generally most shrines seem to have remained untouched by anyone but family or, if they have been disrupted, people do so respectfully.

¹⁶⁷ Kathleen Garces- Foley, *Death and Religion*, 248.

massacre at Columbine High School in 1999. She paints a vivid picture of Clement Park, the nearby public green space that became the instant sacred landscape in which to memorialize the lost lives: “People bring things to spontaneous memorials and walk through them; they read the cards and poems that are left; they kneel down to touch things; they photograph what they see; they cry; they are physically and emotionally moved – affected—on multiple levels.”¹⁶⁸ This is evocative of certain ritual postures that people assume in this and many other sacred spaces: they kneel, bow, close their eyes, hug, sit, contemplate, hold hands, meditate and pray. They carry their bodies differently, and it is to such physical performance, and the delicate sacrality it creates, that I will now turn.

As noted earlier, Paul’s friends and family confront his shrine in a distinctive manner. Nobody approaches the cross head on; instead, they navigate around the sides and back, if they actually went to touch or read it at all. Many simply stayed on the roadside below. If they did approach the shrine, they did so very quietly and touched all the assembled artifacts tenderly and gently, so as not to disturb any of its fragile features. Most who hiked up to it read the hand-written notes and some even wrote new ones. Others lifted and folded fabric to make sure they had caught any little hidden treasure that might have been buried underneath. They seemed to earnestly observe, feeling both a sense of duty and sense of nobility in doing so. People knelt down to place offerings of flowers and cards, careful of their footing and surroundings. Cell phones and cameras snapped hundreds of photos. Heads were

¹⁶⁸ Doss, “Spontaneous Memorials,” 300.

bowed in reverent silence as Tom spoke, and when he and Sheli refreshed the flowers. The most typical ritual postures assumed by Paul's family and friends that day were hugs, kisses, handholding and outstretched arms, adding genuine sensitivity and solemnity to this occasion.

When alone, Sheli performs ritual positions of her own, making her experience of the space unique. She concedes that "sometimes I go there and put the little flowers there and I walk around hoping I'm going to find some other kind of clue," regarding the still unknown circumstances surrounding her son's death. However, most of the time, she just sits. She wonders, contemplates and considers. She explains her routine this way: "when I go by myself, [I] just sit up there, and I'll have the radio on, or my CD that I know [has] songs he likes, and I'll just sit up there." The area surrounding the cross is dense with chaparral and loose, sandy soil, hardly a place of respite for most. However, she feels that her body's physical presence there, alongside her son's memorial, is significant. She explains, "when I'm out there, I feel like I'm with him. I feel like...that's my place."¹⁶⁹

Aurality, the sense of hearing, is an integral way by which we experience the sacred nature of a place. In some sacred spaces, quiet and reserve are the norm; in others, it would be offensive *not* to be loud. Generally speaking, the space of shrines tends toward the former: they are muted, decorous spaces punctuated only infrequently by music, low speech and, of course, road noise. The side of a busy street may not seem like a place of calm, meditation and communion, but for those

¹⁶⁹ Vavao, 13

grieving, this is of little consequence. The space of the shrine sequesters all the world's white noise and instead, low whispers, crying and music are all that are really audible.

When I attended the Vavao family ritual, I got the sense that these were not folks who thrived in stillness and quiet—the roars of their motorcycles and constant cursing certainly didn't suggest otherwise. However, as soon as they dismounted their bikes, people fell silent as music was played. People were not milling around talking, but instead silently hugging, kissing and simply being with one another. Everyone maintained respectful silence, even as they went up to the cross. Anything that was said, including the copious profanity-laced insults hurled at other group members, were said at a distance. The area immediately below the cross was for jeering and joking; to be around the cross required altering the volume of voices and content of speech. The only break in this pattern was when the entire group, perhaps thirty strong, all crammed behind the cross for a photo. A particularly raucous friend decided he would defy the camera, presenting to it his middle finger. Others followed suit and the crowd burst into laughter. I also understood this gesture to be something Paul would have approved of wholeheartedly. This was, however, an unusual break in an otherwise somber mood. Even when Tom gave his heartwarming speech, it certainly felt more like an unrehearsed sermon on the importance of living life to the fullest and enjoying it, rather than just storytelling.

Conclusion: Chain of Memory

As we were wrapping up our interview, I asked Sheli what her favorite memory of the shrine is. She responded with the following anecdote:

I think it was the first day, maybe, that we went. As hard as it was, and everything, to see all of us riding and putting something on [was nice.] One of my sisters-in-law had sat and made this lei while she was here to put on it with the girls. Just seeing that... for everybody to be there and just everybody [going and doing] it, as sad as it was standing up there and looking at everybody and just knowing how much they loved him, and how sad they were... Once they got there, they were like, 'oh my God, that's awesome. That cross, oh my God'... That [memory] was good because I thought it was going to be horrible.¹⁷⁰

The cathartic release of emotion and the feelings of community facilitated by Paul's vernacular shrine are evident in Sheli's poignant tone. There isn't a singular moment crystallized in her imagination; rather, it is just people that she remembers, and the way they interacted with each other in general and with Paul. Such memories of people and things in this place work to make the place sacred. The cross itself, as a sacred symbol, pales in comparison to the ways that the community imagines, creates and reinforces holiness on their own, in their singular, special ways. All those who visit in the future will be inextricably linked to the past as they read the messages and symbols on the shrine; to the present as they experience continued communion with

¹⁷⁰ Vavao, 21-22.

him; and, as they look forward to the future, living on with Paul, even when he himself cannot.

Speculating about the building of shrines, Sheli later mused, “maybe it gives some people a sense of closure. Maybe it’s so that nobody really forgets if it’s there that this happened, especially, I think, if it’s tragic.” This is a complicated statement. On the one hand, she’s right—many people don’t necessarily want to forget something that irrevocably altered their lives forever.¹⁷¹ However, her own experience belies any sense of closure. I believe shrines represent people’s refusal to “close” that chapter of their lives. It will never be closed—it can’t be. The chain of memory runs the risk of becoming stale and rigid, qualities that lead to its collapse.

Rather than closure, we should think of shrines as inviting ongoing relationships and forging bonds for the future. One of the ways in which shrines, or for that matter, any material manifestation of a religious chain of memory, achieve this is by providing a context for managing trauma. Trauma is so dangerous because, for survivors, the “ways in which they usually experience the world and make sense of their own place in it are effectively shattered.”¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ It is important to consider here the ways in which this statement is true for those in the shrine building community. That is not to say that *all* people *want* to remember traumatic events from their past, even if said events have inalterably shaped who they are. Victims of physical, sexual or psychological trauma, for example, may have different experiences with their memories and may actually connect with deep wishes to forget.

¹⁷² Maria Tumarkin, “*Traumascapes*.”

Ch:4 The Public Lives of Shrines

Introduction

Interstate 80, which charts an east-west course through the state of Wyoming, and continues on across the country, has hardly been a stranger to fatal car accidents. Although the road appears emptier than in more densely populated areas of the country, evidence of the harsh reality of road casualties nonetheless punctuates this landscape. In fact, one finds death markers around every corner. However, these memorials look starkly different in Wyoming. According to the Wyoming Department of Transportation (WYDOT),

WYDOT will install a memorial sign free of charge for anyone killed in a traffic crash on a Wyoming highway, if the sign is requested in writing by a member of the victim's immediate family. After receiving the application, WYDOT will install the sign as soon as practical, and it will remain in place for five years. At that time the family will have the option of having the sign removed so they can claim it, leaving the sign up without maintenance until deterioration requires it be removed or having a new sign installed for a \$50 fee to cover the costs of fabrication and installation.¹⁷³

Personalized memorials, those handmade, highly localized material entities, have, in effect, been banned in the state of Wyoming in favor of a simple metal sign designed by the state's schoolchildren. These signs are uniform; they depict the image of a

¹⁷³ Accessed in October 2014,
https://www.dot.state.wy.us/home/news_info/roadside_memorials.default.html.

dove over a broken heart and vague obelisk. These signs treat every Wyoming accident victim equally—no one has greater or more limited access to this service, and no favor is granted to those in positions of power, specifically financial power. Showing some signs of sensitivity, the state acknowledges that even after five years, more money and energy may be required to continue helping the bereaved along their journey, as their flexible policies can generally accommodate most Wyoming taxpayers who might take advantage of this service.

Perhaps without realizing it, however, states like Wyoming, Florida, Washington, Texas and Utah have stirred up debate surrounding the place of roadside shrines in the public sphere, as each requires that the state *replace* homemade, vernacular shrines with markers sanctioned by the state. From the point of view of policymakers, such legislation constitutes a compassionate middle path between unregulated memorial building on the one hand, and an outright ban of all such shrines on the other. However, for shrine builders and their loved ones, such intrusive, unwarranted regulation of personal mourning amounts to a violation of their ability to assimilate their grief, and the requirement that their taste be erased into a normalized conception of “the public.” These issues are further muddled by unstated problematic assumptions underlying the concept of “good taste,” the plasticity of both state and federal laws regarding objects and how all of these together work to create a high-stakes public debate. In examining the intricacies of this ever more entangled debate in American culture between lawmakers, shrine builders and the general public, fundamental questions are raised about American material culture, religion,

and the law. In order to examine this issue, clarifying the use of terms “public” and “taste” is necessary, followed by a preliminary investigation into the diversity of laws and legal policies surrounding shrines, and ending with a study of the raging debates such outright contradiction of legal precedent from state to state fuels. To illustrate the gravity of these debates, this chapter ends with an examination of the 9/11 National Memorial and Museum and the adjacent St. Paul’s Chapel. Understanding how and why these places become loci for both shrines and community helps us better understand the place of vernacular shrines in American culture.

“The Public” and Its “Taste”

Although we saw in the previous chapter that vernacular shrines are “humble” objects, they nonetheless are powerful determiners of collective behavior, as they require a different set of social conventions be followed. However, it is when disagreement arises about what such conventions should look like that major debate occurs. Very often, these debates take place within the community and, therefore, impact not only those immediately involved with the disagreement, but all of us: the “public.” Thus far, I have used the public as a way of including *all* Americans of a particular locale, and, more broadly in some instances, to refer to the general American citizenry. The crux of this definition, and its relevance to the current work, is that it implies participation, of either an active or passive variety. To some extent, all Americans participate in “the public,” whether by voting and participating in politics, relating to one another through the media, social networking, etc, through

consumer culture or in any capacity that necessitates interaction with and a general acknowledgment of fellow citizens. American national identity seems predicated on such a concept of “the public.” In other words, it is a way of bridging cultural, social, and racial/ethnic differences and creating a language through which we refer to the whole as a single unit. This idea is powerful; it suggests unity, even in the face of diversity and sometimes discord.

However, as we have observed throughout American history and felt through lived experience, *being* a public is a more difficult, more problematic concept. Erika Doss reminds us that being “the public,” which is both her audience and her research subject, depends upon “the shared assumptions of its participants, or would-be participants, that *they* comprise the public sphere and are therefore entitled to its rights and privileges.”¹⁷⁴ This raises the question, then, of exactly what those rights and privileges are. For many, the core issues seem to be related and twofold: one, freedom of speech and two, freedom of expression, and these are especially valued for people in the context of grief and mourning. Many of the shrine builders I have spoken with imagine that they are due at least a small sliver of public space in which to vent their anger, frustration, confusion, grief, and trauma. This is intensified when they understand the death of their loved one to be just a single snapshot of a larger social problem like drug use, drinking and driving, constructions of masculinity and machismo culture, urban violence, public health and safety as well as other contentious social issues. In these instances, “people have a sense of entitlement, that

¹⁷⁴ Doss, 34.

their issues should be given public space/voice/money,” and that their loved ones’ memories *deserve* to be publically broadcast as both commentary and a warning.¹⁷⁵ Very often the form that such mourning takes is the cathartic release of shrine building.

While some would grant public space for this kind of emotive, intense grief, others consider it to be in poor taste in a phenomenon that Doss has come to identify as “mourning sickness.” Playing with medical terminology that immediately conjures very unpleasant, “distasteful” images, she explains that “their excessive physical and emotional properties are deemed ‘too much’ and even fetishistic; their overwrought sensibilities seemingly strain boundaries between good taste and vulgarity.”¹⁷⁶ The very materiality of shrines, their over-the-top, highly ornamented, free flowing and free form displays, seem to grate against conceptions of what is acceptable in public and what is not. As I have argued elsewhere, I believe we can locate the origins of an American commitment to eschewing such emotional materiality in our *de facto* Protestant establishment, which has worked its way into our conception of taste.¹⁷⁷

Americans have quite an entrenched predilection for romanticizing our conservative Protestant past, prompting journalists and others in the media to ask whether or not we are still, in fact, Puritan in some capacity. One such writer is Matthew Hutson, a staff writer at the New York Times. After raising the question, he explains that most Americans continue to believe that “success [is the] path to

¹⁷⁵ Doss, 37.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 68.

¹⁷⁷ Allison Solso, “Austerity in Practice: Material Protestantism and the Contest of Tradition” (presentation, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA. April 2013).

salvation: hard work and good deeds [will] bring rewards, in life and after,” ideas emphatically endorsed by early Protestant reformers like John Calvin.¹⁷⁸ With convincing brevity, Hutson demonstrates that when it comes to work, sex and morality, on paper, Americans look thoroughly enchanted by this conservative Protestant ethic. These practical applications, like hard work and good deeds, are circumscribed within an austere worldview, which values aesthetic and material reserve.

In the colonial period, those historical inheritors of his legacy in the US, the Puritans, avoided any ornate, embellished, over the top forms of religiosity, equating such excessive materiality with the Catholic devotionism from which they sought to distance themselves. This included unadorned churches and modest cemeteries, as it was believed that such earthly intemperance precluded cultivation of their relationships to Christ. Deeply impressed by the ideas of his predecessor Martin Luther, and seeking to throw off the shackles of his parent’s Catholic faith, Calvin asserted God’s undisputed supremacy in salvation and humanity’s virtual powerlessness; people are fated by God’s decree. Since there is nothing humanity can do on its own, they must always show deference before God and live in strict accordance to biblical precepts. One effect of this philosophy was that Calvinists distinguished themselves from other Protestants, especially by marking their religious zeal with extreme austerity in nearly every aspect of personal and spiritual life. Since

¹⁷⁸ Matthew Hutson. “Still Puritan After All These Years.” *New York Times*. August 3, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/05/opinion/sunday/are-americans-still-puritan.html? r=0>,

humans were powerless before God, why take pains to make earthly life visually or aesthetically appealing? Ultimately, God wouldn't be swayed by such finery.

Puritans internalized this message deeply. As they fled persecution first in England, then in the Netherlands, they sought refuge on the shores of the colonies, especially in Massachusetts Bay. As they established towns like Salem, they did so under virtual theocratic rule, in which Puritan precepts governed everything from local elections to marriage and, of course, congregational life. Seeking a new, purified homeland, they created an environment in which austerity was the rule: meetinghouses were stripped bare, leaving simple wooden structures without adornment, in which to worship. Clothing was to be humble, without lace or ribbons. Cemeteries, which were usually located on church grounds, were equally unadorned, with simple markers around plain graves.

Such austerity in the face of death seems fitting, given the regularity with which colonists faced death. One source on Plymouth notes that “of the first 102 Pilgrims who landed [there] in 1620, half died during the first winter.”¹⁷⁹ In fact, death and dying became so commonplace that “the tolling of church bells on the day of funerals [was] legislated against as a public nuisance.”¹⁸⁰ The elements, starvation and contact with Native Americans all played their part in this, but perhaps most disturbing was the alarming rate of disease among the colonists at the time. For example, “Cotton Mather, the famous Boston minister, had 14 children. Seven died in

¹⁷⁹Mintz, S., & McNeil, S. (2013). “Death in Early America.” *Digital History*. Retrieved (April 2014) from http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/topic_display.cfm?tcid=72.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

infancy and just one lived to the age of thirty. Bacterial stomach infections, intestinal worms, epidemic diseases, contaminated food and water, and neglect and carelessness all contributed to a society in which 40 percent of children failed to reach adulthood in the seventeenth century.”¹⁸¹ Because death lurked around every corner, it comes as a shock that no great pains were taken to mark it. While this may not be the only influence on American’s shared concept of good taste, it goes far in explaining the root of the concept of taste as we relate it to matters of death.

When death practices do not conform to this conception of taste, many Americans tend to balk, especially those in positions of power in the public sphere. We have seen this throughout American history as immigrants have brought diverse religious practices into ethnic enclaves, spilling out of storefronts onto street corners, and down rural and urban roads alike. For example, various ethnically diverse, localized and material Catholic practices have been examined by scholars for decades. Robert Orsi’s *The Madonna of 115th Street*, Thomas Tweed’s *Our Lady of the Exile*, and Elaine Pena’s *Performing Piety* each examine distinctive ethnic, Catholic practice in the US and circumscribe these studies within the larger framework of taste, even if this is not the direct intention of these authors. Each of these works is careful to devote time to public reactions to large, festive public gatherings among America’s Italian, Cuban and Chicana/o communities, respectively. More often than not, the tone is apologetic, suggesting, even if not directly addressing, the (sometimes) unspoken issue: the vibrant parades, embodied, physical

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

displays and sensual depth and detail of Catholic ritual life bother “the public.” Something about outward, public displays does not sit well with traditions considered less “materialistic.” While a full discussion of this rich history and interesting psychic effects it has taken on American thought is outside the scope of this project, suffice it to say, the pressure felt, especially in minority communities, to behave according to a *de facto* Protestant conception of “good taste,” is a reality faced by many trying to assimilate their traditions into a larger conception of the American public.

It might then follow that given this concept of “good taste,” that overt religious displays might fall by the wayside. If Hutson is correct, then these outward markers of religiosity should have all but vanished, as these values have been reinforced through the centuries on the American continent. This, however, seems deeply problematic, given the efflorescence of grand, celebratory funerals, especially in the last century (as we saw in the previous chapter) and the move toward lively churches and meetinghouses. Equally disruptive is the established burgeoning of building roadside shrines in the last century. Roadside shrines, in particular, might make us linger over Hutson’s question. While it is impossible to capture the complexity of American religion by offering a single answer to this question, we might begin to answer it by noting that vernacular shrines are found all over the country, in every state, among members of every religious, ethnic and socioeconomic group. Everyone engages in this practice. And, it is my contention, that because shrines are built in the context of traumatic death, “taste” fades from peoples’ purview. What is generally considered “in good taste” melts away for those who

build, and this seems to be generally respected by those in local communities. It is as though death gives people a pass—they can behave, in this one very specific way, how they would like, with few real consequences. Even if they are considered to be low-brow, they still achieve the cathartic release detailed in chapter two, as the Fernandez family clearly demonstrated. In order to maintain ties with their deceased loved ones, families very often simply do not care what others may think or how other might judge their efforts.

Erika Doss poses her own negative answer to the question of whether or not Americans suffer from the “mourning sickness” she identifies. She reminds us that while “spontaneous memorials are often scorned as fetishistic for their obsessive materiality and manic mourning,”¹⁸² they can and perhaps should be viewed as “the creative products of profound personal and public feelings...the palpable stuff of which they are made both describes and defines them.”¹⁸³ If it is the “palpable stuff” that not only describes shrines, but, as Doss suggests, makes them what they are, then their inherent materiality is key to understanding them and probably also key in understanding what they do for people. This poses difficult questions for those in positions of public power: if vernacular shrines are made of stuff—stuff that is clearly important to the living and their memory of the dead—what does it say when that stuff is removed or discarded? Is this a form of violence against the memory of the deceased or simply a move toward preventing future deaths by eliminating the distraction of that very same “stuff?” The variety of answers to these questions

¹⁸² Article, 298.

¹⁸³ Doss, 69.

reflects the diversity of current laws surrounding the treatment of vernacular shrines in public.

The Variety of Legal Responses to Shrines

Depending on where a shrine is born, it will live a very different public life. No federal legislation regarding shrines currently exists. There is more variety in laws from state to state regarding shrines than there is any clear consistency. Within states, there are even various rules for different organizations or jurisdictions; for example, state law in California technically governs shrines, though enforcement of the law is difficult, and human emotion and empathy sometimes trump the complicated legalities of the situation. The official position of the state of California regarding vernacular shrines comes from the state legislature and is enforced by the Department of Transportation (CalTrans); it reads as follows:

[Roadside memorials consist of] white crosses, wreaths, flowers, personal items, etc. They commemorate the memory of loved ones that died while traveling on a particular State highway. Placement of roadside memorials is not allowed unless required by specific legislation or approved via the Victims Memorial Signs Program.¹⁸⁴
(Streets and Highways Code, Section 101.10)

Technically, every person who has constructed or maintained a vernacular shrine in California has engaged in unlawful behavior. Although some memorials are allowed

¹⁸⁴ (Streets and Highways Code, Section 101.10)

to be built, they must be approved and made uniform by the state, similar to the Wyoming law mentioned above. If you ask shrine builders in the state if they are familiar with this law, they often say no. Especially for those still bereaved, it generally seems unthinkable that shrine building would be frowned upon, let alone banned. Often, the legality of the situation is the last thing on their minds and even with the prospect of punishment, many would have constructed shrines anyway.

This law, however, has been made more complicated since the introduction of the Victims Memorial Signs Program (Assembly Bill 965), passed in 2001 and implemented January 1, 2002. This bill directs CalTrans to install memorial signs along state-maintained roadways for victims of drunk driving accidents. These signs read: "Please don't drink and drive," followed by "in loving memory of..." and the victim's name. However, the state has instituted strict criteria for meeting the qualifications for sign installation including:

A) At least one of the deceased victim's immediate family members requests a memorial sign. An immediate family member is a spouse, child, stepchild, brother, stepbrother, sister, stepsister, mother, stepmother, father or stepfather.

B) The accident occurred on or after January 1, 1991.

C) Either (1) or (2) is true:

(1) The intoxicated driver was convicted of second degree murder, or gross vehicular manslaughter, or vehicular manslaughter.

(2) The intoxicated driver died or could not be prosecuted because of mental incompetence. Note: An intoxicated driver who died does NOT qualify as a victim.¹⁸⁵

Note that victims can *only* be commemorated if their deaths were caused by drunk driving and the offender has to have been found guilty of this crime or be dead him/herself. This law, in effect, renders those killed by other means, like reckless driving, natural disasters, violent crime and, sadly, tragic accident, somehow less worthy of memorialization.¹⁸⁶

Deciding whom the state will honor with such memorials is certainly a complex, fraught political struggle. Honoring victims of drunk driving hardly involves taking a controversial, high-stakes stance; in fact, such memorials seems relatively innocuous and perhaps might even serve to benefit the community at large by reminding would-be intoxicated motorists of the risk they assume by participating in such behavior. Memorializing racing victims, sleepy drivers or the occasional murder victim seem to present much more of a problem for states like California, which has to be conscious of how such displays might play in the court of public opinion. While there is nothing in the California law that suggests fear of appearing to endorse or repudiate various lifestyle choices other than drunk driving, it is easy to imagine that public outcry might arise if someone assumed to be immoral, dangerous or unethical, was honored in a public fashion. Especially if road or other safety

¹⁸⁵ <http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/traffops/engineering/control-devices/victims.htm>

¹⁸⁶ Also, it might not always be immediately clear to the outside observer that the victim was not the drunk driver.

conditions were at play in a death, towns, cities and the state would also probably choose *not* to draw attention to those issues.

CalTrans also goes on to detail further the specifics of sign construction and maintenance. The organization states that “only one sign will be installed in one direction of travel on the right side of the state highway in close proximity to where the accident occurred at a location where it is safe and practical to do so.”¹⁸⁷ Like the Fernandez and Vavao families, and countless others, safety and practicality are primary concerns when constructing memorials. Deciding what is “practical” is left to the crew performing the installation, even down to the recommended materials they use, including standard posts, hardware, materials, etc.¹⁸⁸ As noted earlier, families and friends create their shrines to withstand the elements and to maintain as much safety as possible; CalTrans alerts applicants that they “will maintain the sign for 7 years or until the condition of the sign has deteriorated to a point where it is no longer serviceable, whichever occurs first.”¹⁸⁹ From the arid deserts to the snowy mountains, California’s climate ranges from mild and temperate to windy and volatiles and this two-line policy covers all of them. State signage comes with a built-in expiration date, leaving maintenance to be done only on an as-needed basis, and because this basis is determined by the various field offices scattered around the state, some are better maintained than others.

¹⁸⁷ California Department of Transportation, accessed on October 2014.
<http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/traffops/engineering/control-devices/victims.htm>.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Along with all of these intricacies, California law requires that those who would like to see memorials built for their loved ones apply for the privilege. While this may not seem too egregious, the state has made the application process and its attendant fees prohibitively expensive and inconvenient. The application process is multi-step. First, an immediate family member (as described above) must submit a signed letter to their local CalTrans District Office, asking for the sign to be installed; if an immediate family member has not written the signed letter, the applicant must provide his or her consent for a third party to make the formal request. Secondly, the “applicant must provide a copy of the accident report to the local Caltrans District Office. This is needed to verify the date and location of the accident.”¹⁹⁰ While such reports are public record, collecting such reports may compromise emotional and psychological stability for survivors and feel burdensome. A further burden the living must take on is providing “proof of conviction to the local Caltrans District Office from court records, or proof of intoxication from coroner's records if the driver died.”¹⁹¹ Especially if a fatal car accident necessitated a trial, these records may take months or even years to obtain. As we have seen, building shrines or memorials may facilitate moving through the grieving process for many, but this may be put off by significant lengths of time, especially if conviction is required. To be submitted with these documents is a fee—a \$1000 fee. Presumably this goes toward materials, paying the crew to build and install, and for maintenance activities. However, for many families, this is a significant bill that may prove too expensive and, therefore,

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

removes state-sponsored signs as a viable option for some. According to Rochelle Jenkins, a public information officer CalTrans, in some instances, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) will step in and offer to cover the cost of memorial building for families who cannot afford the fee and who meet the criteria for memorialization under the law.

Rather than relying on the state run program, many simply choose to ignore the law and build their own less expensive and more personal shrine. And generally, it appears that nobody will stop this. In speaking to state and local officials it immediately becomes clear that unless such assemblages cause an egregious safety hazard, they are allowed to stay out of respect for the victims and, especially their grieving families. It is as though being in a fragile grief state gives people a temporary free pass to behave in this illegal manner. As a society, there tends to be sympathy and understanding in the face of the chaos caused by sudden, tragic death. Rules can be relaxed as a show of solidarity and human kindness when facing disaster. This is certainly not a phenomenon isolated to California, as we have seen. In fact, it is the diversity of laws regarding shrines that sometimes leads to shrine building either because people don't know the ins and outs of the law, have never been made to find out, or else they come from a place where shrine building is a special, protected class of activity.

Again, because there is no federal law to govern each state from above, lawmakers create legislation from within, and, in some cases, each town or city has

its own practice. Perhaps the most striking examples of shrine protection, and even encouragement, come from New Mexico and Alaska. The language of the New Mexico law values shrines for their inherent “traditional cultural properties,” speaking to the “particularly” American aspects of this tradition. As the research of Troy Fernandez and Kathleen McRee demonstrates, New Mexicans often have a romantic, nostalgic link to a shared Hispanic past, in which rich Spanish-indigenous practices are something to be passed on to the next generations so that they won’t simply become relegated to the past. When I asked Angela Fernandez, referenced in chapter two, about this law she paraphrased it in her own words:

Angela: I think, again, it can’t obstruct the flow of traffic, can’t be a major distraction, you know? And then, as a matter of fact, you noticed that, which is how you got my number obviously, that little engraved plaque on the side because, if they would have to remove it, the Highway Department, for any reason, they will actually, if there’s a number on it, they will call the individual person to come, to go get it when they have to do their work. It’s not—they are required to put them back up after they finish their work.

While they are considered state treasures, she does acknowledge that not everyone is particularly happy about their presence.

Angela: I think some people aren’t particularly fond of any kind of memorial, you know what I mean? Because they represent, I’m sure in

some people's minds, tragedy and sorrow and, for that matter, for people who aren't religious. They might even take offense, because again, it's in a public space, you know? A [public] space. I'm sure not everyone is fond of them, and they'd rather that we not be able to put them up, and actually, they're protected here so...

Interviewer: What would you say to someone who said something like that?

Angela: Um, you know what? Unless it's harming them, or obstructing safety somehow, you know, basically, if you don't like it, don't look at it. (laughs)

There is a strong sense in which people in New Mexico, and also shrine builders around the country feel *entitled* to that particular space. Through the tragedy that occurred there, public space has somehow switched hands and is no longer a public space, but a fiercely private, familial place. When I inquired of Angela if she would have built Vincente's shrine had it not been protected by law, she said emphatically that she would have.

The Alaska law also reinforces a positive view of shrines and encourages their building almost totally outside the purview of authorities. The law, as written in 2011 and enacted in 2012 reads:

(a) Notwithstanding AS 19.25.090 , 19.25.105, and 19.25.200, a person may, for a period of not more than two years, place in the right-of-way but outside of the traveled way of a state highway a temporary

memorial for a decedent who died as a result of a traffic accident, or other incident in the right-of-way, at or reasonably near the site where the memorial is located.

(b) A memorial must not interfere with the use of the highway, with other uses of the right-of-way, with the visibility of directional and other official signs and notices, or with highway safety, construction, or maintenance.

(c) The person who places a memorial in the right-of-way of a state highway shall:

(1) post the person's contact information on the memorial;

(2) inform the department of the location within seven days of placement of the memorial; and

(3) provide the person's contact information to the department.

(d) A person may not place a political or commercial message on a memorial.

(e) A person may not place reflective material or another item on a memorial if that material or item would be distracting to drivers and other users of the right-of-way.

(f) The state is not liable for damage to, or damage or injury resulting from the presence of, a memorial in the right-of-way of a state highway.

(g) In this section, "memorial" means decorations, flags, flowers, and other lightweight objects or ornamentation commonly used at funerals or at gravesides as a tribute to a decedent.

Alaska legislators put the onus back on shrine builders by maintaining a hands-off approach to regulating. Therefore, shrine builders are almost solely responsible for the shrine, its contents, and its public impact. According to Erin Madigan, staff writer for Stateline, affiliated with the Pew Charitable Trust, "Alaska state Rep. Jim Whitaker (R-Fairbanks) sponsored the legislation to allow memorials because he said he felt it was 'an overly heavy-handed action on the part of the state to try and restrict people from expressing their grief,' said Whitaker aide, Lori Backes."¹⁹² Other states tacitly endorse memorialization by having laws for state-installed signs, as we have seen in California and Wyoming. Other states in this vein include West Virginia, Florida, Washington, Texas and Utah.

Another type of memorial encouraged in some states, including Arizona and Missouri is "highway adoption" or the creation of memorial highways. These need not be limited to roadside victims, but may also include veterans, police killed in the line of duty, historic figures, political donors, etc. In both Arizona and Missouri, memorial signs are installed by each state's department of transportation, and in Arizona, the Adopt-a-Highway program involves a commitment on the part of the sign purchaser to keep litter from cluttering up the roads. There are even occasional outliers like Delaware, where the efflorescence of shrines led to the construction of a

¹⁹² Accessed in October 2014. <http://www.pewstates.org/projects/stateline/headlines/safety-concerns-fail-to-curb-roadside-memorials-85899393289>

memorial garden, providing a centralized focal point for victims of traffic fatalities. In all these instances, memorialization is recognized as a practice with some validity and vitality. However, in other contexts, shrine activities are discouraged.

Many states, including Oregon, Alabama, North Carolina, Michigan, New York, Vermont and Indiana discourage memorialization so strongly that it is now illegal.

Just because this practice is technically illegal in many places, though, does not mean that such laws are accepted without controversy. The state that best illustrates this point is Virginia. Much like the California law, Virginians must apply for a memorial sign to be installed by the Department of Transportation. However, the language of the law in Virginia suggests that homemade, vernacular shrines are banned. Without expressly naming them, the law reads that “There may be no deviation from the standard roadside memorial sign specifications.”¹⁹³ This surely implies that the placement of cards, notes, flowers and other ephemera are banned. This interpretation is strengthened further by the law’s specification that grieving friends and families may not linger at the memorial site too long, presumably to ensure that shrine building isn’t an option.

Approval of a memorial does not give the applicant, family, or friends of the victim permission to park, stand, or loiter at the memorial site. It is illegal to park along the Interstate System, and because of safety reasons and concerns for the public and friends and family of the

¹⁹³ Accessed in October 2014, http://www.virginiadot.org/info/roadside_memorial_signs.asp

deceased, parking, stopping, and standing of persons along any highway is not encouraged.

When such behavior is banned, so, in effect, are shrines. The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) stresses the safety issues posed by bystanders on the roadside, and certainly there is much validity to this argument. VDOT is also, to be sure, forestalling liability in the case that grave injury should occur on their roadways. However, this also addresses shrines in a roundabout manner.

After VDOT revealed this legislation, a debate began that soon became a conflagration fueled by intense emotion. Once again, Erin Madigan's writing crystallizes this issue. She writes, "the plan VDOT unveiled angered some lawmakers and victims' rights advocates because it banned private memorials along state-controlled highways and would instead use state funds to establish uniform markers, as has been done in Florida for more than a decade."¹⁹⁴ The problem with this, she claims, is that some viewed uniformity as disruptive to the grieving process. Quoting Virginia Delegate Bob Marshall, who lost his son in a traffic fatality, she writes, "when people see these crosses out there it gets them thinking," and a state sponsored program and source of funding should not "interfere[e] with the grieving of a family."¹⁹⁵ Marshall, then, equates the practice of building a shrine to working through the grieving process. He offers this testimony from a place of personal experience, making it even more relevant, credible and emotional. Surely this struck a

¹⁹⁴ Accessed in October, <http://www.pewstates.org/projects/stateline/headlines/safety-concerns-fail-to-curb-roadside-memorials-85899393289>

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

chord with others who engage in the practice of shrine building and caused much backlash against the state and its legislation. Madigan goes on to explain that “due to such negative responses, the legislature revisited the issue and barred VDOT from using state money for their program, said Tamara Neale, spokeswoman for VDOT. The program would have cost the state an estimated \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year.”¹⁹⁶ Ms. Neal, quoted above, also went on to say that the state of Virginia is practicing “compassionate tolerance” of memorials even though this law officially remains in place. As often happens elsewhere, while a stringent law may remain, its enforcement is lacking. Especially when it involves the death of loved ones, many officials simply look the other way.

In instances where laws are enforced with more urgency and regularity, often the motivating factor is their potential for creating safety hazards. The laws of the state of Wyoming are once again instructive when seeking to understand how vernacular shrines might be viewed as public nuisance. WYDOT maintains that:

The goal of the Roadside Memorial Program is to remember the victims of traffic crashes and recognize the needs of grieving families, while still maintaining a safe clear zone along the highways. Having WYDOT personnel install and maintain the breakaway signs that meet federal safety standards for use beside highways eliminates the

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

dangers of family members erecting memorials beside a highway, and of having unregulated obstructions in the clear zone along the road.¹⁹⁷

Having traversed busy highways, hiked cliffs and traipsed through rugged terrain, I can attest to the safety risks posed to the general public. It is not just their placement by the roadside, but their very materiality, which often succeeds in drawing us in, concentrating our attention and capturing our imagination. In a situation where one is operating a vehicle, shrines *may* prove dangerously distracting. However, my experiences in the field have led me to an important realization: I sought out the unusually vivid, the imposing, the over-the-top and even in so doing, I am sure I missed and passed right by more shrines than I visited. As often as the particularly striking ones distract, most merely blend into the landscape, becoming a mere blip on the radar, hardly working their way into our fields of vision. This observation serves to complicate this issue and calls into question just how much of a hazard noticing them may be.

Another argument for their potential liability is that shrines deteriorate and their debris flies onto roadways, causing problems for maintenance crews and drivers alike. When ornamentation overflows, it often detaches from shrines and ends up on the shoulders of highways, in center medians or elsewhere. Winds and rain rip shrines apart effectively, scattering what might appear to be garbage across the scene. These can pose problems or, at least, cause drivers to react, rather than remain calm.

¹⁹⁷ Accessed in October 2014, https://www.dot.state.wy.us/home/news_info/roadside_memorials.default.html.

Maintenance crews often complain that roadside shrines make it more difficult to perform basic clean-up including mowing grass, cutting back brush and maintenance on signage. These issues do pose some legitimate concerns and helps explain why, when shrines are permitted, their regulation tends to be relatively strict.

It is important to note that in many of the political, cultural and academic forums dedicated to discussion about vernacular shrines and official memorials alike, the overwhelming majority of people are supportive of the emotional, psychological release facilitated by shrines. That is to say, even though officials sometimes stand opposed to shrines on public safety and aesthetic grounds, they do so while maintaining the utmost respect and thoughtfulness toward those in mourning.

Rochelle Jenkins, of CalTrans, added a much needed softer, more humane dimension to the work done by CalTrans and like organizations which can sometimes receive intense backlash over their perceived insensitivity to tragic death. As a spokesperson for CalTrans in Yolo County, California, Jenkins has had to deal very publicly with her own thoughts and feelings about her work and that of her colleagues. After establishing that most memorials are removed for safety reasons, I asked about public responses to that practice. She said:

a lot of the time the people that have to remove them are the same people that reported to the accident scenes themselves. Our crew members are usually one of the first people on the scene...we're all over the place working, depending on the time of the day, and we're usually about the last to leave because we do the clean up.

This put CalTrans workers in the unusual position of coming in very close contact with friends and family in the immediate aftermath of spontaneous death. A point she continues to reiterate over and over again was simply that the workers try their best to proceed with compassion and “human-kindness,” to use her language. In illustrating this point, she recalled the following story:

Rochelle: Little Danielle that we lost six or seven years ago now, her friends were stopping and hugging the cross [that was erected at the scene of her death in a car accident.] I mean, we had no choice. It had to go quickly. And the maintenance supervisor that went out there had actually lost a child in an automobile accident at seventeen. So he was very sensitive to having to remove it. He called and said, ‘I’m going to go take it.’ I said, ‘do you want me to go with you?’ He said, ‘no, I’ll go, I’ll be ok. I’d rather go by myself...’ because of his background. And I said, ‘Ok, I’ll get a hold of her parents and he said ‘ok.’ Unfortunately, right as Bruce was removing it, was the procession for her funeral, [which went right] past the cross. And all they saw was Bruce putting it in the back of the truck.”

Interviewer: Oh my gosh, do you know what happened?

Rochelle: Oh, I got a flood of phone calls!

Interviewer: Oh wow, and what were people saying to you?

Rochelle: Well, ‘bureaucratic whore’ was one of them!

[laughs]... Yeah, it was not pretty and I explained to them—I talked to

Danielle's mom and explained to her the circumstances and I actually personally, it's not something we usually do, but given the circumstances, a local paper was stirring the pot over and over and over even though [the family] asked to please stop running stories about it, they kept running stories about it. One of the local CHP officers and myself went and got the memorial and took it to Danielle's mom's house and returned it to her. And we gave her the paperwork to help her fill it out to get a legalized sign for Danielle. Yeah, that one was not pretty. I think we had two to three weeks worth of stories in the local paper about it...about how we didn't care.

It turns out that Danielle's family quickly came to the defense of Bruce, Rochelle and CalTrans as an organization, in an effort to quell outrage about the removal of the cross. In fact, Danielle's family was touched that so many people felt so strongly and personally about what could have simply been treated as an anonymous case. This story and those like it highlight the difficult situation that many maintenance workers find themselves in. They proceed in doing their jobs knowing full well that public perception may not be on their side. And the overwhelming majority of those workers do their best to maintain professionalism, sensitivity and compassion as families and friends face these most difficult times. These workers, as Rochelle reminded me, are fathers and mothers themselves, some of whom know the pain of loss, and they are simply doing their jobs in hopes of preventing more tragedy.

The Case of Rodney Lyle Scott

Especially in the last two decades, one controversial argument has gained some traction in the debate around vernacular shrines and their appropriateness in the public square: the issue of government endorsement of religion. A cursory glance at the issue of vernacular shrines may not seem to pose a church-state issue; that vernacular shrines are often illegal doesn't necessarily constitute a state rejection of religion, and similarly, where legal, such legislation may not constitute an endorsement of religion. However, the ever-contentious history of the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the First Amendment, and growing American awareness of agnosticism and atheism make these issues particularly controversial and raise questions about religion's relationship to public policy. Rodney Lyle Scott, a Colorado atheist, thrust this issue to the forefront after making headlines nationwide for "desecrating" a vernacular shrine along Interstate 70.

According to Scott's lawyer, Robert Tiernan, who worked the case *pro bono*, Scott had become disturbed when he began noticing the amount of vernacular shrines lining the highway. He was even more bothered by the fact that most of these shrines contained crosses, and he likened his daily commute to work to "driving through a graveyard."¹⁹⁸ After years of feeling irritated by these objects,

¹⁹⁸ Robert Tiernan. "Colorado Freethinker Charged with "Desecration." Freethought Today, October 2000, Accessed in January 2015 at <http://ffrf.org/legacy/fttoday/2000/october2000/tiernan.html>.

a Colorado State Trooper noticed Rodney Scott's pickup truck sitting in the median strip one evening alongside Interstate 70 about 25 miles east of Denver. He also noticed some religious paraphernalia in the back of the truck and questioned Scott. Satisfied that nothing was wrong, the Trooper left but not until he had made a note of the license plate number on Rodney's truck...However, it appears that several people complained to the authorities that their Christian crosses had been removed from the Interstate 70 median strip and an investigation was initiated by the local sheriff's department. The State Trooper who had taken Scott's license number heard about the investigation and contacted the sheriff, who then questioned Scott.¹⁹⁹

Eventually, it was decided by local authorities in Arapahoe County, where his crime was originally committed, that he was likely the culprit. However, the county refused to press charges and his case was sent to Adams County, where he was soon facing serious allegations. With bitter sarcasm, Tiernan explains,

Curiously, Scott was not charged with theft of a roadside memorial. Instead, he was charged under a little-used law making it a crime to "desecrate an object venerated by the public." This has all the indicia of a crime against religion. The word "desecrate" means to destroy the sacredness of, and "veneration" is synonymous with worship. Our legal system has a long history of rejecting crimes such as blasphemy

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

and heresy, so a major issue in the case will be whether the law violates the Constitutional principle of church/state separation.²⁰⁰

In an article entitled, “Roadside crosses: using public property to endorse religion?” by the Associated Press, Tiernan discloses that “[building shrines is] a violation of the U.S. Constitution, as far as I’m concerned, and it’s a serious distraction.”²⁰¹ One might not expect Tiernan to be quite so stringent with policy on shrines given his own association with auto accident fatalities. According to a report by AP reported Ted Shaffrey, Tiernan lost control of his vehicle one rainy night on a family vacation, smashed into a tree, causing the traumatic brain injury that would take his son’s life a year and a half later. Tiernan chose not to erect a memorial for his son. He explained “It’s my grief... Everyone has grief in your life, you deal with it without forcing other people to deal with it.”²⁰² As it turns out, Tiernan may have a legal leg to stand on.

In 2000, the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF), an organization dedicated to upholding a “wall of separation” between the state and religion, asked the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) to cease and desist allowing crosses, since they believe this particular symbol constitutes a promotion of religion in general and Christianity specifically. Colorado responded to the FFRF’s request by instituting policies that Tiernan explains as follows:

Upon receiving a complaint, [CDOT] would first offer the family which had erected the memorial an opportunity to remove it. If that

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ Associated Press, “Roadside crosses: using public property to endorse religion?” October 21, 2002.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

was not successful, CDOT would remove and dispose of the display itself. Although a number of religious objects were removed under this program, it proved to be unsatisfactory primarily because, usually within days, the object would reappear at the same location. For this reason, the Colorado Chapter [of the FFRF] filed a written request with CDOT asking (1) that fines be assessed against the party or parties who erected a display and (2) that CDOT's maintenance crews routinely remove these objects regardless of whether their presence had been brought to official attention by the Colorado Chapter.²⁰³

Using these standing CDOT policies and the first amendment to the constitution, Tiernan believed Scott's case would ultimately be dismissed. The First Amendment, which states that the government "shall make no laws respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The longstanding problem in American jurisprudence is the vast latitude of this law. Its lack of specificity and room for interpretation makes it relatively easy for government action to be subject to scrutiny under the law. CDOT's allowance of crosses, for example, was behavior that Tiernan believed "established" religion and/or violated his atheist clients' ability to "freely" assert his worldview.

That vernacular shrines infringe upon religious free exercise, or atheist free exercise, as the case may be, is particularly fascinating as it seems slightly harder to "prove." Scott appears to have been keenly sensitive when viewing shrines. Aside

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

from envisioning the highway as a mass graveyard, he explained in 2002, “I had gone through a lot of personal turmoil myself,” and “I didn't appreciate somebody else throwing their hurt and sorrow out for the public view, as if it was more important than someone else's hurt or losses.”²⁰⁴ In my interpretation, his assertion implies that Christian grief is more permissible to the American public than atheist grief. Scott's personal pain doesn't have an immediately resonant symbol upon which to graft itself. A Christian has a cross, but what does an atheist have? This may have fueled feelings of isolation in a time in which grief was already causing such feelings to stir. Although he had not lost a loved one to death, he was going through a divorce and custody battle over his three year-old daughter, which, in some way, is like marking the death of his family unit. He may have felt bothered that the pain of others, immediately noticeable from the shrine, was being acknowledged by others but his wasn't.

On an interesting note, one of the shrines Scott “desecrated” by removal belonged to Deena Breeden, who lost her son in a traffic fatality. Her shrine to him included a cross, which had turned up missing, presumably removed by Scott. After his trial, she replaced his shrine, but without the cross, which, she explained, was not meant to offend anyone. Although technically illegal under Colorado law, the Breedens did not receive citations for replacing their shrine. CDOT's position is ambiguous: “We really don't have a policy - we just try to look the other way

²⁰⁴ Ted Shaffrey. “Remembrances or Hazards? Courts, families concerned about roadside memorials.” Amarillo Globe News. September, 1, 2002. Accessed in October 2014, http://amarillo.com/stories/2002/09/01/usn_courtsfam.shtml#.VQh-F47F-So.

whenever possible,” said Stacy Stegman, spokeswoman for the Colorado Department of Transportation. ‘We encourage our maintenance workers to focus on other problems.’”²⁰⁵

The Phenomenon of the Counter-Shrine

Scholars from many academic disciplines have made forays into the academic study of vernacular shrines. Some of the most insightful, provocative commentary comes from Harriet F. Senie, currently professor of contemporary American art at the City College of New York. Her interests meld memory studies, material culture and memorials in ways that provide distinctive commentary on American culture. The following pithy statement addresses a question that Halbwachs, Nora and Winter all grapple with and ultimately, helps provide insight into the historical function of shrines as meaning-makers:

all spontaneous memorials are democracy in action and as such they suggest a range of critical questions for those commissioning and building permanent official markers for history. How can memorial designers tap into the profound personal response and civic commentary evidenced by the practice of spontaneous memorials?²⁰⁶

Senie’s question is discerning and cuts to the very core of the issue for many shrine builders who often wonder exactly how these mass produced, state-fabricated signs might possibly capture their deceased loved one or speak to their personal grief. As

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Santino, 51.

demonstrated in previous chapters, vernacular shrines are built in order to reorient a ruptured world, solidify social bonds, continue relationships and assuage grief. One might ask, can a metal roadside, produced by a government entity rather than a loving circle of friends and relatives, mark profound loss in the same way? To this question, many shrine builders would answer an emphatic ‘no,’ as evidenced by the widespread phenomenon I call “countershines.”

Countershines are those erected alongside more permanent, official memorials, complementing, or sometimes even obscuring, the authorized monument. Often countershines are dwarfed by their much larger vernacular shrines and may simply be a bouquet of flowers placed at the foot of a sign or atop a plaque, adding a bit of personal punctuation to an otherwise unadorned memorial. However, they can be much more intricate, to the point that the countershrine actually outshines the permanent structure. One may ask why, if a death (or deaths) is already receiving public attention and the person is being remembered, why do countershines exist at all? What is it about a recognized, institutionalized memorial that seems to, somehow, come up short?

Canadian scholars Belshaw and Purvey, referenced elsewhere in this work, provide an interesting way of approaching this question. They remind us of the simple truth that, “a roadside death marker which is erected by officials...is meant to use the death event to convey a lesson to other road users, but is *not* intended to serve as a memorial for the individuals involved, except to the extent that they are victims.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Emphasis added.

Essentially Belshaw and Purvey are arguing that official death markers are sterile. They do not necessarily speak to an individual's personality or character, but rather, remove any complexity from the personhood from the deceased, rendering them *merely* victims. The problem is that, for loved ones, the dead are so much more.

Virginia state assemblyman Robert G. Marshall, referenced above, raises public consciousness of what Doss calls "statist intervention," into profound, personal grief.²⁰⁸ Aside from having a son killed on the road, Marshall fiercely supports the practice of building vernacular shrines in his role as public servant because he is a shrine-builder himself, flouting the anti-shrine legislation technically on the books in his home state. As someone paid to create and theoretically uphold the law of the commonwealth, Marshall's stance may be unexpected, but somehow makes sense in another of his important life roles: the bereaved father. He explains his feelings about Virginia's anti-shrine law thusly: "'This is bureaucratization of love. I don't like it one bit,' ... 'I intend to put a cross up for my son. Period.'"²⁰⁹ These words are powerful and likely would resonate with others who insist on building shrines where an official monument already exists: showing *love* need not conform to a law, especially if no one is being harmed.

Relatedly, Clark and Franzmann, Australian scholars on this topic, suggest that building a countershrine, even if it is just one or two objects, is an act of protest. They explain,

²⁰⁸ Doss, 303-304.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

That [government sanctioned] markers are not the same as personal memorials erected by family and friends is borne out in South Dakota, for example, where some official death markers were subsequently decorated with flowers and had crosses planted at their bases as a sign of *ownership*, or indeed an assumption of control from the state.²¹⁰

This action on the part of countershrine builders wrests power from the hands of those who couldn't possibly be aware of the victim, as an individual, and places it in the hands of those who can. The crux of the issue, which speaks to Nora's work in particular, is who gets to decide how memories are made and *displayed*. Nora brilliantly looks outside historically acceptable and typical sources of memory, such as political documents and archived literature and instead studies the highly localized food, architecture, and everyday objects that constitute mnemonic devices for the French citizenry. "Bold, Knowles, and Leach (2002) distinguish between what they call hegemonic cultural memory—'the dominant record of memorializing solidifications of imagined community'...and cultural countermemory—'the various kinds of oppositional or resistant memory making'" and, as Jack Santino reminds us, these are clearly juxtaposed in the phenomenon of the countershrine.²¹¹

Countershines exemplify what is meant by cultural countermemory in that they resist the portrayal of the victim as merely victim and, instead, display his or her (or their) humanity. Objects, as shown earlier, are intensely personal and speak to who we are and who others imagine us to be.

²¹⁰ Emphasis added, 585.

²¹¹ 251, Santino, 126

The various policies in place regarding vernacular shrines also hint at another related and yet slightly different trend noted in my own research and that of other scholars: people in mourning seem, often times, to be longing for *participation*. As demonstrated by the families profiled in the previous chapters and in the work of authors like Belshaw and Purvey, Holly Everett and Sylvia Grider, the bereaved often look to participating in the process of building shrines as a means of coping and assuaging grief. Public policies and legal practices across the country further bolster this claim, even as various jurisdictions try to limit, as much as possible, their own liability. While delineating the risks involved in shrine building in an effort to remove their own financial and legal accountability in the event of a problem, states like California acknowledge the desire on the part of shrine builders to want to be at the death site, participate in sometimes dangerous ways and to take their life into their hands in order to properly grieve.

The California Victims Memorial Sign Program website addresses some of these concerns in their document entitled “frequently asked questions.” The fact that these questions are often enough asked for CalTrans to provide prophylactic answers to them speaks volumes about both their frequency and seriousness. Two FAQs in particular shed light on the extent to which involvement and participation seems key to mourners: 1). Can family, friends, or the general public be present during installation? and 2). Can family, friends, or the general public pull over to view the sign or get out of their vehicles? To both of these questions, CalTrans provides negative answers, again, stressing public safety. However, that they are asked at all

implies that people *want* to do these things and, as Doss would put it, may feel *entitled* to such behavior. When people flout these laws, “It is Caltrans’ practice to remove wreaths, crosses, flowers, etc. within the state highway right-of-way to prevent these from being motorist distractions.”²¹² So as we have seen, these practices continue on, even when specifically regulated against.

Conclusion

It has thus far been my contention that vernacular shrines are an outlet for peoples’ grief and, additionally, that those built alongside official monuments address survivors’ concerns about the inherent lack of personalization when victims are only presented as such. One way in which we might try to bring these two issues together and overcome the suggested polarity of the presentation thus far is to imagine that these two practices, building official memorials and then vernacular shrines in and around them, is to understand them as coexisting living organisms that together work to address significant grief. In her article “Death, Art and Memory in the Public Sphere: The Visual and Material Culture of Grief in Contemporary America,” Doss argues that it would be to overlook an important dimension of American culture to treat vernacular shrines and official memorials as two entirely separate entities. She explains, “to separate, [for example,] the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Memory Fence into categories of official versus populist memorial discounts their interdependence as material culture manifestations of contemporary patterns of grief

²¹²<http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/traffops/engineering/control-devices/victims.htm>

and mourning.”²¹³ In other words, that official and vernacular memorials have a symbiotic relationship speaks to Americans’ ability to assimilate their personal grief into a narrative about a larger, perhaps even national, issues.

While there have been several examples of this type of mourning practice discussed in the literature, including the Oklahoma City National Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall cited in the last chapter, the Columbine High School memorial, and several others, the site at which I have seen this delicate interplay on the largest scale is the National 9/11 Memorial and Museum in lower Manhattan, New York City. The 9/11 Memorial is a surreal landscape, to be sure: cascading waterfalls fill the gaping pools where the twin towers of the World Trade Center once stood, tourists mill around in eerie silence, people cry together, embrace one another, traverse the perimeter of the two pools, read the names of the victims, and tenderly caress the etched metal. This vast memorial addresses the psychic pain in remembering the tragedy of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and, in an effort to solidify the American community, grieve and, hopefully, move on, presents a quietly hopeful, strident patriotism. Americans make pilgrimage to this place as a sign that they will not forget and that they love the victims, their country and one another.

However, it is the vernacular shrines present all around the official memorial that add the personal touch that continues to move visitors, in ways that simply reading the victims names cannot. Of course, there are very personal, touching, even heart wrenching features of the official monument—the inscription for a mother,

²¹³ 78, Doss.

Renee A. May, who died aboard flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon, and her unborn child, for example. However, it is the countless flowers, notes and tokens left behind that speak to the inability of the monument, as beautiful and captivating as it is, to fully capture peoples' emotions and personal connection to the individuals and events of 9/11. It is these two things together, the official and unofficial memorials, that somehow work together to *feel* complete. Walking the perimeter, one notices paper cranes, pendants, handwritten cards, photographs and other personal paraphernalia adding personal affect to what may be viewed as a national "shrine." Unlike, say, the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Wall, the 9/11 site is the *actual* place where many of these victims died. This is the last place where those aboard American Airlines flight 11 and United Airlines flight 175 were last alive, along with the victims caught in the towers and the scores of first responders who lost their lives. While the memorial there certainly requires participation, like circumambulation of the pools and museum halls, purchasing memorabilia, making donations, wearing 9/11 memorial bracelets, maintaining respectful silence, etc., other outlets of participation—more direct, personal involvement—suggest that it is both of these activities together that pilgrims are seeking out.²¹⁴

Leaving behind mementos at the official memorial is but one mode of more individualized participation, but is certainly not the *only* one available to those seeking to remember and mourn 9/11. A short walk to St. Paul's Chapel, a mere stone's throw from the memorial and museum, reveals the plethora of ways in which

²¹⁴ When I made my trip on September 10, 2013, the museum was not yet open to the public and I was not able to obtain permission to visit it under construction.

people mourned and sought out community and refuge in the immediate aftermath of the attacks and continue to do today. On the morning of September 11, 2001 St. Paul's churchyard was filled with dust, dirt, and debris, including computer monitors and window blinds from the crumbled buildings. The sanctuary was lined with cots and became a makeshift urgent care facility, as emergency personnel administered First Aid and passersby found shelter. Because St. Paul's became its own "ground zero" for the recovery effort, it also became a powerful symbol upon which to hoist profound sorrow, and also a surprising amount of hope and optimism. The fence surrounding St. Paul's quickly became the de facto "official" vernacular shrine in the city. Those who walked by placed posters, flowers, teddy bears and countless other items on the fence, creating a hauntingly beautiful mosaic. To this day, permanent memorials are housed at St. Paul's and during my visit there in 2013, the entire sanctuary, while still functional for services, was home to dozens of displays of memorabilia, including many of the vernacular shrines erected in the immediate wake of the tragedy.

In the rear of the church sits what has come to be called the "pilgrimage altar." The sign for the altar gets to the heart of the matter quite beautifully. It reads:

After 9/11, this altar was filled spontaneously with mementos by those remembering their loved ones. To this day, every pilgrim to St. Paul's Chapel brings something precious with them: a hope, a question, a memory, a wound. This is a sacred place to name and offer what is in your heart. Pause a moment; write a name or a prayer; leave a symbol

or a memento. Then take a ribbon as a sign of your visit, and let it remind you to pray for the pilgrims coming after you.²¹⁵

As referenced in chapter two, people make their way to ground zero and the surrounding area as ‘pilgrims,’ those journeying with a sacred purpose, to a sacred place. As we have seen, people seem to have an urge to participate; they want to participate in some real, often material, capacity. They want to prove they were there, that they remember and that the dead live on in some different form.

It may seem obvious to most observers that when families and friends build vernacular shrines, they are doing so to honor *specific* memories of the deceased, and these close relations have enough proximity to honor victims in ways that would hit home both with the deceased, and also with survivors. However, when mourning occurs on a national scale, the proximity of victim and survivor is often a very wide gulf. Visitors to the 9/11 National Memorial and Museum or to St. Paul’s Chapel might not have known any of the victims personally. This raises the question, then, why leave something behind? And how does one know that what he or she leaves behind is appropriate?

By way of conclusion, let us return once again to Erika Doss and her sharp observations of American culture. She explains our urge to participate in these types of commemorative exercises as exemplifying “the faith that Americans place in things to negotiate complex moments and events, such as traumatic death.”²¹⁶ When our feelings are ambiguous, as perhaps, before the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or

²¹⁵ As recorded in photos and notes taken at St. Paul’s Chapel on September 10, 2013.

²¹⁶ Doss, 71.

when they are acutely painful and tinged with anger, as some undoubtedly feel at the 9/11 Memorial, material culture is uniquely equipped to deal with this range of feelings, and, indeed, an ever expanding range of human emotions. In other words, no matter how we feel, material culture provides a sort of buffer: objects can take on some of our deepest feelings so that we can release pain, suffering and, in some cases, joy and beauty. Most intimately tied to the phenomenon of vernacular shrines is grief: objects help negotiate grief by providing a material focal point. On a national scale, leaving a ribbon or a bracelet on a victim's name humanizes the victim, provides an outlet for the range of emotions experienced by traumatized peoples and solidifies our communal bonds.

Chapter 5: Vernacular Shrines in American History: From Juan Bautista de Anza to Hubert Eaton

While scholars, media outlets and cultural critics may not be able to agree on the implications and interpretations of vernacular shrines, they reach consensus on one undeniable point: there are more vernacular shrines now than ever before and their numbers continue to rise.²¹⁷ They have quietly become an undeniable force in American culture and a symbol that really resonates with Americans. Recent moments in American history and popular culture clearly demonstrate their salience and poignancy: the media latched onto these vernacular displays as potent symbols of the death and destruction wrought by Adam Lanza's massacre of twenty children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012 in Newtown, Connecticut; as local and federal authorities began a city-wide manhunt for the two men responsible for the Boston Marathon bombing on April 15, 2013, front pages began featuring the vernacular shrines that had already been erected near the finish line, commemorating the three runners killed by the alleged suspects' homemade explosives; in the video game *Crysis*, virtual shrines line fatal roadways overtaken by hostile alien life forms. When major, violent calamities strike and death follows, shrines also follow with shocking regularity. In other words, this practice has become normalized. To a certain extent, the news-consuming American public expect reports of tragedy to be followed by an image of a shrine.

²¹⁷ See especially C. Allen Haney, et al., "Spontaneous Memorialization: Violent Death and Emerging Mourning Ritual."

The question that follows from this seems to be: *why*? Why are shrines splashed across headlines? Why do they resonate so deeply with American news watchers? Some scholars have begun to tackle this question, including Erika Doss, whose exhaustive research into memorials provides interesting fodder for considering this phenomenon. For her, the answer is subtle, but makes sense considering the emotional gravity of trauma. She explains that vernacular shrines are primarily a mode by which we achieve “catharsis and redemption.”²¹⁸ In the event that an unforeseen calamity strikes, she claims, people feel the need to, on the one hand, release emotion and, on the other hand, to transcend that pain and reach an ultimate end. This argument seems relatable enough. In reference to the Sandy Hook massacre, people descended on Newtown in droves, leaving behind teddy bears, notes, cards, bouquets, candles and especially children’s toys. Those who commemorated Newtown’s children were not *just* family members and locals, but people from across the country, with no immediate ties to the relatives or geographic area, paid their respects in this manner.²¹⁹ Doss would be likely to explain that this ritualized, solemn activity was performed by the public in order to achieve catharsis: to give materiality to their intense grief and anger, releasing it into the world. The shrines acted as redemption by remembering the innocence of the lives lost, assuring onlookers that these little angels surely met with a heavenly fate: though they died, those twenty children and six adults had found peace in the afterlife. The shrines that

²¹⁸ Doss, “Death, Art and Memory in the Public Sphere,” 70.

²¹⁹ I personally observed three Sandy Hook shrines in southern California, nearly three thousand miles away from the site of the massacre. One in Temecula, CA; one in Chino, CA; and one in Anaheim, CA. Each of these contained Christmas and children’s items.

were erected in Newtown were kept and, if all goes according to plan, the teddy bears, flower petals and papers will become mixed and embedded into the Children's Memorial Walkway, achieving a very literal concretizing of their memories and, in material form, assuring their immortality.²²⁰

Doss makes this claim against other scholars, such as Harriet F. Senie and Jack Santino, who argue that vernacular shrines are also, importantly, “concerned with producing a critique of historical moments and tragic events.”²²¹ The Sandy Hook shrines, while touching in their tributes to deceased children, are primarily this and not, say, engaged in producing critiques of Adam Lanza's alleged mental illness, access to guns and tragic family life. The shrines built for the victims of Sandy Hook seem to be directed exactly where people's grief lies: with the children, school community and families, rather than with the alleged perpetrator and the societal issues that may have led to his outrageous actions. There certainly have been important instances, though, where social commentary seems to be mixed with mourning, producing a rich, powerful platform for voicing specific issues. Many might question if it is appropriate or in good taste to mix the political and social with untimely death in this manner, but it is important to note that shrine builders have felt free to express political and social opinions through their shrines' content. For example, many who memorialized the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999, did so by including plastic toy guns affixed to crosses, writing poetry directed toward gun control and even slinging bullets over crosses, making them appear as stoic

²²⁰ See Hutson, “Family Sees Sidewalk as Symbol,” and Voket, “Resident Guarantees.”

²²¹ Doss, “Death, Art and Memory in the Public Sphere,” 70.

soldiers waging a battle for good.²²² These examples demonstrate the extent to which shrine builders can and do use shrines to voice public commentary, though they do not do so with the regularity one might expect. So if there are concerns about properly situating shrine construction within American culture, circumscribing them as mere public critiques is problematic.

On this point, Doss' arguments are legitimate, thoughtful and carefully constructed. Her insistence that shrines can capture and manifest our emotions and that building them can be cathartic and redemptive rings true, and ethnographic evidence certainly bears this out. However, that this practice feels emotive and cathartic fails to take into account shrines' exponential growth in the last hundred years. Surely those who built shrines centuries ago experienced similar feelings of release and hoped for some modicum of transcendence as well. Grappling with this dilemma, Doss argues that, "traditional forms of mourning no longer meet the needs of today's publics and prompt questions about what death, grief, and memory mean in the new millennium."²²³ By 'traditional forms of mourning,' Doss is referencing a funerary tradition in crisis, which has been clearly illustrated by Katherine Garces-Foley²²⁴, to whom we will turn below, as well as the perceived emptiness of rote religious prescriptions, symbols that have become contentious or drained of significance and people simply seeking a more novel, personal outlet for their individual pain.

²²² These and other shrines with references to violence can be found at the Littleton Museum in Littleton, Colorado.

²²³ Doss, "Death, Art and Memory in the Public Sphere," 64.

²²⁴ See Garces-Foley, "Contemporary American Funerals."

At the level of popular culture, shrines have worked their way deeper and deeper into constructions of celebrity, fame and, therefore, importance. In recent decades, media coverage of celebrities' deaths has been on the rise, and when these deaths occur in a tragic, unforeseen context, shrines often resulted. The deaths of musical superstars Elvis Presley and John Lennon, for example, were both accompanied by pilgrimages to the death sites, erection of shrines, and the attendant media reporting on both of these phenomena. To this day, Elvis' home at Graceland and the memorial garden in New York City's Central Park, dedicated as Strawberry Fields in remembrance of one of Lennon's great lyrical accomplishments, continue to be sacred sites, where the rituals of pilgrimage and shrine building and maintenance take place. While these seem to be some of the early precursors to the spread of this phenomenon, the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997, seems to have really solidified vernacular shrine building as a legitimate response to overwhelming grief after a totally unexpected and tragically violent death. As news broke of Diana's death, shrines began to spring up across the globe, but the largest and most breathtaking of them all covered the walls and sidewalks outside Kensington Palace in London. Her work with children's charities and social causes was apparent as teddy bears and toys were common in the flood of flowers, notes, photos, candles and British monarchical symbols. This elaborate shrine and others constructed in Paris, other parts of London and elsewhere around the world made headline news and evinced Diana's international celebrity status, fame and the love her people and the global community felt for her, "the people's princess." Having borne witness to such

media coverage of shrines, common folks equate shrine building with important people whose memories should not be forgotten—such feelings surely extend to their own families.

Australian scholar Keith Suter offers a slightly different take on the issue. Speaking to shrine building worldwide, he explains that, “in an increasingly secular society, with a declining belief in life after death and a declining faith in religious institutions, people—young and old—are searching for new ways to make sense of death.”²²⁵ Doss and Suter are implying slightly different things about modernity. For Suter, this reaching out to vernacular shrines as a mode of mourning has to do with declining trust and belief in institutionalized religion to properly help people navigate the dying process, funeral planning, etc. Having referenced similar sentiments among shrine builders in Norway in chapter two, there certainly seems to be some validity to Suter’s claim. To believe this argument necessitates belief in declension, or secularization as a measurable and real phenomenon. If measuring church attendance is one way of proving the validity of secularization theory, then Suter seems to be right on: taken as a percentage of the US population, fewer people attend church on a regular basis than in past decades.²²⁶ However, other markers of religiosity or spirituality remain particularly high in the US, especially compared to European societies where secularization theory can be better evinced. According to the Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, people may attend formal worship services less, but they still declare belief in God, spirits and angels with

²²⁵ Suter, “*Roadside Memorials*,” 58.

²²⁶ Lipka, “*What Surveys Say*,” 1.

consistency.²²⁷ Televangelists and preachers continue to have the same superstar status in some circles that they enjoyed during the colonial period—and now they can be viewed from anywhere and at anytime, thanks to increasingly accessible technology.

So in examining the scholarly literature, the two alternatives are clear: secularization has led to people reaching beyond church for answers and/or traditional symbols simply don't resonate anymore for some other ephemeral reason. Doss herself makes no mention of secularization as a possibility, perhaps anticipating the slippery slope involved in such a claim. Augmenting these two positions, I offer a third possibility: Americans turn to this form of grieving because it is a part of American history. This practice is certainly not unique to the United States, but it is important here: many people embrace this practice widely and feel it is a respected, historically precedented way of getting through life's most difficult trials. While there is certainly no uniformity or agreement concerning shrines' legitimacy and appropriateness as a grieving ritual, they have always *been there*. It is to this often overlooked phenomenon in American culture that I will now turn.

The "Humility" of Shrines

If shrines have been an important part of American history, why aren't they illustrating the pages of history books, being recreated for class projects or mentioned in indexes? This is a legitimate question, and when wrestling with it, British

²²⁷ For more information, visit Pew's website at: <http://www.pewforum.org/topics/religious-beliefs-and-practices/>.

anthropologist Daniel Miller is particularly enlightening. Miller's stature in the field of anthropology owes to a few things, the most important of which is the extensiveness of his fieldwork. He has conducted ethnography the world over: from India to London to remote regions of Africa. Not only does this enrich his worldview, but it also provides multiple critical lenses through which to examine his theoretical contributions to the field.

First and most significantly for material cultural studies across the social sciences is his absolute insistence that things make people as much as people make things. He explains, "material objects are a setting. They make us aware of what is appropriate and inappropriate."²²⁸ Human beings are shaped by the things that constantly surround them. Yes, people labor to make things, distribute them, interact with them, alter them, etc., but those things around them also play a part in helping people achieve a sense of self. This process is dialectic—we engage with objects and they engage with us. While he doesn't go as far as other scholars of materiality like Manuel Vasquez and Bruno Latour who insist that objects have true agency, akin to that of thinking, feeling people, he does concede that "by learning to interact with a whole slew of different material cultures, an individual grows up assuming the norms that we call culture."²²⁹ The things around one at a young age impact the ways in which individuals can know and understand themselves throughout life. As a point of clarification, he admits that it is not individual objects that are capable of this, necessarily, but *systems of objects*. Taken as a collective, they produce modified,

²²⁸ Miller, "Stuff," 50.

²²⁹ *Ibid*, 53.

normalized behavior. For him, our stuff has a certain “internal order” that “makes us who we are.”²³⁰ He paints this picture beautifully by studying the multifarious relationships Indian women have to their saris, in particular the *pallu*, or draped shoulder covering, which can seduce and suggest flirtation and sexuality, or, conversely, can hide and obscure. They are also used to cradle and comfort babies at the breast and, in the kitchen, they act as both towel and hot pad. This example poetically illustrates how a simple item of clothing can impact how women understand themselves as sari-wearing Indian women, beyond merely proclaiming fashion sense and taste. Their experience with this piece of clothing, something traditionally considered mundane, illustrates the extent to which material culture impacts experience and is capable of rendering change, from seductress, to mother, to housewife, to cook, etc. Each woman develops different relationships to and understandings of this piece of clothing which, for most, comes to act as an extension of the body. It is not simply that this clothing is a barrier concealing the body or the real self, but instead, partially constitutes it.

The idea that things are as able to influence us as we are able to influence them may seem a bit problematic, as we do not always directly experience things working on us. Often, our lived experience contradicts this ideas, since we don’t *recognize* the objects around us as barriers or obstacles or, to put it differently, they don’t seem to have enough agency to really affect the world around them. A tree could blow in the wind, a branch could snap and this could, in effect, damage a

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

window. But we don't usually blame the tree or imagine it chose to damage the window. Human beings are the ones with the clear ability to control, manipulate, change and choose. So if we can't accept that inanimate things have the ability to effect change in the same way we do, how do they do anything at all? The answer is found in what Miller calls "the humility of things."²³¹ This wonderfully thoughtful, concise idea is that things aren't loud and obnoxious; they are quiet and subtle. They are just *there*, and that mere fact is enough to drastically alter the course of our action. That condition of simply being present creates what Colleen McDannell would call a "material landscape" and what Miller calls a "setting," suggesting what is and isn't acceptable in a given space/place.²³² This dialectical process works as follows:

Objects are important, not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but quite the opposite. It is often precisely because we do not *see* them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations, by setting the scene and ensuring appropriate behavior, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so.²³³

For example, consider how sacred spaces, especially architecture, are highly determinative of appropriate behavior. Writing on women pilgrims in late medieval England, Susan Signe Morrison shrewdly observes how art and architecture

²³¹ *Ibid*, 50.

²³² *Ibid*.

²³³ *Ibid*.

reinscribe gender roles and disparities, determine proper behavior and do so subtly rather than overtly. For example, she explains that “women were not treated the same way spatially as male pilgrims,” as they had different relationships to the interior space of the church or cathedral.²³⁴ The architecture of the medieval cathedral was intended as a microcosm of the entire universe in which men were to sit in front and to the right and women were to sit to the left and back. Sacred space, architecture in particular, and the ritual act of pilgrimage to these places “can be read as ‘an instrument for establishing the fundamental contexts of time, space and authority within which social relations and political identity are enacted.’”²³⁵ It is the ways in which they do this subtly, however, that bears the most direct relation to the present discussion. Often, as Morrison explains, these effects were felt subtly and indirectly, as women perceived their place in the universe via material clues such as placement of certain sacred icons, statuary, the arrangement of pews, etc.

Miller’s observations are particularly astute because he is specifically discussing items that surround us all the time. While they often go unnoticed, I would argue that shrines *are* always all around us. They are on the sides of roads, up on hillsides and down in ravines, and, therefore, may blend into the landscape. However, even when they don’t immediately register to people, they are working on our subconscious. Almost without fail, interview subjects I have spoken with notice shrines but lack details of their appearance or a precise location. The shrines have made their way into peoples’ minds, but perhaps without much thought. On the other

²³⁴ Morrison, *Women Pilgrims*, 89.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

hand, what people are quick to note is that while they can't necessarily recall specifics, they know they *feel* differently and act differently before them. Those who interact with shrines, either personally building them or just seeing them in their communities, describe feeling awe, respect and reverence when they see one. Especially common is people's near compulsion to pray and speak to the deceased, and to offer their well wishes to both the dead and their bereaved families. Doing fieldwork, I often faced the conundrum of deciding where was appropriate to sit, walk or set things down. I often asked myself, should I kneel or crouch? Is it permissible to touch things and take photos? By prompting such reflection, shrines alter routine human behavior. We hush our voices, quiet our children, meditate, hold each other and cry. As in other sacred spaces, shrine builders transform their manners, dress and attitude in order to meet the seriousness and solemnity of the location. They don't make conscious decisions to act that way—they just do it.

One important factor to consider when describing shrines as objects of humility is that they are overwhelmingly supported in public and, therefore, fit Miller's criterion that humble objects are mostly unassailable. Earlier in the present work, the case of Rodney Lyle Scott, the Colorado atheist accused of desecrating a vernacular shrine, was interrogated. However, this case is unique in its *irregularity*. Much more common is a live-and-let-live attitude among community members regarding shrine construction. Even non-religious people often recognize the value of such structures in helping people move through the grieving cycle and, especially in bedroom communities and suburbs, families tend to view them as *needed* safety

reminders. When a road is particularly treacherous, like Dominigoni Parkway discussed in chapter three, local citizens rarely complain about a shrine, since they too understand the need for further involvement in maintaining community safety standards and traffic enforcement. In these ways, general populations lend shrines collective tacit approval; by choosing not to contest their presence, they remain as something valuable, even if that value is undeclared.

Miller's thinking falls in line with the structuralist school of anthropology and sociology, which attributes human behavior to the "structuring structures," that give order to our lives, rendering certain modes normal and appropriate, and others strange and inappropriate.²³⁶ The scholar with most effect on Miller's thinking and one who continues to be a critical force in all social scientific disciplines is the late Pierre Bourdieu, especially his work *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Especially useful to both Miller and the current project is Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*: "the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less 'sensible' and 'reasonable.'"²³⁷ One's *habitus*—"systems of durable, transposable dispositions"—makes one's actions, thoughts, behaviors and choices intelligible to persons of the same *habitus*. When surrounded by people of a different *habitus*, the world may seem foreign and social norms and mores may be totally different. In discussing Bourdieu, Miller explains that, "a particular society elaborates its cultural practices through an underlying pattern which is manifested in a multitude of diverse forms," and

²³⁶ Bourdieu, *Outline*, 73.

²³⁷ *Ibid*, 79.

navigating this diversity is something learned from birth.²³⁸ One's *habitus* is, by definition, unspoken and, thus, indecipherable to outsiders and simply known to insiders.

Even with its attendant critiques, a Bourdieuan structuralism helps make sense of vernacular shrines' place in American history.²³⁹ As Miller suggests, this theory may in fact point us toward an understanding of how people interact with objects and, beyond Miller, I suggest that these objects work their way into a shared collective memory and transform action. In unraveling this, Miller turns to examples of great civilizations like ancient Egypt, the Indus Valley and early Christian communities and to one important commonality they all shared, making their impacts on world history particularly long-lasting: "In essence, it was their faith in the potential of monumentality to express the immateriality that has created their legac[ies] as material presence[s] in our own world."²⁴⁰ Humorously for Miller, materiality is a consistent manner in which *immaterial* concerns are made know. Vernacular shrines provide a material housing for our often inexpressible, immaterial feelings and ultimate concerns.

²³⁸ Miller, *Stuff*, 53.

²³⁹ Many argue that Bourdieu and his kin are simple too deterministic. That is, they accuse him of assigning too much weight to the idea of hereditary structures, which can, therefore, lead to oversights including the role of personal choice and freedom in developing one's self and relations to one's world. See, for example, Richard Jenkins' "Pierre Bourdieu and the Reproduction of Determinism; Calhoun, C., LiPuma, E. and Postone, M. (1993) 'Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives' Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Francisco Perales Perez's 'Voluntarism and Determinism in Giddens's and Bourdieu's Theories of Human Agency.'

²⁴⁰ Miller, 71.

Descansos: A Spanish Legacy

For centuries, Spanish influence has been felt from California to Texas and beyond, in nearly every facet of life from cuisine and language to architecture and religion. The Spanish colonial enterprise, successful though it was in its mission of winning souls for God and new subjects for the king, was certainly entangled with serious risk. One problem the Spanish didn't seem to anticipate, for example, was the extremity of the topography and climate of New Spain, especially the painfully arid conditions of current-day New Mexico's desert. The areas surrounding Santa Fe, where the Spanish headquartered, was, and remains, a temperate oasis compared to the dry and barren region to the southwest. The colonial outpost at Las Cruces, for example, acquired its name as tall crosses began to line the horizon—structures built to sanctify the much bloodied desert floor.²⁴¹ *Descansos*, meaning to stop or rest in Spanish, became the term for such roadside crosses. This centuries-old practice belies the constant narrative of the essential modernity of the vernacular shrine phenomenon.

It was Spanish imperial expeditions that brought the concept of the roadside cross to American soil. In 1589, Juan de Oñate, the famed leader of the Spanish gold expedition in present-day New Mexico, founded the first settlements along the Rio Grande on the *Camino Real* (Royal Road), between the New Spanish capital in Mexico City and the colonial outpost in Santa Fe. One particularly lethal section of

²⁴¹ Sources vary on exactly how many crosses remain for the earliest Spaniards. However, authors like Juan Estevan Arellano, et al. examine enough old crosses and 'earthworks,' to suggest that many remnant crosses still exist in present-day New Mexico, especially in the areas of Espanola through Chimayo and up to Truchas. Because most have been destroyed, precise estimation of quantity remains difficult. Instead, historical sources posit a large number, likely in the hundreds, as they are mentioned with regularity by both the Spanish and later American settlers.

this road to traverse became known as *jornada del muerto*, the journey of the dead, so named because it veered sharply into desiccated wilderness. Craggy cliffs, parched stretches between meagerly stocked settlements, wild animals, foreign vegetation and hostile Native American groups angered by Spanish encroachment created conditions that sent many young Spanish journeymen back to Mexico City in coffins. This created a situation where average men became their own clergy and caretakers as their comrades began to fall.

When a servant of the crown succumbed to these elements out on the rugged frontier, proper Catholic burial was hardly a viable option. Deceased men would be carried back to Mexico City or buried in the closest *composanto* or cemetery. However, both possibilities often involved quite extensive journey. Pallbearers carrying makeshift coffins were charged with bearing this burden for miles and miles. According to some sources, where the pallbearers took respite, often in the shade of trees, one may find small wooden crosses. The exact reasons why these were erected may not be precisely known, as historians present a few competing possibilities. Most often, *descansos* are described as a necessity for sanctifying the otherwise profane ground onto which the coffin was placed. Traditionally, coffins and dead bodies are to be treated as respectfully as possible, so instituting this practice with crosses may have helped give the land a sense of sacrality. G. Benito Cordova, professor of education and New Mexico history at the University of New Mexico, Gallup, describes the scene this way: “the deceased was carried on an *escalera*, (ladder) [and] wrapped with a *sarape* or blanket. During the procession the *dolientes o* (mourners)

would stop to rest and say a *sudario* (prayer) for the deceased, marking the spot with a flagstone that had a cross etched on it.”²⁴²

There are a few alternative, contemporaneous practices that add to the rich texture of vernacular shrines in the American southwest. Cordova offers at least three other cultural-religious practices overlapped with the placement of *descansos* at the resting spot of pallbearers. First, he suggests that this practice may have been predated by a slightly different Spanish practice, wherein crosses were erected by survivors for the earliest *conquistadors* and their troops killed by Native Americans along *el Camino Real*. Noting the sheer volume of crosses in the area of New Spain, Cordova also explains that during Holy Week, the period on the Catholic liturgical calendar immediately prior to Easter, *penitentes*, those performing pious acts of contrition, placed crosses marking their sojourns to various sacred sites. He explains that, “as they carried large crosses, or *maderos*, and flagellated themselves, they would stop periodically to pray. These rest stops were a form of the *descanso*.”²⁴³ The theme of rest continues to play a part here, but the difference between resting a deceased body and a bloodied, living one, imitating the suffering Christ, is significant. As a final alternative, Cordova reminds us that this practice of marking the road was not limited to the Spanish or Catholic. The Zuni, whose ancestral homeland cut across southeastern New Mexico, were known to pile stones “at the beginning of a trail in the belief that it would overcome weariness.”²⁴⁴ While these

²⁴² Cordova. “*Descansos*,” 17.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

did not contain the cross imagery used by the Spanish, they have been called *descansos* by Spanish-speaking populations who stand as heirs of the tradition and have now used the term for centuries to note both explicitly religious and non-religious roadside markers. New Spanish *descansos*, then, should be conceptualized as a dynamic, multicultural practice.

It is important to note that *descansos* are not usually headstones or grave markers. Rather, as is the case with modern vernacular shrines, *descansos* often mark the place of death, which many believe to be a portal for the soul to access and interact with the living. *Descansos* do not need to be in proximity to a deceased body, but rather, garner respect and sacrality because they are communicative channels between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Though they may have much in common with headstones, historical *descansos* need not even be physical structures. For example, the January 1847 Battle of Embudo is commemorated by petroglyph crosses etched into the rocks near the battlefield, forming a *descanso* out of the porous rock.²⁴⁵ While different in form and medium, it certainly fulfills the same purpose of a built structure: remembering those lives lost.

One of the problems of trying to establish a history of this practice in the US is simply that *descansos*, and vernacular shrines from all cultures, are, by definition, ephemeral. While many strive toward stability and longevity, more often than not, they fall victim to inclement weather, rot and decay. Others, however, cease to exist for more nefarious reasons. Some throughout history have decried shrines as public

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 19.

nuisances, safety hazards or objects that blur the slippery boundaries between church and state. One such notorious figure known to have left an impact on New Spain's burgeoning *descanso* tradition was Juan Bautista de Anza. By the time he arrived in New Mexico proper in 1778, he had already earned a reputation as a capricious yet strong willed and tough military and political leader. After successfully squelching attacks from the Comanches and Apaches on the Sonoran frontier, and brokering a hard-fought peace with the Comanches, he won the admiration of many. By 1776, his prestige and popularity had grown such that he won the newly-created office of commandant general, which brought with it not only political administrative responsibilities but also vice-patronage of the Catholic Church in New Spain. While the exact allowances made for men in this position remain lost to history, it appears that Anza was either granted extreme latitude in New Mexico's governance or "took a very broad view of the role of the state in imperial government and its right to intrude in ecclesiastical affairs."²⁴⁶ In other words, it quickly began to anger clerical authorities that Anza had gained so much power so quickly and could impact their lives so drastically with nothing more than a signature. Presumably, his larger-than-life persona and intimidating reputation loomed large in the imaginations of New Mexico's mission leaders.

Anza always had a tenuous relationship with the local clergy, whose power he probably believed interfered with his own, this was never more clearly illustrated than

²⁴⁶ Hendricks. "Church-State Relations," 32.

in his 1784 decision to legislate against *descansos*. According to Rick Hendricks, state historian of New Mexico:

Anza ordered publication of a provision to remove roadside crosses that had been left as reminders of victims of enemy attacks. Aside from the fact that they were subject to desecration and defacement, they so intimidated travelers that they were afraid to defend themselves, thus making it easy for the enemy to attack.²⁴⁷

Calling Anza's legislation "meddlesome," "inappropriate and ineffective," Hendricks leaves us with the impression that Anza's decision was a direct affront not only to the clergy, but to the general population, who had come to regard these objects with affection as religious icons, folk art and symbols of love and loss. The clergy appreciated their presence, as they acted as *memento mori*, confirming the centrality of the clergy in managing mortality. However, as importantly, the clergy were instrumental in encouraging the placing of crosses and providing pastoral care to those in mourning. When they were ordered removed, the clergy probably felt a combined sense of outrage and sadness.

The *descanso* tradition has left such an important mark throughout the American southwest that some who live in New Mexico and Arizona thoroughly accept this practice as part of what it means to live and die in former Spanish territory. In the early 1990s, a small but devoted band of researchers from the University of New Mexico began noticing this pattern. As they travelled all around

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 36.

the state cataloging every *descanso* they found, they interviewed people who had built their own, usually in memory of those killed on the road. Troy Fernandez and Kathleen McRee visited homes to sit down with *descanso* builders to seek out *why* they build. For example, they spoke with Ann Marie Esquibel, who built a shrine to her son Miguel. When they asked her where this tradition began, she explained, “when I was little, my mom said they used to do that. When people would die, they would put up a cross.”²⁴⁸ When pressed toward specificity, she offered an insight that crystallizes perfectly the nostalgia and sentiment attached to this practice in New Mexico and other places where its history is rich. She simply said, “that seems to come along from way back. When we used to have our grandmas, that’s what they did.”²⁴⁹ Oral history beautifully narrates the human emotion attached to a place or a thing, and the sweet sentimentality of these objects for many is apparent in comparing them to warm familial memories.

Eighteenth Century Cemeteries and Death Imagery

The eighteenth century witnessed an influx of western European migration to colonial shores, especially as Europe became an increasingly hostile environment for religious minorities. New England acted as an asylum for persecuted members of the Congregational Church—the Puritans, whose views of death and the afterlife would continue to resonate throughout New England and beyond well into the nineteenth century. The Puritan worldview is filled with paradox and contradiction, and their end

²⁴⁸ Esquibel, “Transcript,” 1-2.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

of life practices illustrate this concept particularly well. On the one hand, their death imagery is distinctly macabre, while simultaneously, their death rituals included intimacy and sentimentality. The cemetery was a special, nostalgic place, and, yet at the same time, it was filled with skulls, crossbones and ghoulish creatures. Marking death in these ways sets an important precedent for later developments, including the denial of death, which would already begin by century's end.

According to David Chidester, whose studies on American attitudes toward death and dying are historically insightful, the eighteenth century cemetery “was a sacred space because it was set apart from the ordinary, mundane, or profane activities of daily life, providing a sacred location for maintaining ritual contact with the dead. Visits to the cemetery were pilgrimages to a sacred site that kept alive the memory of the dead.”²⁵⁰ Cemeteries were close to homes, within walking distance, and provided a locus for continued communion with the deceased—a role cemeteries continue to have into the present. However, what makes eighteenth century Puritan cemeteries unique is their imagery. Headstones and grave markers crafted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often included overt references to the withering decay of the body and the loneliness of the corpse in the form of the ubiquitous skull, often accompanied by ominous crossbones. Skulls were sometimes made less ghoulish by being flanked by wings, suggesting an angelic or heavenly fate for the deceased, but often they were simply left unadorned, with mouths agape and concave eye sockets. Rudimentary proto-angels can also be found chiseled into tombstones;

²⁵⁰ Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence*, 236.

however, unlike later developments in cemetery adornment, these were not peaceful or hopeful looking figures. Rather, they imitated the likeness of the deceased, adding another foreboding layer to the cemetery décor. So when pilgrimage to these sacred places occurred, these images were there to greet devotees, loudly proclaiming death, rather than masking or obscuring it. These images suggest an attitude toward death that is rather more confrontational and matter-of-fact than the modern cemetery.²⁵¹

Another key into understanding early New England death practices can be gleaned by reading the inscriptions found on grave markers which imply, once again, that death was to be faced with unimpeded stoicism. New York City's Trinity Church graveyard, a colonial chapel and cemetery, is a testament to this attitude. For example, the headstone of one Mr. Browne reads: "Here lies the body of James Browne who departed this life Jan 22 1759 aged 70." Virtually all headstones at Trinity Church begin with the inscription, "here lies the body of," referencing the actual buried corpse, decomposing in the earth below. While the phrase "departed this life," acknowledges an afterlife and hints at potential immortality, it is also eerily final—the dead left this world and will not return in the same form. Rather than hiding behind platitudes, these headstones proclaim the identity of the deceased and concede their death. They are not resting in peace, sleeping or living in the presence of the divine.

²⁵¹ When considered alongside the modern tradition of etching headstones with portraits and affixing photos to vernacular shrines, these practices seem consistent with long standing traditions. Conceiving of the American history of death as a continuum toward more personalization helps makes sense of this continued trajectory.

Undeniably, people in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries died much earlier than they do now, making death and dying a much more predictable, routine part of everyday life. These feelings were probably enhanced because families attended to the corpses themselves. The relationship between the living and the dead was much more intimate, as bodies were wrapped, treated, dressed and washed by close relations. All this is to say that, compared to today, when many do not face death and its eventuality until adulthood, for generations past, dying was simply more familiar.

What connection might this history have to vernacular shrines? Here, I offer two insights: first, even the Puritans, who used rather haunting imagery, were on a quest to find more personalization within the practice of burying bodies. As stated, proto-angelic figures etched into stone are compelling evidence that normalized images of death were becoming more unsatisfactory. As stated above, there was some movement toward trying to represent the deceased in likeness on their headstone. Communicating that this was a specific person, rather than just some body, seems to have been a concern, especially when the individual was considered important. The headstone of William Bradford, an early New England printer, for example, illustrates this well, as the angel's face is an attempt at portraiture.²⁵² As I will demonstrate, these sentiments continue to have an impact on American death culture, as contemporary mourners also seek to expand death practices to include more personalization of the deceased. Secondly, the ways in which the trek to the cemetery

²⁵² Observation made on a trip to Bradford's grave in New York City on September 10, 2013.

was treated as a sacred pilgrimage echoes later practices wherein families of the dead, such as the Vavao and Fernandez families, make journeys to and linger at vernacular shrines, which they similarly treat as sacred sites. Both of these observations evince precursors to the increasing regularity of vernacular shrines today.

Nineteenth Century Culture and Shifting Practices

As the country moved from its infancy to its adolescence, the ways in which average Americans made sense of and related to death also began to change. That is to say, the nineteenth century was a time in which death, dying and the afterlife were national obsessions. In her encyclopedic text *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, American religious historian Catherine Albanese argues on behalf of an American spiritualism, a heretofore understudied but important component of the American religious mosaic, especially in reorienting American attitudes toward death. While she acknowledges the place of evangelicalism and mainstream-denominationalism in constructing the narrative of American history, she believes both threaten to flatten what she calls “metaphysical culture,” which was especially prevalent in the 19th century. The explosion of belief in spirits and ghosts, rappings and mediumship as well as the introduction of hypnotism, yoga and other practices aimed at controlling the spirit via the mind, speak to a desire among many Americans to seek after the otherworldly.

For Albanese, those who engaged in such rituals were committed to “all that was good in religion, all that concerned Truth and its practical feats of saving power

in everyday life.”²⁵³ She divides all metaphysicians into four distinctive, yet related groups according to their particular area of interest:

1. People with a preoccupation with the mind and its powers.
2. People with an orientation toward the ancient cosmological theory of correspondence between worlds represented by a macrocosmic/microcosmic equivalence.
3. People who thought in terms of energy and movement or magic, understood in a healing mode.
4. People for whom salvation was a yearning for solace, comfort, therapy and healing.

Even within what Albanese would call “mainstream” groups in the US, similar spiritual practices began to infiltrate everyday practice. New religious movements were resuscitated from the husks of what had become stale or decayed traditions. The nineteenth century, in particular, seemed to draw out these tendencies that had previously remained unexplored or had been relegated to the margins of acceptable spiritual practice. Albanese demonstrates with creativity and clarity the ways that these practices thrust death and dying into the forefront of the American religious imagination, especially the concept of life after death and Americans’ ability to maintain bonds that death was thought to sever.

The major socio-political developments of the day also left indelible marks on death practices and led to a flourishing of roadside shrines. First and foremost, the

²⁵³ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 12.

nineteenth century brought into stark relief the reality and tragedy of mass death, especially during the bloody years of the Civil War, 1861-1865. Infamously, the Civil War produced more American deaths than all other US war deaths combined, even until the present day. Some scholars, including Molly McGarry and Leigh Eric Schmidt have attributed the rise of the Spiritualism described above, especially trance and visionary mediumship, including communication with Civil War soldiers, to Americans' inability to accept the scale and devastation of such mass slaughter. This practice was not just limited to the famous Fox sisters of Hydesville, NY, whose 1848 séance is said to have spread spiritualism across the nation, but precursors and contemporaneous movements such as the Shakers, Swedenborgians, Harmonialists and others speak to just how far belief in spirit communication had stretched.²⁵⁴ Often, it was missing and recently deceased soldiers to whom the living were reaching out.

To demonstrate the extent to which this phenomena was real and widespread, Silas Weir Mitchell's "The Case of George Dedlow" is exemplary, if a bit eerie. In his own right, Mitchell was a fascinating character in American history: he was a brilliant Philadelphia society doctor who gained much notoriety as a nerve specialist—widely considered foremost in his field. He came into intimate contact with Civil War soldiers suffering from nerve wounds, and he frequently administered medicines and treatments to amputees, who were in abundance after the war. Through years of therapy with amputees, he made the breakthrough discovery of "phantom

²⁵⁴ See, for example, Sally Promey's *Spiritual Spectacles*, Anne Taves' *Fits, Trances and Visions*.

limb syndrome,” wherein a patient suffers pain in removed or unrecoverable limbs. In an attempt to make this medical discovery accessible to a general audience, Mitchell created the fictionalized character of Dedlow to tell the story of his medicine. In the form of a historical diary, Mitchell penned his experiences in the Civil War and the physical, emotional and mental toll it took on survivors. In fact, Dedlow is so consumed by his pain and misery that he visits a séance as a last resort in dealing with his freshly damaged body from which a leg had been rather brutally removed. In a hazy, hypnotic conjuring, a medium summons the phantom limb for Dedlow, who then, overcome with joy, dances upon his lost leg. This creepy story not only thrust its author into the medical and literary limelight, it also demonstrated the intimacy and familiarity with which suffering, injury and death were approached. The nineteenth century should be noted as a time of pragmatism in the face of death: people took active steps to attempt to deal with it, and did so in a variety of ways, from séances to personalized funerals to shrines.

Also, and most importantly for our purposes, is the rise of migration during the 19th century, which presented several compounding factors in the rise of hastily constructed roadside memorials . Whether it was the Great Migration out of the rural south to the urban north during Reconstruction, floods of newly arrived immigrants (re)imagining their own cultural traditions, economic migration to California during the Gold Rush or continued westward expansionism fueled by an unremitting commitment to manifest destiny, migration was filled with fatal risk. Any movement en mass inevitably led to death from exposure to the elements, starvation,

confrontation or simply unforeseen logistical problems. Pioneer travel diaries are filled with tales of lurking hungry animals, fierce Native American groups, even poisonous insects and vegetation. The rise of systems of mass transportation led to a sharp increase in tragic, accidental death among both workers and those *in transit*. The construction of the railroads, especially in the more sparsely populated west, led to construction-related fatalities, as trial and error played an important role in helping establish best practices and safety protocol that would not be required until after the fact. In all, there was a heightened perception that death was waiting around every corner during this century, as cultural conditions continually compounded one another. As these conditions produced death of a tragic, spontaneous and often violent manner, the construction of roadside shrines became a more common practice.

One of the most touching roadside tributes was built in the summer of 1852 along the Mormon Trail near Chimney Rock, Nebraska. In June of that year, Rebecca Winters, along with her husband Hiram and the James C. Snow party bound for the Salt Lake Valley, left Nauvoo, Illinois, the latest defunct headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Departing in early summer, they had high hopes for a new life in Zion, but it was not to be—Rebecca would not live to see autumn. On August 13th she contracted the cholera to which she would succumb two short days later. It was not until fifty years later in 1902, however, that Rebecca's fate was uncovered, when the land near Scottsbluff, Nebraska was surveyed for the construction of the new Burlington Railroad.

Workers discovered a curiously perched tire iron, seemingly out of place, and decided to investigate. As they began excavation, they found the tire iron wasn't simply discarded by pioneers; it was trying to communicate something. Surveyors eventually discovered that this outwardly mundane object spoke volumes: someone who deserved to be remembered had died there, in the very spot where a gleaming new railcar was to chug along its path. The tire iron hinted at the nearby grave of Mrs. Winters, which had also been marked using whatever the pioneers had at their disposal: in this case, a found wagon wheel that her dear friends, William Reynolds and his daughter Ellis, inscribed with her name. Others inscribed their names and the date on nearby rocks, paying tribute to their deceased friend and also carving out space, proclaiming their presence on newly sacralized land. LDS official sources and other scholars suggest that most pioneer graves went unmarked. However, because the Reynolds took the time to personalize and assemble objects, which suggested death to the workers, Winters' nearby grave, which may have remained lost to the trail, was discovered. The pioneer trail is a testament to on-the-go memorializing, speaking once more to shrines' accessibility and pervasiveness in American culture.

As members of the newly founded Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were forced to move from Kirtland, Ohio to Independence, Missouri to Nauvoo and eventually to be headquartered permanently around the Great Salt Lake, they found themselves faced with the often deadly task of migration. Handcart pioneer Mary Ann Hafen remembers that "the fourth company, comprising 500 persons, lost over sixty; and the fifth company, of 576 persons, lost between 135 and 150 through freezing and

starvation.”²⁵⁵ The journal of Eliza Roxcy Snow attests to the grave dangers the Saints faced as they headed across the Great Plains, as well. While she takes time to thank God for the blessings He bestowed upon them, she also recounts with sheer horror that “it [was] a growling, grumbling, devilish, sickly time with us.”²⁵⁶ One disturbing detail of her writing is the regularity and normality with which she references death. She writes, for example, “the day fine—took coffee with Sarah A. and went to [Brother] A. Lyman’s tent—found a little child of Syndey Tanner at the point of death.”²⁵⁷ She doesn’t linger over such events, considering them as routine and uneventful as her morning coffee. Where she seems most distressed about death, and recounts the events in greater detail, are when the traditional death practices described above cannot be properly met. She remembers the burial of a Sister E “was attended with *all the propriety circumstances would permit*—after the customary dressing, the body was wrapped in a quilt and consigned to its narrow home without a coffin. It truly seemed a lonely grave.”²⁵⁸ This is about as much emotion as could be illicit from Snow, which may owe more to the conditions of migration and her own serious illness, than a lack of empathy. This demonstrates, however, that the infant church’s members still looked upon death rituals as honorable and necessary, despite their circumstances. Additionally, as situations would permit, both graves *and* roadside shrines were erected commemorating the final resting spot of the body itself, but also the *land* that had been sacralized by death.

²⁵⁵ Hafen, *Diary*, 22.

²⁵⁶ Snow, *Diary*, 111.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 120.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 189.

One such landscape made sacred through the erection of a vernacular shrine was Mountain Meadows which had witnessed the controversial and heretofore mysterious slaughter of pioneers by Mormon militiamen and members of the local Paiute tribe. In 1859, a stone cairn with a small cedar cross was erected on the spot where the massacre had occurred in September 1857. Later, the US Army installed their own memorial: a granite marker. This follows a typical pattern, which again speaks to the ephemerality and therefore difficulty of studying shrines: most often, vernacular memorials are replaced by those of an institutional nature, coming from sanctioned government, religious or secular bodies. When vernacular shrines vanish, sometimes they simply fade into historical memory and, at other times, they are subsumed by others and given voice by those in positions of power.

The case of Rebecca Winters, though, illustrates powerfully the contest of space, and the interplay of public need and communal protectionism. After 1884, the land on which Winters was buried, along with the land on which the humble pioneer marker was built, was acquired by homesteader Lorenzo DeMott. It was, in fact, DeMott's wish that Winters' grave, and the nearby shrine commemorating her, remain undisturbed when he sold this particular plot to Burlington. However, the 1899 plans of the engineers drew a route that disturbed the land, leaving DeMott distraught. An impasse had been reached. DeMott invested much time and energy in waging a legal battle with the railroad, which was forced, as a consequence, to resurvey. Eventually, the railroad changed its course to avoid the grave and adjacent shrine, including the tire iron and carved stone, which had been moved back to its

original home on the roadside. While the fight was over land, that land had come to represent a complicated space, having been made sacred not just by the presence of the body, but the touching tribute the Reynolds had made to their friend. There is still mystery surrounding what occurred in the intervening years between the placement of the shrine, it being forgotten and then unearthed again by DeMott. However, this example nevertheless brings together, migration, transportation and mass death—illustrating the changing conditions faced by many nineteenth century Americans.

While Mormon migration was certainly fraught with danger, they were not the only community moving toward new territory en masse. After president James Polk annexed the lands of the Pacific northwest, wagon companies flooded the Oregon Territory, comprising present-day Oregon, Washington and Idaho. Among those to leave were the Sager family, who had been making their way westward from Ohio to Missouri, up to Platte County. The family patriarch, Henry, was a true rolling stone, moving his entire clan, including seven children, ever westward, seeking after cheap land on which he might build his fortune. His daughter Catherine, whose memoirs recount the family's history, describes her father as, "one of the restless ones," who couldn't be satisfied in one place for too long.²⁵⁹ So when Oregon Territory was opened for homesteaders, Mr. Sager once again packed a wagon, hitched up his oxen and began another trek.

It wasn't long before tragedy struck the Sager family, whose legacy is one of the hardship faced by pioneers, rather than a successful venture on the Oregon

²⁵⁹ Sager. *Across the Plains*, 1.

frontier. The journey began on a sad note, as the family and their company departed their friends who they were certain never to meet again. The Sager children instantly fell ill, as the constant jumbling of the wagon over rough terrain made them seasick. When the wagons had to be tightly closed during the rainy season, their air was restricted, worsening their condition. As fate would have it, things only deteriorated further. Catherine recalls her own pitiful luck as she shattered her leg after jumping from her family's wagon, catching her dress on a tool handle and being dragged under the heavy wagon wheels. While her diary details pleasantries through the Summer months of 1844, as they arrived in Laramie, Wyoming, Henry, his wife Naomi, and his sons fell ill. Although cholera was common on the trail, the Sagers' diagnosis remains unclear. As Mr. Sager realized his demise was immanent, he mourned bitterly the loss for his family that his death would entail. Catherine remembers:

[He] could not be reconciled to the thought of leaving his large and helpless family in such precarious circumstances. The evening before his death, we crossed the Green River and camped on the bank. Looking where I lay helpless he said, "Poor child! What will become of you!" Captain Shaw found him weeping bitterly. He said his last hour had come, and his heart was filled with anguish for his family. His wife was ill, the children small, and one likely to be a cripple. They had no relatives near and a long journey lay before them.²⁶⁰

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

He would succumb that same evening to his illness. As the provisions in the wagon were not much beyond bare necessities, there was no time, money or resources for a proper funeral. Rather, his family memorialized him using whatever means they had available. Catherine explains, rather matter-of-factly, “father was buried the next day on the banks of the Green River. His coffin was made of two troughs dug out of the body of a tree, but next year, emigrants found his bleaching bones, as Indians had disinterred his remains.”²⁶¹ Even in death, Sager couldn’t escape the dangers of the open trail. His makeshift tomb was almost immediately disturbed by other emigrants and nearby Native Americans. The rest of the Sager family didn’t fare much better: Naomi passed away a few months later, leaving her children orphaned. Her deceased body was wrapped in her bed sheet and buried. Willow brush and her wooden headboard marked the spot. Memorializing in the wilderness was impermanent at best.

How did Americans respond to these compounded conditions? As was the case in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, dying was a familiar and familial affair. Especially compared to developments in the 20th century, earlier death practices drew heavily on the friends and families of loved ones, rather than on professionals. David Chidester explains,

During the nineteenth century in the United States, funerals were simple and relatively inexpensive. The funeral was a ceremony conducted by family and friends. They washed and dressed the corpse,

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

preserved it on ice, placed it in a simple pine coffin, and carried it to the grave-yard.²⁶²

While he concedes that some professionals might be necessary, such as a carpenter to build a coffin or a minister or priest to conduct religious ritual, he highlights the nearly singular role played by the closest relations to the deceased. Such simplicity concerning death was easy to take up in any context, especially those that many Americans were facing during this formative century. Even when life was lived on the move or in an environment haunted by memories of war and destruction, family ritual, including not only funerals, but building shrines, was viewed as a viable option. The nineteenth century, especially after 1860, was a time of contest for the nation, which many viewed as a test from God. The response was to turn to shrine building, and other increasingly accepted alternative spiritual practices, to help pull through.

20th and 21st Century Developments

Unfortunately for many Americans, while the number of deaths related to air and rail transit are currently much lower than in centuries past, the number of deaths related to automobile driving has risen sharply and unrelentingly. Paradoxically, our most heavily utilized form of transportation also causes the most death and destruction. The advent of the highway system and skyrocketing car ownership has brought with it an explosion of vernacular shrines that shows no signs of slowing. However, the

²⁶² Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence*, 129.

question still remains, why remember in this way? After all, isn't that the purpose of a funeral? According to many scholars, it is precisely because the American funerary tradition has atrophied that vernacular shrines present themselves as a best option for personalization of memory and management of grief.

According to many in the area of death studies, western culture suffered a massive memory loss in the early twentieth century—a phenomenon known as the “denial of death.” While I have discussed this elsewhere, it bears repeating that the current increase of vernacular shrines may be a direct rejection of denying death over several generations. “Denying death” was a multistep erosion of the public religious and social traditions surrounding death. When death was a family affair in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, public emotion and displays of affect were considered inappropriate. In fact, showing too much emotion was frowned upon and regarded as childish or, worse, barbaric and uncivilized. To understand this phenomenon, Doss explains, “... Western social and cultural conventions insisted on private and individual forms of grieving throughout much of the twentieth century, viewing the bereaved as psychologically disabled social pariahs.”²⁶³ Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s narrator of her 1892 “The Yellow Wallpaper” comes immediately to mind. Her mourning, in this case, postpartum depression, makes her an instant outcast, reviled by her high society physician husband and his patronizing sister. As a woman forced to quiet her sadness and distress, she is eventually overcome by an overwhelming sense of liberation when she proclaims to the world her true feelings

²⁶³ Doss, *Memorial Mania*. 93.

and breaks from the confines of her own room. By the 1920s, feelings of revulsion toward the bereaved ran high, as memorialization was referred to as “a troubling public spectacle of intemperate affect,” again implying an almost manic, disturbed image.²⁶⁴

In the Freudian tradition, which radically altered psychology in the twentieth century, “grief was viewed as a disruptive and debilitating emotion, and one that ha[d] to be dealt with—worked through—as quickly as possible, hence the emphasis on severing ties with the dead, with “letting go” and “moving on.”²⁶⁵ The twentieth century traditions that grew out of this worldview expedited this process—they were, more often than not, over and done quickly and lacked personal touches that would have led to emotive responses. One of the most interesting developments of the twentieth century was the outsourcing of funeral planning and oversight to professional undertakers in a process I refer to as the “professionalization of death.” The responsibilities of making arrangements now fell to professional planners and funeral homes began to spring up. Often, these included all-inclusive packages designed to remove the melancholia of death from the immediate friends and family. This was thought to assuage grief and, therefore, make the whole process much easier on the bereaved. It also, conversely and probably unintentionally, meant that some people felt a lack of control over important funerary decisions. A sense that funerals were simply rote, mechanistic responses to death churned out at a quick clip by funeral directors ready to make a profit was a real problem. One of the leading figures

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 30.

²⁶⁵ Doss, “*Spontaneous Memorials*,” 301.

who brought about such sentiment was Hubert Eaton, a California entrepreneur in the newly-created death industry.

Eaton “decided that Americans had a ‘memorial impulse’ to commemorate their dead and that he would provide them with the proper environment to express that basic impulse.”²⁶⁶ He gained notoriety as the builder of Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California, a Los Angeles suburb. For Eaton, whose show-business connections would make Forest Lawn the new, expensive place to be interred, the “proper environment” was the lap of luxury. After assuming management of Forest Lawn in 1917, Eaton instituted his “memorial park plan,” which he hoped would replace “unsightly, depressing stoneyards.”²⁶⁷ His memorial park, which banned upright headstones, was bright and thoroughly optimistic, complete with fountains, sprawling lawns, flowers, and trees with sweeping views of the Los Angeles skyline forming the perfect backdrop. His goal was “a great park devoid of misshapen monuments and other signs of earthly death,” and, instead, filled with beautiful memorials.²⁶⁸ Forest Lawn was also the first memorial park in the country to have an on-site funeral home with professionals ready to help the wealthy, especially stars of the silver screen, navigate dying in Los Angeles. Once instituted, cemeteries all across the country tried to emulate what Eaton had been so successful in implementing: an undeniably beautiful space where all monuments created a cohesive look to the cemetery.

²⁶⁶ Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence*, 237.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ Strack, *Death and the Quest for Meaning*, 115.

While some immediately loved Forest Lawn and regarded it as a sanctuary, others reviled the squeaky clean, theme park feel its perfectly manicured lawns and reproduction European statues suggested. In her 1963 book *The American Way of Death*, Jessica Mitford took aim at Forest Lawn and the death care industry in general for grossly inflated prices and other unsavory business practices which she believed took advantage of grieving families for the sake of profit. This book, which became a national best-seller, brought the death care industry into the public eye. One of the most common complaints about such cemeteries was that they had all become cookie-cutter. Studying vernacular shrines in British Columbia, Canada, John Belshaw and Diane Purvey suggest that headstones and cemeteries announce that the death care industry has become homogenized.²⁶⁹ For many, this has led to a crisis in which,

For an increasing number of contemporary mourners the cemetery is divorced from the places and paraphernalia of personal meaning.

Cemetery management may even regulate how the dead are remembered, restricting the size, structure and nature of memorialization to something that meets Council approval, so that there is little scope for individual expression.²⁷⁰

This increasingly led to outcry about the ways in which not only cemeteries, but the funerary services they provided, had become deeply problematic. In other words, people felt that their freedom to mourn as they saw fit was being infringed upon. This

²⁶⁹ Although Belshaw and Purvey are specifically discussing the Canadian context, this trend certainly also holds in the United States. Interview subjects and sources such as Suter and Garces-Foley reinforce this point in their work.

²⁷⁰ Garces-Foley, *Death and Religion*, 247.

led to the increasing feeling among many that “families no longer feel that the traditional space for private grief—the cemetery—is an adequate space to express their grief.”²⁷¹ According to Jack Santino, who gained international reputation for his studies of vernacular shrines, this trend has caused people to turn their attention away from the cemetery and increasingly toward the death site.²⁷² It is into this niche that vernacular shrines fit for those whose grief is not assuaged by other means.

For most scholars, a “postmodern death” is “a reaction against the authority of both religious tradition and medical and funeral experts in order to have an authentic experience of death and farewell. In the postmodern death, authority rests with the individual, or the family on behalf of the individual, and personal choice drives ritual planning.”²⁷³ As we have seen in the first three chapters, erecting and maintaining a vernacular shrine is one of the primary modes of enacting this pent-up agency and wresting death from the hands of those removed from the deceased. It is an antiauthoritarian, highly local practice by which individuals within or alongside communities work to retain social bonds death threatened to sever. Increasingly, individuals find comfort in enacting their own rituals, outside the purview of *anyone* else’s control, creating their own sacred space and do so as heirs to those who have been doing so since at least the Spanish conquest. The sheer volume of shrines present on today’s roadways acts as powerful testament to this fact.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² Santino, *Spontaneous Shrines*, 120.

²⁷³ Garces-Foley, *Death and Religion*, 209.

Conclusion

Increasingly in American culture, mourning is permissible on a grand, national and even international scale. When tragedy strikes, from the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, to the Oklahoma City bombing, to 9/11, mass outpourings of emotion are not only permitted, but encouraged as a show of solidarity and communal support.

However, there are powerful ways in which vernacular shrines act as vocal reminders that all is *not* well, that some communities remain fractured and that our national narrative is not always a cohesive, warm tale. No vernacular shrine illustrates this better than those erected at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the mall in Washington, DC, which, in its own right, G. Benito Cordova calls a *descanso*.

The Vietnam War continues to haunt American history. Little consensus has been reached about how the war should be interpreted and remembered, and Americans continue to reel from the massive loss of life, which many believe was for no gain. Memories of this war, and the period from 1956-1975 in general, are plagued by doubt, confusion, anger and, above all, uncertainty. The war had tremendous impact on average Americans whose family members may have served and died, on politicians who grapple with the lingering legacy, and, above all, on veterans who feel, on the one hand, proud of their service, but on the other, forgotten by a society that is deeply ambivalent the war in which they fought. Kristin Ann Hass' *Carried to the Wall* illustrates the contentious relationship Americans have to this war, and the memories they attach to it, by paying particular attention to the objects people bring

to the wall and leave behind. For this reason, Cordova's characterization of the wall as the ultimate national *descanso* rings true.

Since its construction in 1983, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall has quickly become the most visited memorial in Washington DC and, indeed, the whole country. Americans, both those directly related to the war and those who are not, perform an American civil religious pilgrimage to the wall, bringing with them affectionate tokens and offering them up in a show of tense, mixed emotions and national solidarity, in some instances, or, as the case may be, communicating dissent and vitriol. While other memorials on the National Mall are decidedly triumphant and celebratory, especially the awe-inspiring arches and waterworks of the World War II memorial, the Vietnam memorial is decidedly, purposefully ambiguous. While visitors kick off their shoes and cool their feet in the wading pools of the WWII memorial, such behavior would seem ridiculous before the wall, as the names of the 600,000 plus killed or missing in action etched into black granite hardly invite joviality. Mirroring interpretations of the war itself, people have rendered harsh judgments of the wall, noting its depressing, ominous feel, while others feel its somber presence accurately reflects the loss felt by so many. The politics of this memorial and its creator are outside the scope of the present research, and, as Hass has explored these in depth, to do so here would be redundant.

Hass, however, does offer a suggestion that directly relates to an overarching American impulse to memorialize, which has had tremendous impact on this work. In grappling with why visitors feel compelled to leave something behind, a hypothesis

which years of research at the memorial confirmed, she explains, “the active participation of visitors in the memorial process, which clearly marked a departure in memorial practice, may have acted as a model for action on a lesser scale.”²⁷⁴ For Hass, the wall is special—people do not treat it like every other memorial, and the evidence can be found in the Maryland Area Regional Storage (MARS) facility in Landover, where the Parks Service keeps and catalogues every single item left at the wall. Only the occasional item is discarded: open containers of food or beverage (though the cans and bottles are kept) and live flowers which are difficult to preserve. The storage facility, which encompasses the space of over three football fields, is packed to the gills with MIA/POW bracelets, letters, photos, wartime cigarettes and alcohol bottles, military pins and uniforms, stuffed animals, American flags, and countless other uncommon tributes like a fully operational painted motorcycle, a huge wooden reindeer and boxes of weapons and ammunition.

During my visit to MARS in September of 2013, I viewed a sample of objects that had been catalogued as “religious.” Nearly every world religion was represented in the religious objects collection: prayer beads, rosaries, sacred texts of all varieties, pendants, posters, ornaments, keychains, portraits and pictures of saints, Buddha figurines—these were just the most common. Studying the variety of objects in the collection, it became immediately clear that this was a practice everyone engaged in, and continues to be a part of, regardless of personal affiliation. Even those ill prepared to leave something behind resort to reaching into their purses and pockets

²⁷⁴ Hass, *Carried to the Wall*.

and leaving coins, matchbooks, business cards, even brochures about the monument itself. It is as though once before the wall, an expectation is created: you must leave something, or the journey is incomplete; it's not enough to come and see, you must interact.

Conclusion: Liminality

Thus far, I have demonstrated the various ways that we might study shrines in the American cultural context: religiously, temporally, emotionally, socially, psychologically, politically and, finally, historically. I have suggested that, rather than each of these modes of inquiry constituting unique queries, that in order to build a cogent picture of the multi-faceted nature of roadside shrines, *all* of these contribute a differentiated and complementary piece of the puzzle, complicating and yet enriching our understanding. As a final reflection, I suggest that the entanglement of these modes of understanding is due to shrine's irrepressible liminality in *all* respects.

In chapter two, I examined the religious and ritual life of shrines by introducing the Fernandez family and the ways in which Angela and her family negotiate not just the death of her brother, but their new lives after his death within the space of his shrine. Vincente's shrine is *temporally liminal*—is it a place only of this world, or does it provide some sort of near portal to life beyond this life? Both the family and I noted our confusion of how to act and where to walk, what, exactly to do and how to feel. The space itself constitutes a liminal landscape: between heaven and earth. Liminality is essentially vulnerable, as the uncertainty of leaving this world and entering the realm of the unknown, in-between space of the shrine is a fragile transition and can present with real danger, before being reintegrated into the day's banality.

In chapter three, I argued that shrines are indeed sacred space, whether that sacrality is overt or subtle. The activity at shrines, combined with their affect—the

emotional, social and psychological feelings achieved there, together create the overall impression of the sacred. It is these feelings that constitute perhaps the most significant *experiential component of liminality*, especially, as I have suggested, for grieving mothers. As a case study, I presented Sheli Vavao, who routinely visits her son's shrine. The liminality of this phenomenon is captured best for those in mourning, especially those recently traumatized, by the word "fraught." Fraught implies the intense and simultaneously contradictory emotions at play, leaving survivors in liminal limbo—between controlling and reeling, between remembering and forgetting, between breaking down and building up. Often, these feelings are happening simultaneously. For example, Sheli's deep, sometimes paralyzing grief is often countered by the support and love she gleans from her religious community, her friends and relatives. Even a seemingly simple question, such as, "how do you feel about your relative's shrine?," often elicited meandering responses, replete with incongruities or, in a rebuke of the question altogether, many simply responded "I don't know." For many, this liminality, this unknown, this unsettledness lingers into their futures as they attempt to negotiate living with the memories of the deceased, especially by living near, with and through shrines.

In chapter four, I investigated the various ways that state, federal and local governments have interpreted and legislated roadside shrines and the attendant controversy roused by their personal, sacred nature. Indeed, in American culture, few phenomena can be understood as *politically "liminal"* better than these shrines. The gap in the federal law is filled with a variety of legislation from coast to coast,

making the only true consistency inconsistency. In that environment, legislators and those on the enforcement end of the law hardly know how to act and what is actually in the public interest. For some involved, the question of allowing or disallowing shrines is a simple issue of public safety. For others, however, it becomes an issue of the free exercise of mourning. For those who are tasked with regulating and removing shrines, again, some view this as simply part of their job description, and for others, this tugs at their heartstrings, making an already difficult job that much harder. This liminality also bleeds over into the lives of average citizens totally removed from the incidents surrounding the death and the controversy by prompting us to all reflect on questions like, “how do I feel about that shrine being there?,” “who was that person?,” “how did they die?,” and perhaps even the thought, “maybe I should be more careful.” Still others, of course, become outraged at shrines’ very presence and feel their legality to be a positive nod to religiosity, which they feel should remain outside the purview of the government. In other words, there is no normalized or even consistent response to shrines and, instead, American citizens are left to wander through the fog of liminality that hangs over the political life of shrines.

Finally, in chapter five, I chronicled the history of roadside shrines in the United States. For most of our history, we have been a people on the move—on foot, by wagon, by rail and by car, in search of new land and new opportunities. It is this love of transport that has left Americans with a legacy of violence on the move, though, which has often been commemorated via shrines. Movement, in and of itself, is liminal—surety dissolves to chaos, as the unpredictability of the world bear heavily

upon the traveler. However, there are other, more subtle ways in which the American history of shrines is a history of liminality: confronting death on any kind of frontier necessitates reaction and adaptation. The security of full-fledged death and mourning rituals must be reimagined, forcing the ambiguity of liminality to the forefront. Aside from this, when studying larger American historiography, the process of thinking about and writing about change through time, shrines themselves occupy a liminal space: always on the margins, never central focus of study but nonetheless speaking in complex way to American culture.

Other types of liminality are also at play when considering vernacular shrines. One of the most persistent and clearly expressed ideas I encountered in interviews, and noted on a personal level, is shrines' *spatial liminality*. The space of shrines is at one profane, grungy and dirty, and simultaneously sanitized by the sacred, set apart and special. The shrine's existence in space consecrates the entire landscape. In so doing, it also raises questions about the state of the space: is it just the earthly landscape it appears to be, or is it now something more? A channel, perhaps, where communion with the dead is possible once more? Spatially liminal places are neither one exactly, and somehow both. Sites where traumatic events have occurred and blurred these boundaries are referred to as "traumascapes," to use Clark and Franzman's formulation. Literally "traumatic landscapes," this idea marries the space with the unimaginable events that occurred there, each lending to the other further complexity and bolstering the sense of the space as liminal.

Shrines also exemplify *temporal liminality*. Unlike some other types of memorials, which do not necessarily commemorate the event *where* the event took place, shrines transform space by disrupting our conception of time. Shrine simultaneously freeze time in the past, while forcing survivors to confront a present and future without their loved one. Shrines dislocate our western sense of linear time by bringing us back to the past, sometimes even incorporating evidence of wreckage like forensic time capsules. I have experienced shrines where crime scenes and automobile accidents have remained largely untouched, including blood stains and scattered debris, transporting viewers back to the moment of the fatality, only to thrust them back to the present when confronted with the structure of the shrine. As one lingers at a shrine, a forecast of life without the dead again confuses one's orientation to time. The way the deceased are depicted on shrines is also temporally liminal: the deceased are usually adults, but are often depicted as children.

Adding yet another layer, shrines are also *materially liminal*. The material nature of shrines lends itself to a discussion of liminality since they are at the same time neither permanent nor necessarily impermanent. As suggested above, most people construct shrines with some semblance of permanence in mind, but, by their very nature, they are impermanent, made of materials that will shred and decay in the weather and through the years. They are every changing material objects as well, shifting with seasons, holidays and anniversaries. They can also quite quickly

disappear—one day they are there, as they have been for years, and then they vanish.²⁷⁵

Finally, shrines are perfectly positioned as *legally liminal* objects. On the one hand, they are often illegal at federal, state and local levels. However, they are in the tenuous position of simultaneously being tolerated. So even as they are illegal manifestations under the law, they often remain unimpeded, and their illegality is quietly protested by those who build and those who allow shrines to remain. As a public, we lend shrines our tacit approval by being respectful of them, ourselves becoming complicit in an illegal act. Shrines remain on the margins of the law, floating between acceptability and unacceptability and yet both descriptors somehow do not capture the full picture.

In a simultaneously contentious, yet effortless interplay, all of these layers of liminality are inextricably bound to and anchored to these shrines. Shrines provide the centralizing material manifestation around which all of these intense feelings attach themselves and find representation. In true democratic form, shrines present a zone of safety in which these feelings of liminality are safe to be felt, even if they do still remain uncomfortable. Liminality is, in principle, an emotional and mental state that is inherently chaotic, and the material presence of shrines act simultaneously as buffer and sponge for the intense overflow of distress that may result. It has been my

²⁷⁵ I noted this several times over the course of my fieldwork. As I was located in Riverside, CA for the majority of my dissertation years, I was able to locate shrines in my neighborhood and visit them quite often, or at least get used to taking note of them on my morning commute, etc. Two shrines that I'd noticed well before formal research had begun had been there for years and suddenly vanished after my initial fieldwork. In both instances, there was no clear reason why this should be the case, but again, bespeaks material liminality.

contention that the practice of building and maintaining these material productions is an integral part of understanding what it means to confront trauma in American culture.

Questions about this contention, may, in fact, persist without also revisiting the concept of memory and memorialization. As I and other scholars have shown, Americans are a monument-building group and memorializing the deceased is an important way in which we make sense of national tragedy and triumph, victory and defeat. However, it is when we are faced with trauma, that we, perhaps subconsciously, grasp for the material to help us manage our grief. We have seen this in the country's great war memorials, as well as modest street signs, online memorial candles and car decals. Even the virtual and mobile materiality suffice to help us sort through moving from the liminal phases of rupture to vulnerability to reincorporation to transformation. I contend that while this is not a uniquely American tradition, there is something "peculiarly" American about it. The term "a peculiar people" can be traced historically back to the King James Version of the New Testament, 1 Peter 2:9 in which Peter reminds Christians that they are unique and special in the eyes of God. This echoes passages from other biblical sources, including Exodus and Deuteronomy, in which the great Hebrew prophets and writers urge the Jewish people to fulfill their covenants and demonstrate their loyalty and love for God. In this sense, "peculiar" is denoting kinship or ownership, rather than the strangeness we colloquially imply today. This phraseology has been widely adopted by Christians the world over, especially within the United States, to suggest their exceptional

relationship to God.²⁷⁶ So when I suggest that this ritual activity is “particularly American,” rather than suggesting that this is exclusively an American practice, I am suggesting that, as a people, we find comfort in shrines and that they resonate with our local communities, as well as on a national scale. In other words, we feel “kinship” for those who build and maintain shrines, and we demonstrate this by saying a quick prayer when we pass one, giving a respectful nod, speaking lowly and softly near one, keeping them clean and allowing most of them to remain unmolested. In making this claim, I am also foregrounding and centralizing an American folk tradition that has largely been overlooked in academic discourse on religion in the United States. Rather than marginalizing shrine building and the lives and experiences of everyday citizens, I have demonstrated how this cultural, familial practice constitutes an important ritual on a national scale.

So how might I, finally, connect memory with liminality? The following offers only a cursory response that I’d call upon future scholars to study in greater depth but that nonetheless points the way to a serious set of questions for theorists of both liminality and memorialization. My ultimate contention is that: memory is, as the saying goes, fleeting precisely because the process of remembering places the remembering person in a liminal state. Remembering, for many of us, is not merely a psychological exercise. Rather, it is a felt, embodied, deeply personal and culturally informed *process* during which we are, as Victor Turner would say, “betwixt and

²⁷⁶ One Christian group to attach their identity heavily to this idea are members of the LDS Church, whose scripture calls the Saints to retain their status as “favored,” “peculiar,” and “pure.” See 2 Nephi 1:19 and D&C 100:16.

between.” Remembering can blast us from the present into the past, invited backward by familiar smells, sights, sounds, tastes and feelings. We are then left to negotiate the past and reconcile it with the present. That process can be a very dangerous prospect, as modern psychological scholarship, particularly on issues like PTSD would lead us to conclude. As we remember, we are vulnerable, no longer living purely in the present or purely in the past, but in some world between the two. Our feelings about both the then and the now can be ambiguous, confused and unclear, leaving us vulnerable. Our memories, as often happens with victims of trauma, can become scattered and our feelings unsure. Memory is, therefore, fleeting *because* it is liminal. We use words like ‘capture’ or ‘concretize’ when discussing memory because they are always in movement, which can be elusive. And, at its core, that’s what liminality is—elusiveness that is both dangerous and vulnerable.

One might reason that liminality is uncomfortable and therefore, should be overcome as quickly as possible. However, shrines suggest a substantially different rationale. Shrines actually perpetuate liminality. They amplify and extend liminality. While this is uncomfortable to be sure, even debilitating, it does allow for that line of communication between this world and the next to remain open. It allows a paused glance through a closing curtain. In other words, the deceased won’t be completely accessible nor completely inaccessible, making this position in limbo preferable to the perceived finality of death. Liminality is often conceived of as a “threshold” experience, and shrines shape the material boundaries of this earthly/heavenly threshold. Building, and especially maintaining, shrines is akin to an open-ended

ritual. There will not be resolution in the traditional sense, and really, this is their genius.

Future scholars would do well to pursue issues I have only just begun to raise in an effort to further complicate the relationships between material culture and liminality. One such field of study that I find particularly compelling and which might be of interest to those in the burgeoning field of religion and cognitive science is relationship between trauma-related illness and material culture. Here, special attention might be paid to people diagnosed with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and other mental states induced by trauma. One tragic, yet interesting symptom of PTSD is the inability to create and synthesize memories. It would be an interesting course of study to discern whether or not mnemonic material culture might aid the memory making process for those without correctly functioning memory mapping systems of the brain. There has been much work in psychology that suggests the inability of cogent memory making for sufferers from such disorders, and which also suggests paths for recovery including journaling, psychotherapy and community building. However, it would be interesting to see if going through ritual memorializing might also offer some comfort and alleviate some of the symptoms of such disorders. Although the bereaved might not be said to be suffering from a clinical disorder, connections can be drawn between their mental states and those of war, abuse and neglect.

As evinced throughout, this work focuses solely on the American context and I have suggested that while there has been a strong surge in the number of shrines

here and that we have had to deal with their cultural and political consequences, other cultures also build roadside shrines and have equally as complicated relationships to them. While I have encountered works on shrines in Norway, Greece, Mexico, Ireland, Spain, Canada, South Africa, Australia and Great Britain, I have not seen studies that create synthetic profiles of different countries' relationships to shrines. Works tend to be hyper-regional, including previous work in the American context. I would find such work extremely valuable as a way of examining the extent of this phenomenon worldwide and also, across borders. There has not been serious transnational study of shrines at all. Transnational studies of material cultural artifacts have done much to illuminate the unique struggles and interests of people on the move and in flux, and I'd encourage work to continue on in this manner. I'd offer my chapter on the American history of shrines as a potential jumping off point for such theoretical investigation.

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