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Trauma remains: The material afterlives of the 1989 Alton school bus crash

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Abstract

This is an essay about how the material *remains* of automobile crashes *remain in place* to give road trauma a performative dimension through material objects. The paper draws on two decades of fieldwork on multiple roadside shrines throughout the American Southwest, but focuses on the site of the 1989 Alton school bus crash, which claimed the lives of 21 junior high and high school students in Alton, Texas, a small town on the border between Texas and Mexico. My analysis focuses on the way the trauma of the crash lives on in the materiality of the site—how it is structured visually, materially, and spatially at the shrine, but also how it is situated in relation to the adjacent intersection, guardrails, and fence, as well as the quarry and city park below. I argue that the shrine ensures not only that lost bodies receive a material afterlife in the form of a commemorative memorial, but also that the trauma of losing those lost bodies takes on a material afterlife in the structure of the site as well. By integrating both of these sets of material afterlives, the shrine becomes capable of translating Alton's collective trauma to a much broader collective made up not only of subsequent generations of Alton residents, but also of anonymous non-residents, forming a vast trauma collective that is stretched across time but always anchored to the materiality of the site.

Keywords

Alton bus crash, collective trauma, material afterlives, material culture, visual culture

Introduction

At 7:34 in the morning of 21 September 1989, moments after picking up the last student from Alton, Texas, a school bus carrying 81 junior high and high school students from their homes in Alton to their schools in nearby Mission, Texas, was broadsided by a

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Dr Pepper soda delivery truck that ran a stop sign at the Southeast corner of the intersection of Bryan Road and Mile 5 Road. The force of the crash knocked the bus off Mile 5 Road, where it fell 30 feet into an abandoned caliche pit located a few feet from the edge of the road. Seconds later, as the bus settled on its side, thick, muddy yellow water flooded in through the bus's narrow and broken windows and pushed against the only emergency exit door, trapping the panicking students inside as the water started to swallow the bus. The students lucky enough to be seated near broken window frames pulled themselves out, grabbing as many of their companions as possible by the hair and clothes along the way, and shot to the surface to breathe. By the time they tried to go back for more, the bus had been engulfed (Belkin, 1989; Carmona, 2019).

News of the crash traveled fast in the town of 3700 on the Texas-Mexico border, where almost every teenager and pre-teen in Alton used the same bus to get to school from their little town to the next bigger town over, and where most of their families' homes were in earshot of the bellowing sirens. Soon, the road above the quarry and the muddy ground around the quarry's edge below were swarming with emergency workers and distraught parents who had heeded the call of the sirens, all frantically trying to get to the children. The parents witnessed the horror of pulling the 81 from the water, almost all of them injured or dead.

Nineteen junior high and high school students from Alton were pronounced dead at the scene, drowned by the milky yellow water that choked them from the inside, and 64 were injured, many rushed to area hospitals. In the days that followed, two others died of their injuries as well, bringing the crash's final death toll to 21. For days afterward, people throughout the Rio Grande Valley drove with their headlights on to honor the dead and show their solidarity with the grieving families. That weekend, Mission High School officials canceled the scheduled football game, a rarity in Texas, and 10,000 people showed up to the memorial service held at the local stadium instead. Thousands also showed up for the funerals (Carmona, 2019).

In the months that followed, the families endured another inundation, as Alton was flooded with personal injury lawyers. By the end, Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Co., the owner of the delivery truck, had paid out a total of $133 million, and Blue Bird Bus Company, the bus manufacturer accused of design flaws, had settled for $23 million (Lemieux, 1994). The influx of money into this formerly poor community of mostly first-generation Latin American immigrants set off trauma echoes that lasted years, as fault lines formed between the families who took the payments of $4.5 million per dead child from Valley Coca-Cola and nearly another $1 million per dead child from Blue Bird and replaced their trailers and weather-beaten border homes with nicer houses and cars, and their neighbors who judged them harshly for doing so (Lemieux, 1994; Carmona, 2019).

Alton was a tight-knit community, where almost every resident was related to or knew not only the kids who died and survived, but also the bus driver, the delivery truck driver, the people who helped with the rescue, and the people who received settlements from the beverage and bus companies. Everyone there also knew the corner of Five Mile and Bryan as part of their everyday landscape. Now they would never be able to look at it or school buses or beverage delivery trucks the same way. Even though the traumatic experience tore the community apart, everything about the event and the aftermath

was experienced collectively in terms of space, time, and culture. As is true of any mass trauma, people reacted differently, but they shared the experience of the traumatic event itself, and that trauma remained with them, in their bodies.

The trauma remained when they had to say goodbye to their surviving kids every morning for the rest of the year and for years to come as they got on a new school bus that passed the crash site on the same route (De Leon, 2019). It remained in the early summer of 1990 and for 8 years after, when everyone watched the graduates of Mission High School honor those who were missing from the list, and the "lucky ones" from Alton graduated with a vow to live their lives to the fullest to honor their lost friends (De Leon, 2019). It remained in 1992, when two of the "lucky" boys who had survived the bus crash died in a different single-car crash, this time with their blood pumping with cocaine and alcohol as they wrapped their fancy new sports car paid for with the settlement money around a tree (Associated Press, 1992). It remained in 2002 when the City of Alton built the Josefa Garcia Municipal Park around the pit, and the crash victims' parents murmured about how disrespectful it was that people were playing and drinking and barbequing at the place where the 21 had died (Carmona, 2019). It remained with them in 2003, when 21 identical palm trees were planted in a memorial butterfly garden at the site of the new Alton Memorial Middle School, when murals and plaques were dedicated inside the building, telling students from a new generation to always "Remember the 21." And it remained with them through all the anniversaries—1999 and 2009 and most recently 2019—when the school was rededicated to mark the 30th anniversary, and a whole new generation of middle schoolers were implored to "Never Forget the 21" (Brezosky, 2009; De Leon, 2019).

For the people of Alton and the surrounding communities, the trauma of 21 September 1989 remained in their bodies at all these moments and remains still in their bodies today in the form of deep trauma scars (Carmona, 2019). However, the trauma was not confined to their bodies. It also became anchored to material things and places at the school, with its series of memorials, and at Valley Memorial Gardens, where many of them were buried. Most of all, the trauma was anchored to an elaborate permanent roadside shrine overlooking the old quarry, at the Northwest corner of Bryan Road and Mile 5 Road, right in the middle of Alton, Texas (see Figure 1).

This is an essay about how the *remains* of Alton's collective trauma have been materialized in that shrine and thus have *remained in place* to give the road trauma that occurred that day a performative dimension through material objects anchored there. Those objects insist on creating and maintaining material afterlives for the lost people violently removed from the flow of time but nonetheless still present in a different form. But they also performatively insist on carrying the trauma itself from the past into the future, where it continues to resonate more than 30 years later.

I first encountered the Alton crash shrine in December 2004 and last returned to the site in August 2022. These visits were part of my larger ongoing photo-ethnographic fieldwork on multiple roadside shrines I have conducted over the last two decades throughout the Southwestern USA. As an interdisciplinary scholar and a photographer, my commitments are to the on-site analysis of the performative, "more-than-representational" (Lorimer, 2005) dimensions of these shrines. My main methodology involves engaging with the "visuality/materiality" (Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2012) of the site in a set of embodied encounters, where, like Danielle Drozdzewski (2018: 245), I use my camera and "my body as a tool for this research" as I move around the site in space and time,

Figure 1. *Bryan Road @ Mile 5 Road, Alton, Texas, USA, August 2022*. Photograph by the author.

sensing the site (Seremetakis, 1994). Wherever possible, I also visit shrines recursively, analyzing the way that shrines materially change over time. In my larger project and specifically with my work on the Alton shrine, my main purpose has been to analyze them as visual, material, and spatial forms of communication that involve multiple collectives in the process of translating road trauma from the bodies of intimates, who already know the trauma, to ever-widening collectives of strangers, who only ever know of the trauma through encountering the visual/materiality of the site.

Here, I will show that although the main purpose of the shrine is to ensure that everyone in Alton will "Remember the 21," once it was placed there at that particular location in the early 1990s, it developed its own folding, unfolding, and refolding of time, space, and material—its own set of material afterlives. My analysis of the shrine focuses on the way the trauma of the community of grief in Alton lives on in the materiality of the site—with how it is structured visually, materially, and spatially at the shrine, but also how it is situated in relation to the intersection of the two roads, the guardrails, the fence, and the quarry and park below. I will argue that the shrine ensures that not only the lost bodies are given a material afterlife in the form of a commemorative memorial, but also that the trauma of losing those lost bodies is given a material afterlife in the structure of the site. By taking on both of these sets of material afterlives, Alton's collective trauma has become capable of being translated to a much broader collective made up not only of subsequent generations of Alton residents not directly affected by the crash, but also of anonymous non-residents, forming a vast collective stretched across time but always anchored to the materiality of the site.

The Alton bus crash site as a roadside shrine

The Alton crash shrine is a massive site—much bigger than any other roadside shrine I have ever seen. It is about 20 m wide, 10 m deep, and 3 m tall (see Figures 1 and 2). It features 21 identical wooden white crosses with the students' names on them and their

Figure 2. *Bryan Road @ Mile 5 Road, Alton, Texas, USA, August 2022*. Composition and photographs by the author.

birth dates and the date of their death rendered in the American abbreviation: 9/21/89. The crosses hang on either side of a vibrantly painted nearly life-size concrete statue of Jesus standing in a concrete pavilion above a monument carved from polished

spotted pink Texas granite, the same kind of granite that covers the state capitol in Austin. Engraved at the top of the granite monument is the date of the crash, "September 21, 1989." Below that are the names of the 21 students, listed in alphabetical order by last name in three columns with seven names each. Just below that is a verse from the New Testament Bible rendered in Spanish first and then English: "Buenaventurados los de corazón limpio, porque ellos verán a Dios. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Matthew 5:8." It is important to note at the outset that the words described in this paragraph are the only words included in the site.

Placed symmetrically on the ground to either side of the monument is a set of large concrete planters filled with colorful silk flowers. The entire shrine is on a raised earthen platform ringed with a set of guardrails and wooden posts. Just behind the chain-link fence at the back of the memorial, the land drops off sharply into the infamous caliche pit below. Looking down into the pit from the height of the shrine, you can see a city park below. That park, the Josefa Garcia Municipal Park, was built in 2002, officially incorporating the shrine as a feature of the park and ensuring that the shrine and park likely will sustain an even more significant material afterlife for the people of Alton long after people forget why the park was built there in the first place (De Leon, 2018).

If you came across the shrine today and saw the durable materials it is made of, you might think that it has been there in the same form since it was established. But a closer look would reveal not only the effects of time on the structure but also evidence of shrine activity that continually updates the site, particularly inside the pavilion, where there are always Mexican and American coins placed at the feet of the Jesus statue. Along the chain-link fence are three smaller shrines for three of the 21 children. They are remnants of an earlier version of the overall shrine, indicating a tension among the families between the desire to create a single collective shrine for all of the children and the desire to create a collection of individual shrines.

Because I have studied the site over the years, I have documented other changes there as well. In the early years of the shrine, the crosses hung directly on the chain-link fence surrounding the pit, built immediately after the crash. Now the crosses hang on a shorter homemade iron rebar fence inserted between the monument and the chain-link fence. Some of the crosses also have rust spots on them, indicating that they used to have metal objects tied to them. The concrete planters on the platform contain silk flowers that are replaced periodically. The guardrails that circle the site have sustained many dents over the years. The intersection that once had two stop signs only on Bryan Road now has full-scale stoplights in all four directions. Finally, the part of Five-Mile Road that runs East-West through the center of Alton is now called Main Street.

The fact that the Alton crash site is located on the roadside instead of down in the caliche pit is absolutely crucial for understanding its material and spatial logic, particularly the way it manifests trauma and the way it produces collectives. Roadside crash shrines are places built by ordinary people to mark the place where someone they know has died in an automobile accident, either while driving cars or motorcycles or being hit by cars as pedestrians, bicyclists, or motorcyclists. Prevalent for decades in the Southwestern U.S. and in Latin America, roadside shrines are now present throughout the USA and around the world (Anaya et al., 1995; Everett, 2002; Bednar, 2020). They

are a distinctive form of “deathscapes” (Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010) that function as both “grassroot memorials” (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, 2011) and “spontaneous shrines” (Santino, 2006), which have proliferated globally since the 1990s.

But while roadside crash shrines are now considered a subset of these other forms, they have a distinct and much older origin that directly impinges on the Alton site, where all of the dead were Hispanic/Latinx. The practice of building and maintaining roadside shrines has been intertwined with many other death practices within Hispanic/Latinx cultures in the borderlands for generations, through practices such as Day of the Dead ceremonies and family rituals for maintaining gravesites (Barrera, 1991; Anaya et al., 1995; Everett, 2002). Catholic Hispanics in the borderlands also have a longstanding practice of placing crosses at the site of violent deaths to serve as the location for ongoing griefwork focused on helping the souls of people who died “bad deaths”— deaths that are not only violent but so sudden that the person dies without the benefit of a priest’s last rites— pass through to heaven. Because these sites were scattered throughout public spaces, they always served two purposes: to mark sites of private grief while also demanding that the whole community witness that process in the everyday landscape they all traversed, which is something that has persisted as the practice of building roadside shrines has spread beyond Hispanic Catholic theological and cosmological frameworks (Barrera, 1991).

Although the Alton site is a roadside shrine, it is an outlier among roadside shrines— first because of its scale and its longevity, and second, because it has essentially been adopted by the city of Alton as a quasi-public memorial, even with its overt religious iconography. The other reason the Alton site is an outlier among roadside shrines is that the Alton bus crash itself has the status of mass trauma, meaning that it happened to a large number of people at the same time and was known by many more people who learned about it via news media at the time and, later, representations of the crash in the book and movie called *The Sweet Hereafter,* as well as numerous YouTube videos made by paranormal sleuths exploring whether the students’ ghosts haunt the site. The Alton bus crash is not as widely known as more familiar mass trauma events from the decade after it, such as the Oklahoma City Bombing, Columbine, or September 11th, which also have permanent memorials or shrines built at the site of the trauma, but both the crash itself and the shrine are very different from most car crashes and roadside shrines, which occur to thousands of relatively anonymous people every year in separate crashes, where the trauma is always experienced locally and can only be felt to be part of a collective trauma conceptually, metaphorically.

Materializing collective traumatic memory

Most of the scholarly work done on the material culture of memorialization has focused on national and civic memorials, where losses are often recuperated into national or civil myths of collective identity to figure losses as sacrifices on behalf of the collective to some larger collective good (Kelly, 1997; White, 1997; Dwyer and Alderman, 2008; Savage, 2009; Doss, 2010; Wells, 2012). However, scholars studying the more personal memorialization of loss in roadside shrines have pointed out that in the absence of a collective narrative frame that might be mobilized to make the loss “mean something,” roadside shrines bring public visibility to personal loss but have difficulty translating that loss

into collective action larger than the politics of public grief, which demand "feeling something," but not much else (Gibson, 2011; Cann, 2014; Bednar, 2013; Rose, 2009).

Unlike other violent deaths that generate spontaneous shrines, such as acts of political violence, police-stop murders, school shootings, and even drunk-driving accidents, most car accidents do not inspire a call for legal justice, much less social justice. Mostly this is because there is not a systematic perpetrator/victim dynamic as there are with these other forms of traumatic violence. Some scholars have argued that street and roadside shrines constitute a "populist reclamation" of public space (Seremetakis, 2016: 78), and there often are implicit inequities at play here in terms of what Judith Butler calls the "differential allocation of grievability" in contemporary societies (Butler, 2004: xiv; Butler, 2009), but without clear systematic injustice beyond that to fight, roadside shrines hardly ever mobilize further collective action (Bednar, 2013). Indeed, this fact itself is one of the things that makes the trauma of a car crash linger at roadside shrines. As Karen Wells (2012) argues, these quiet public displays of grief by ordinary people "are laden with poignancy precisely because they only matter to those for whom the fabric of everyday life has now unraveled" (p. 154).

Astrid Erll (2011) has shown that while individual memories can take myriad forms, all acts of collective remembering require some form of "mediality" (p. 104). Erll defines mediality broadly as the process of externalizing memory outside of the body into and onto material objects, virtual representations, and platforms. This is similar to Alison Landsberg's (2004) concept of "prosthetic memory," whereby experiential media have the potential to give strangers access to memories they did not experience directly in their bodies, just with a much more expansive idea of what constitutes a medium. For Erll, mediality conceived broadly thus includes not only media such as photography, film, writing, sound recording, and the internet, but also monuments, memorials, and even landscapes. As Erll elaborates, "It is only through media in the broadest sense that contents of cultural memory become accessible for the members of a mnemonic community" (2011: 104). Erll suggests that we, therefore "understand media and mediation as a kind of switchboard at work between the individual and collective dimension of remembering" (2011: 113).

While it is true that media, broadly defined, are necessary to extend memory beyond the bodies of individuals, this is particularly the case for traumatic memory. E. Ann Kaplan (2005) argues that trauma produces "a special form of memory" that is structured in dissociation—a separation of the self from conscious experience and thus memory of an event—as the key process that makes traumatic memory function outside the narrative, where it is primarily experienced in the form of unconscious belated, latent, intrusive repetitions (Caruth, 1995; Baer, 2005). Where most communicable memory works in and through representation to be a memory *about* the past, traumatic memory thus emerges and gets performed as a materialization of the trauma itself in the form of "acting-out," where trauma erupts as a compulsory form of materialized action, not technically a memory of or about action.

This is why most scholars have concluded that trauma is more likely to manifest in visual or material forms or performative practices than in explicitly representational linguistic narratives (Baer, 2005; Bennett, 2005; Saltzman and Rosenberg, 2006; Good, 2015). As Kaplan (2005) argues, not only is it true that "most people encounter trauma through the media," but "mediatized trauma" is the main way that trauma can

be shared beyond the bodies that experience it directly. Kaplan has shown how mediatized trauma is used to "translate" trauma from bodies to collectives by performatively presenting (vs. representing) the trauma so that it happens for the spectator when they encounter the translation (2005: 21). Combining Kaplan's perspective with Erll's and Landsberg's, we might say that some experiential form of mediality is necessary for the translation of embodied trauma into "prosthetic trauma."

While they live their lives on the side of the road, roadside shrines not only demonstrate "continuing bonds" (Klass et al., 1996) between mourners and the victims at the site, but also generate what Kathleen Stewart (2010: 343) calls "the actual residue of people 'making something of things'." There, trauma adheres to the objects materialized in working-through it. It *stays there*, functioning simultaneously as an *eruption* of the past into the present and an insistent *interruption* of the present, manifesting trauma's distinctive temporality, where "one experientially feels as if one were back there reliving the event, and distance between here and there, then and now collapses" (LaCapra, 2004: 118). The logic of trauma is the logic of time travel and flashbacks, not a history book. With trauma, something in the present triggers you to sense the presence of the past in the present. In the case of trauma, it emerges in the present not as an integrated narratable version of the past, but as the raw material of the past anachronistically presenting itself to you.

Shrines like the Alton site work the same way: they bring past trauma into the present directly, and in a material form that can only be apprehended by attuning to the way that trauma is manifested there. For me, the shrine conjures Benjamin's (1968: 255) admonition "to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in the present" as a way of relating to the past that defies an understanding of history as something cut off from time, located only in some "back then." At this and other shrine sites, trauma *remains to be seen*, meaning that it persists so that it can be witnessed in the present, but also meaning that it might not be visible or even material unless you know how to look at it. But once you know what you are seeing, you are summoned into a collective—a collective that recognizes that shrines materialize a collective traumatic loss much larger than any single shrine.

The Alton shrine materializes "prosthetic trauma" in its form more than its content. Indeed, the relative silence of the Alton site is exactly what makes it resonate as a place of collective trauma. The site is vibrant, visually, materially, and affectively, but it "says" very little, both because it presumes you already know what it could say, and because, being located in trauma, it doesn't have much it can say, directly. It can only show.

Indeed, what makes material objects in shrines produce "trauma time" is that they function as relics. A relic is not only *from the past*, but makes its anachronistic status materially self-evident by being both *out of place* and *out of time*. The power of relics comes from their recalcitrance—not only from their *persistence* in the present, but also their material *insistence on being present* even after "their time is gone." Gay Hawkins (2009) argues that taking these "leftover" objects seriously can show us "how the life of things, after we are done with them, persists and resists" (p. 161). All of them are, as Hawkins writes, a form of "recalcitrant matter that refuses to go away" (2009: 175).

But shrines, and the objects within them, are not only relics. Roadside shrines form a set of materially and visually evident traumatic *scars* (Bednar, 2020). Each shrine is a scar. Collected together, they give form to a massive collective scar that Americans

have built up for over a century on the roadside like an endlessly replicating palimpsest of traumas that create what Kenneth Foote (2003) calls “shadowed ground.” The scar is an apt figure because a scar is a condensed metaphor for the material afterlife of both trauma and loss. That is, a scar is both a material trace of the original wound *and* the ongoing temporal process of healing from that wound, so that it persists from the past into the present, like other relics.

Yet even as the image of the scar evokes the structure of roadside shrines, the metaphor has its limitations. Most of all, a scar is often seen as evidence of an external assault to an otherwise intact body. But shrines are intentionally built, and the ones that last more than a few weeks are usually built to last. Maybe a better concept metaphor then, especially for sites like the Alton bus crash shrine, is a tattoo.

When the town of Alton built the shrine to the children lost in the bus crash, they intended it to be forever (Carmona, 2019). They wanted it to be like a tattoo on the skin of Alton as a city, keeping the lost alive but also keeping the loss alive. Tattoos are undertaken with an understanding of their permanence. It is true that people can hide tattoos and revise tattoos, mostly by incorporating them into newer, larger tattoos, and sometimes by attempting to remove them. Regardless, the original tattoo remains. Indeed, a tattoo is something deliberately created to be a relic—designed to persist beyond the moment of creation to have a material afterlife into the future. It is exactly that projected permanent afterlife that makes deciding to get one substantial, but also desirable. It is also what allows people to accept the pain of getting a tattoo. Tattoos take work and are painful to endure. They materialize a belief that the future utility of the tattoo outweighs the present pain.

Refusing to leave the site of trauma

In “Trauma and Experience,” Cathy Caruth (199: 9–10) argues that the process of working through trauma produces its own trauma: “for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but the passing out of it that is traumatic, [where] *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*” (emphasis in original). Consequently, “trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site.” Evidence of this process is palpable everywhere at roadside shrines, where you can watch them be born, live, and die—sometimes in the space of weeks, sometimes years. But then there are those recalcitrant places, the ones that won’t go away on their own because people won’t let them die, even if it is clear that they are struggling on the roadside. Their persistence materializes a different truth: that people using these sites refuse to leave the site. The Alton bus crash shrine is such a place.

The people who experienced the trauma of the Alton bus crash directly formed a collective bound by trauma, even as they were also already bound as a different collective in time and space as neighbors with thick ties to one another within Alton. The two collectives collapsed into one for a moment in the early 1990s, when to live there was also to know the trauma experienced there. That time is gone, but the place—and much of the matter—remains, and so too do the material afterlives that connect the present to the past in a series of connected and disconnected presents that add up to a constellation of ongoing collective trauma. Trauma remains at the crash site itself, which still stands

Figure 3. *Bryan Road @ Mile 5 Road, Alton, Texas, USA, December 2004*. Photograph by the author.

there more than 30 years on, resolutely refusing to go away, as a recalcitrant matter, asserting the ongoing presence of the trauma it materializes.

One of the central features of trauma—wherever, whenever, and to whomever, it occurs—is that it generates largely unconscious, compulsive, and repetitious reenactments of itself. Recursive studies of roadside shrines over time show that roadside shrines are sites of repeated pilgrimage—sites where people return again and again as they work to find ways of living with the trauma and ways to "leave the site" behind them. Sometimes it leads to a repetition with a difference, where the trauma itself is legible not only in word and deed, but also in symbolic performances that take the form of material afterlives.

For me, the objects at the Alton site that most effectively, and affectively, constitute its material afterlives are the two large and elaborately decorated molded concrete planters placed on either side of the main Jesus statue (see Figure 3). The planters are painted bright white and always have some sort of flower in them. When I photographed them in December 2004, they featured red silk poinsettias. Subsequent visits have revealed that mourners change the flowers seasonally, but always with silk flowers. The fact that they are continually refreshed, even though they would persist there on the roadside anyway, is a subtle materialization of just how people use this place to make the past present. In December 2004, the poinsettias seemed seasonal. But the poinsettias felt more symbolic than that, especially because their red color is associated with blood, and because they also matched the robe of Jesus at the center of the memorial.

Underneath the poinsettias in the planters were also several living Aloe vera plants. The aloe plants are to me a kind of metonym for the whole site. Aloe is known for its soothing and healing properties, but it is also a succulent with thick, waxy skin, and sharp protective spines that protect its tender interior, the place where the healing gel

Figure 4. *Bryan Road @ Mile 5 Road, Alton, Texas, USA, December 2004 and August 2022.* Composition and photographs by the author.

flows. In the end, the juxtaposition of the poinsettia and the aloe together provides the clearest materialization of the larger trauma that the site mediates: the blood-red artificial and recalcitrant poinsettias combined with the fragile, prickly, yet soothing natural aloe daggers peeking out.

But repetitions abound throughout the site, beyond the poinsettias and aloe. The repetitious structure is of course most apparent in the collection of crosses—each the same and bearing the same death date but with a different name and birthdate. In asserting both individuality and collectivity, the crosses manifest the "collectiveness" of the trauma that occurred there. Each time you see that 9/21/89 date repeated under a new name and a new birthdate is like a new kick in the gut.

In front of the memorial and the fences are also a series of concentric guardrails that echo the repetitious structure of the planters and the crosses (see Figure 4). The guardrails were built after the crash to better separate the road from the quarry below, but they also create a platform for the memorial. The guardrail closest to the memorial is painted white and attached to a low concrete retaining wall, so it is actually part of the main memorial, mirroring once again that dialectic of aesthetics and function present in the planters. The next guardrail outwards from the center is painted school-bus yellow (another repetition), and for many years has carried on its surface a series of scars from errant automobiles that

have crashed into it, evidence that it has served its purpose several times over the years since the crash (yet another repetition). One especially large scar on the yellow guardrail shows that a vehicle hit it at exactly the same trajectory the bus took that morning as it flew into the quarry. This later vehicle hit the guardrail with enough force to bend the rail and uproot two of the wooden posts, but not enough to blast through it entirely.

The concentric guardrails make the whole site feel like a repetition of the multiple, almost redundant, protective layers of the planters. Knowing the trauma the guardrails mark, it is impossible for me not to see them performing an additional trauma in and of themselves. Repetitiously, even excessively, working not only to protect the shrine from other crashes, but also trying to protect cars from going over the edge into the quarry below, they form a material reminder of how the people of Alton have channeled their trauma into working not only to protect the shrine but to prevent anything like the Alton bus crash from ever happening again.

It is curious that while the crosses and the names and the dates and even the Jesus statue have been repainted over the years, the guardrails have neither been repainted nor repaired. The same gashes that I photographed in 2004 on the yellow guardrails are still there today, alongside new ones. The paint is peeling and has been dulled by years of direct southern exposure to the Texas sun. As the scarred guardrails have remained in a place like that for decades, they have given another material form to the traumas located there.

There is another, more subtle repetition here: it does not take a lot of imagination to see that the structure of the shrine looks like a cubist painting of a school bus, where you can simultaneously see the front and both sides of the “bus” (see Figure 1). The central Jesus statue and pavilion look like the front end of a school bus, with Jesus serving as the “driver.” Behind Jesus, the symmetrically arranged and uniform but unique crosses look like student bus riders visible through the side windows of a school bus. That visual echo is materialized not only by the anthropomorphic figuration of each cross, which has a head, arms, and torso, but also by the fact that each cross “stands for” an individual child. The yellow guardrail circling the whole bus structure reinforces the association, especially if you imagine the wooden posts as wheels. So, too, does the scale of the site, which is roughly the same size as a school bus.

Another thing that connects the trauma experienced by the families in Alton even to the strangers driving by today is the quarry, whose thick waters ultimately killed the 21, regardless of all the legal battles over whether the truck owners or the bus manufacturers, the city or the state was to blame. The quarry was a place where for decades before the crash, caliche was extracted. Once it was extracted, it was shipped all over the USA, first by railroad and later by trucks (Carmona, 2019). The reason this particular material was shipped all over the country was that South Texas caliche is a versatile natural cement. When combined with gravel, it creates a caliche roadbase, the sticky substrate that undergirds and binds the pavement not only at the intersection of Bryan Road and Mile 5 Road, but also on most of the roads in America. Sitting there under all those roads, forming the literal foundation of American automobility, is a little bit of Alton.

Finally, the busses that drive by the site today and on the streets and roads of America also do that, just in a more subtle way. That is because in the early 1990s, inspired by the Alton bus crash, laws were passed requiring school buses around the country to have bigger windows as well as emergency exits on the roof and all sides of the bus (Carmona, 2019). That is perhaps

the most profound way that the tragedy has been given a material afterlife: like the yellow caliche that has spread far from Alton, all those safer yellow busses will continue to carry the collective trauma anchored there into the future without anyone knowing it.

Conclusion

Today, the Alton shrine remains at the corner of Mile Five and Bryan like a tattoo working to ensure that the trauma that occurred there in 1989 is given a material afterlife. But it isn't just sitting there. The reason I am calling it a material afterlife is that it is *living* there. Here it is important to notice that tattoos themselves can experience trauma, and be scarred themselves. That is what is happening with the guardrails: the tattoo, inscribed at the place of the original wound, now has its own scars on top of it. It's like a tattoo placed on a scar that has its own scars.

Finally, a tattoo is only as permanent as the body that sustains it. Kill the body and the tattoo dies with it. If the shrine works like a tattoo, it is crucial to notice that the tattoo is changing as the "skin" it is inscribed upon is also changing (see Figure 5). You can see this in the way the memorial is splitting apart, where the granite piece holding the date and the names of the dead is separating from the pavilion containing the Jesus statue. You can see it in the tilt of the pavilion, as it slowly moves toward the pit as the quarry continues to eat the land that the shrine is built upon with each passing rain, leaving parts of the chain-link fence floating in the air.

The fact that the part of the "tattoo" including Jesus is slowly falling into the pit is not incidental here. It is as if God is abandoning their children, the ones whom trauma brought closer to seeing God. If the whole thing falls into the pit one day, and the pit that killed their bodies also kills the memories of their bodies, it would be even more poignant. Time will tell.

Roadside shrines are places where trauma remains. One way to recognize road trauma is to know it in your body, or to talk to people who know, or to read or hear or see mediated stories about people who know. Another way is to study the material afterlives of objects and structures at roadside shrines themselves. When things are placed somewhere for some time for some purpose, their relationship to time becomes inscribed into their matter in the form of material afterlives. There, roadside shrines also *produce* different collectives by materially interpellating strangers into a public made up of other strangers (Warner, 2002).

That is, through their unique material form and location in relation to the road, roadside shrines always interpellate at least two scales of collectives involving strangers. The first scale includes local strangers—especially the subsequent generations of children implored to Remember the 21, and also all subsequent residents of Alton, who live around and with the memorial every day, but also around and with people with embodied memories of the event and the aftermath, including the decades of communicative memories generated by intimates. The second scale includes the broader set of strangers driving by or seeing mediated representations of the shrine. This is a *collective of strangers*, each of whom has something in common with the other strangers seeing the shrine and knowing that someone is showing them that their trauma is present here now, not just "over there" or "back then." That broader collective trauma is not the same as the

Figure 5. *Bryan Road @ Mile 5 Road, Alton, Texas, USA, August 2022*. Composition and photographs by the author.

collective trauma that remains for the friends and family of the victims, but it is a collective trauma nonetheless, and it is best understood by studying trauma remains—the material instantiation of afterlives of lost bodies but also of afterlives of the trauma of losing those bodies.

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