

7 Denying Denial

Trauma, Memory, and Automobility at Roadside Car Crash Shrines

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In an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, Paul Virilio proposes building what he calls a “Museum of Accidents” to demonstrate that accidents are intrinsic to contemporary technological systems of social organization.¹ Virilio says that “Each invention creates the possibility of a specific failure”: the train creates the derailment; the ship creates the shipwreck; the airplane creates the plane crash; and the car creates the car crash.² As Virilio sees it, the problem is that these accidents are coded as anomalies in an otherwise functioning system, which has the effect of containing the accident as an aberration—an abject disruption of the system instead of part of the system itself—“something that shouldn’t have happened and would take everyone by surprise.”³ The Museum of Accidents would not only commemorate accidents as “integral” to a technological society but also be organized experientially so that visitors to the museum would have to *perform* the accident in some sense as they move through the museum. Virilio argues that a Museum of Accidents is necessary because “the accident has to be *exposed*, to play on words: exposing oneself to accident or exposing the accident. The major accident is the Medusa of modernity. To look Medusa in the face, you have to use a mirror. Its face has to be turned around, and this is the aim of the Museum of Accidents.”⁴ If such a Museum were created, Virilio says, the accident might begin “to have a place in history, through its memory”; it might begin “to have a place not simply as an accident, but as an element that runs parallel to positivity.”⁵

I would like to suggest that a version of Virilio’s Museum of Accidents already exists, but not exactly in the form he articulates. The Museum is not located in a singular place that archives and curates displays of accidents to the public through some institutional apparatus officially designated with the power to do so. Instead, the Museum is radically dispersed and collectively authored. Like Virilio’s Museum, it hails visitors through complex dynamics of mirroring and distancing that expose the accident to viewers and expose the connections between the viewer and the accident. Most important, it is even more “experiential” than Virilio’s vision of a Museum, taking the “museum” to visitors out there

on the roads and streets of the automotive landscape where car accidents themselves occur, emplacing it in such a way as to make accidents visible right next to cars and drivers going about the business of automobility, where people encounter evidence of the “negative” fatal accident while performing the “positive” of autonomous mobility.

I am speaking of roadside car crash shrines, vernacular memorial assemblages built by private individuals at sites where family and friends have died in automobile accidents, either while driving cars or motorcycles or being hit by cars as pedestrians, bicyclists, or motorcyclists. Prevalent for decades in Latin America and in the American Southwest, roadside car crash shrines are now seen throughout the U.S. and around the world. Some are simply small white crosses, almost silent markers of deathsites; others are elaborate collections of objects, texts, and materials from all over the map culturally and physically, all significantly brought together not in the home or in a cemetery but on the roadside, in drivable public space, a space of what Raymond Williams has called “mobile privatization”: a public space where private individuals perform private identities, together.⁶

Every year in the U.S., around 40,000 people die and over two million people are injured in some of the more than six million car crashes reported to the police. The numbers have trended downwards for the last thirty years, with a peak of nearly 55,000 reached in 1973.⁷ Even with the

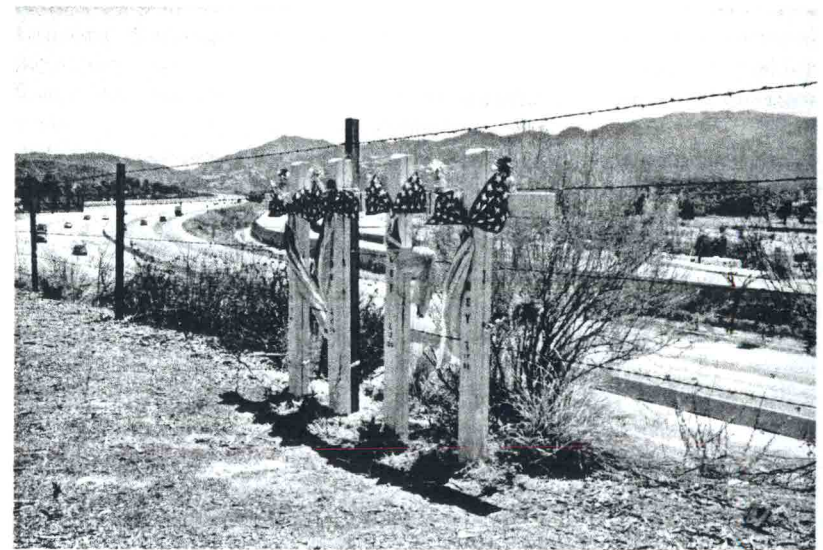


Figure 7.1 Soledad Canyon Road, South of Palmdale, California, 2006. Photo by author.

downward trend, though, those are enormous numbers. Indeed, the car crash haunts automobility—with its spectral presence hiding in the light, embedded throughout automobile culture—and car crash shrines are only one of its ghosts.⁸ The car as ruin is encoded into its very form: we see the end game of the car crash inscribed into cars in the form of bumpers, seat belts, air bags, etc., and in the roadscape in the form of crash barriers. Unable to prevent car crashes, the culture is focused instead on minimizing their impact.

But while both a car's bumper and its chassis are designed to absorb and distribute the energy of the crash, and crash barriers are designed to do the same, there is no institutionally legitimated cultural technology to do the same thing for the people involved in car crashes—and no large-scale cultural practice of memorializing car crash deaths, no means of generalizing the trauma, no way of “translating the energy” of the crash into a politically significant process of public memory. Instead, the cultural work of remembering people killed in and by cars is left to individuals—sometimes individuals working within state-sponsored memorial programs, but more likely individuals constructing roadside shrines on their own.⁹

Perhaps it is fitting that the car crash, the spectacular end to a life of radically individual automobility, is figured individually as well, but the result is that as a form of cultural memory, roadside shrines are so idiosyncratic, so dispersed, and so diffused that they are difficult to perceive as a collectivity. Embedded as they are in someone else's territory, unable to police their own boundaries, heavily regulated and actually illegal in many states, and unable to make themselves officially known as public memories, they each fight their way into the collective consciousness, one by one.

The purpose of this chapter is to “collect” roadside car crash shrines by situating them within a dynamic of interlocking contemporary discourses—trauma, memory, automobility—where the dispersed and individual acts of road trauma, memorializing road trauma, *and* experiencing other people's acts of memorializing road trauma all mirror each other as they intersect on the road. My work here is based on mobile fieldwork I have been conducting for the last eight years, where I have been visiting this “museum” by traveling throughout the American Southwest looking for shrines, photographing them, and writing about their importance in contemporary U.S. culture.¹⁰ Most of the work by other scholars studying roadside shrines has worked to show what roadside shrines mean to the people who build, maintain, and use them, establishing that the primary function of roadside shrines is to create a both a performative space for memory and mourning and a potential warning to other drivers to pay attention to the shrines to avoid their fate.¹¹ But I am more interested here in how roadside shrines work as collective memory forms for the rest of us—the drivers who drive past the shrines, for whom these deaths are anonymous and for whom the wrenching stories of traumatic loss, grief, and mourning are invisible. We “know” there *is* a story, but we do not “remember” the story itself. What

we have instead are the shrines themselves: a collection of dispersed visual, material, and spatial forms we encounter on the roadside.

I argue that roadside car crash shrines remember trauma through a visual/material form that, like trauma itself, intrudes upon the everyday spaces in which they are located. As crash shrines memorialize private individuals in public space, they embody both a refusal to accept car crash deaths as collateral damage within automobility and an affective reminder to other drivers that the everyday traumas of automobility are not only individual traumas, but part of a collective trauma. The best way to see this spatially-defined dynamic operating is to place roadside car crash shrines not only within the discourses of trauma, memory, and memorialization, but also within the discourse of automobility. There, it becomes clear that when the family and friends of crash victims build shrines in the public right-of-way to help them work through their own traumas, these shrines also form a kind of vicarious trauma witnessed by other drivers. Passing drivers may not know what happened at the site, but seeing the shrine, they will clearly know that a death occurred, making space for a quiet but palpable recognition that the everyday traumas experienced within automobility are not a by-product of automobility but are instead central to its functioning.¹²

As spatially anchored stories of loss and defiance that transform a personal trauma into a public trauma, roadside shrines to car accident victims give visual, material, and spatial form to private memories that would otherwise be lost, ignored, or invisible. As such, they constitute a distinctive kind of memory with a distinctive kind of collective, and my analysis of them will contribute to the ongoing work of scholars of visual culture, material culture, and critical cultural geography engaged in understanding spatially anchored visual and material public memory forms. In performing and embodying memory visually and materially, shrines work against the personal and cultural acts of denial that allow drivers to step into their cars every day *knowing* that they could die at any moment but *believing* that it would never happen to them. In short, they deny denial. And seen this way, roadside car crash shrines start to look a lot like Virilio's Museum of Accidents.

ROAD TRAUMA AND CULTURAL MEMORY

The dominant model of trauma in trauma studies, derived from the work of Freud and associated with contemporary theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Bessel Van Der Kolk, and Onno Van Der Hart, emphasizes dissociation. Trauma separates the self from the conscious cognitive experience of and thus the memory of a traumatic event, which makes traumatic memory function outside narrative, living in the affective realm, where it is primarily experienced in belated, latent, intrusive repetition.¹³ As Roger Luckhurst argues, the traumatic subject, both individual and cultural, is “dispersed

'horizontally' in various forms of dissociation. It cannot remember itself to itself; it has no cohesive narrative."¹⁴ Consequently, as Ann Kaplan writes, because trauma does not produce narrative memory and "because the traumatic experience has not been given meaning, the subject is continually haunted by it in dreams, flashbacks, and hallucinations."¹⁵ The goal of trauma therapy is then to "work-through" trauma to bridge that gap of dissociation so that the subject can not only "remember itself to itself," but also communicate that memory to others.

This understanding of trauma originated in psychoanalytic theory and practice, where it was first applied in individual psychotherapy. But trauma scholars also have applied this model to understand collective forms of trauma such as war, genocide, forced migration, and natural disasters as well, developing a body of work particularly concerned with the role of collective trauma in both the need for and struggle over cultural memory.¹⁶ The question here is: if a group of people experiences trauma, does it produce a similar dissociative process that shapes how that trauma is remembered and communicated? Does the memory of large-scale cultural trauma take the form of intrusive "dreams, flashbacks, and hallucinations" as well? More recently, scholars analyzing the news media coverage of events like September 11th also have argued that the *mediated* collective experience of trauma takes similar forms as it is incorporated into cultural memory. For example, Alison Landsberg characterizes the shared memory of mediated events as a form of "prosthetic memory."¹⁷ Similarly, Ann Kaplan applies the terms "secondary trauma" and "vicarious trauma"—terms originally used by psychotherapists to describe the traumas therapists experience as they help their clients work through trauma—to contemporary media audiences' experiences of trauma through television, film, and photojournalism.¹⁸

My work on shrines seeks to bring together these two strands within trauma studies—the study of direct individual experiences of large-scale trauma and the study of vicarious witnessing of trauma—to theorize roadside shrines as isolated, individual material forms of vicarious trauma memories of an otherwise large-scale trauma dispersed throughout the material and cultural landscape. A single car crash is immensely traumatic to the people directly involved, and friends and family members who build shrines create a shared space for mourning through the shrine. But what about for those of us driving by? How is road trauma shared publicly, and what kind of collective is formed through that sharing? How is it similar to and different from other forms of traumatic collective memory?

When individual traumatic memories of road deaths are shared in public, the act of sharing them opens up a potential space for connection through the experience of vicarious trauma. In this, they are like other "public" traumas. For instance, Roger Luckhurst argues that when traumatic subjects form a collective, it is a potentially intense but always also contingent, fragile, and effervescent public, built on what he calls "temporary

communalities."¹⁹ However, the trauma represented by roadside shrines is both unlike the sustained, collective, and catastrophic trauma of war, genocide, or forced migration *and* unlike the equally dispersed but more distanced experience of audiencing trauma through media technologies.

The kind of memory performed at roadside shrines could be seen as a form of intrusive familial remembrance of transgenerational knowledge of trauma at a cultural scale, the kind that has been theorized as "post-memory" in Holocaust studies and as "re-memory" in diaspora studies. Marianne Hirsch uses the term "post-memory" to describe the ways that the transgenerational memory of the Holocaust is lived as an embodied memory for the descendants of Holocaust victims.²⁰ Ann Kaplan notes that "in transgenerational trauma subjects are haunted by tragedies affecting their parents, grandparents, or ancestors from far back without conscious vicarious trauma."²¹ Likewise, Divya Tolia-Kelly, writing about the domestic shrines of British Asian women, calls such embodied experiences of diffused private/public memories "re-memories."²² Tolia-Kelly defines re-memory as "a form of synthesized embodied heritage" that is stimulated by material sights, sounds, scents and textures and felt as "an intimate resonance with past narratives of others' not known"—a visceral personal memory even for people without direct personal experience of the people, places, and things the memory represents.²³

Road traumas can certainly generate transgenerational post-memories and re-memories as their stories are translated through family stories and family rituals, but for strangers it would work differently. Roadside shrines establish this same kind of diffused, indirect relationship between the traumas they represent and the people driving by them who witness them, but ultimately, the public trauma represented in car crash shrines is most like the kinds of "everyday traumas" recently engaged in the recent work of Ann Cvetkovich and Kathleen Stewart. Cvetkovich has collected an analysis of lesbian "sites of trauma" into "an archive of feelings," which allowed her to identify and explore "a sense of trauma connected to the textures of everyday experience," where "affective experience can provide the basis for new cultures."²⁴ Cvetkovich shows how trauma texts—and the act of collecting dispersed trauma texts—can create temporary affective affiliations that can be used to both break through existing collectives and form new collectives. Likewise, Kathleen Stewart collects everyday acts that seek to create at least a temporary "we-feeling." Such an "ordinary affect . . . permeates politics of all kinds with the demand that some kind of intimate public of onlookers recognize something in a space of shared impact. If only for a minute."²⁵

A roadside shrine is just such a momentary "space of shared impact," where drivers speeding by a shrine are presented with intrusive cultural flashbacks of vicarious traumas that pertain directly to the activity they are presently embarked upon: driving a car through the spaces of automobility.

Shrines form a dispersed material “archive” of traumatic experiences within the public right of way that, as Stewart puts it, “demand that some kind of intimate public of onlookers recognize something.”²⁶ Like the affiliations focused on everyday trauma that Cvetkovich studies, shrines are mediations of trauma that themselves take the form of traumatic memory—intrusive, affective, visual, material—and do so not just for the people who knew and loved those who died at the site, but also for the rest of us who drive past them. If the shrines were not located on the roadside, they would not work the same way at all, for as Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey write, when a site of accidental death is actively performed and commemorated in public space, the site “materializes memories,” and the original space of the trauma itself plays a critical role in the process.²⁷

Roadside shrines are an intrusive presence in the roadscape, an affective reminder of the everyday traumas of automobility. But they are also affective reminders that we are living in denial because we appear to *need* denial about the prevalence and immanence of automobile deaths. There they sit, these silent witnesses to another reality that won’t go away, no matter what we may wish, reminding us to remember that we forget. As individual shrine builders heal through repeating their encounter with the affective memory embodied in the shrine site, they bring the trauma to the rest of us, giving us an intrusive traumatic memory for us to work through in a different way. Together, they comprise an embodied, material refusal to either ignore car crash deaths or accept car crash deaths as a matter of course. Together, they deny denial by performing a “Museum of Accidents” on the roadside, where drivers driving by them are forced to experience them as something intimately connected with their own mobility.

TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND AUTOMOBILITY

Roadside car crash shrines are part of a wider worldwide phenomenon: something that folklorist Jack Santino calls “spontaneous shrines.”²⁸ With roots reaching deeply and widely through many different cultural traditions, shrines to people who die suddenly in car accidents, murders, and political violence have proliferated in recent years. Consider Oklahoma City, Princess Diana, the Space Shuttle Columbia, Columbine, September 11th, and others. All spontaneous shrines aim to “make sense of senseless deaths”—deaths made surprising in a socio-cultural context where we “have gained such control over death that we now expect to die only of old age.”²⁹ Spontaneous shrines memorialize “unanticipated violent deaths of people who do not fit into categories of those we expect to die, who may be engaging in routine activities in which there is a reasonable expectation of safety.”³⁰

Like roadside shrines, all spontaneous shrines are located not in cemeteries but within those spaces of everyday life where the unexpected deaths

occurred—on roadside rights-of-way, sidewalks, fences, buildings, etc. Jack Santino argues that spontaneous shrines “insert and insist upon the presence of absent people”—they “place deceased individuals back into the fabric of society, into the middle of areas of commerce and travel, into everyday life as it is being lived.”³¹ Indeed, Santino calls them “performative commemoratives,” and argues that because they occur in the public sphere, spontaneous shrines are both commemorative (dedicated to sustaining the memory of individuals and events) and performative (meant to “make something happen”—to materially transform the space of the event, the significance of an event, and anyone who interacts with the site).³² The clearest example of this is when a spontaneous shrine performatively commemorates a singular violent event with manifest (though not monolithic) cultural significance, such as the World Trade Center explosions, which produced a “Ground Zero” serving as the locus for negotiating cultural memory.³³ The question then is what role space plays in more dispersed traumas such as the car crash, which works on an entirely different scale.

If the spatial anchorage of all spontaneous shrines is inseparable from what they do and how they do it, the space where roadside car crash spontaneous shrines exist is particularly important. Instead of being contained in a finite time and space where it can be celebrated, suppressed, managed, or ignored, affective traumatic memory intrudes upon consciousness, demanding an embodied experience of trauma right there, right then, all over again. And this is just like a roadside shrine, which is not only a materialization of the trauma of the individuals involved in that specific shrine, but a materialization of the larger *social* and *cultural* trauma associated with cars and car culture—the trauma of unassimilated, abject deaths with nowhere to go. Roadside car crash shrines can be consciously or unconsciously ignored, but once they do register with drivers, they work to represent and perform vicarious trauma—an intrusive, repetitive reminder of the trauma of others that simultaneously *speaks to* and *speaks of* automobility as it *speaks out of* automobility.

Here I am drawing on Jill Bennett’s distinction between affective memory and narrative memory. Where narrative memory works in and through linguistic representation to be *about* a memory, affective memory is where “affective experience is not simply referenced, but activated or staged in some sense” by a process of “registering and producing affect,” which produces “not so much a *speaking of* but *speaking out of* a particular memory or experience.”³⁴ In this moment of contact between bodies that feel memories, even strangers potentially can feel another’s pain as their own, not in an act of colonization of the other or even of projection of sameness, but just the opposite: feeling another’s pain as a wound that ruptures the subject/object split instead of as the distanced pain of a contained other; it is “the point at which one both feels and knows feeling to be the property of an other.”³⁵ Roadside shrines create memory spaces that can work on strangers as they work for intimates, and their location on the side of the

road, where they can speak of and speak from automobility at the same time, opens a space not only for memory, but for recognition.

In this case, recognition is necessary to both revealing *and* mitigating structural forgetting. Erika Doss argues that spontaneous memorials are part of a larger contemporary “memorial mania” in the U.S.—a kind of “manic” and “excessive” compulsion to memorialize ordinary life in “visibly public contexts” that reveals a culture with an anxious relationship to time, history, and memory.³⁶ This is a point Marita Sturken also makes in *Tourists of History*, where she argues that the “surprise” of events like the Oklahoma City bombing and the 9/11 terrorist attacks is in part attributable to the prevailing attitude towards history and public memory in the contemporary U.S.³⁷ However, while I also see roadside car crash shrines representing these larger contemporary cultural discourses about trauma, death, and memory, I think it is even more important to locate shrines specifically and concretely within the discourse of automobility, which produces an additional layer of structural forgetting of everyday trauma in the U.S.

Part of this structural forgetting is due to the nature of road deaths themselves. Roadside car crash shrines are distinguished not only by their intimate spatial connection to automobility but also in the fact that they often memorialize local deaths of relatively unknown people—the kinds of deaths that hardly make the local papers, much less around-the-clock cable news coverage. Where some violent deaths can be made meaningful as cultural sacrifices by using spontaneous shrines to recuperate private deaths within discourses of nation and citizenship, the deaths of ordinary people who die in car crashes resist sense-making at the national, global, or even local scale. As Gregory Ulmer argues, this is because “traffic fatalities are fundamentally ‘object’”: if they perform a cultural sacrifice on behalf of some larger cultural value, that value “remains inarticulate, within the bodies and behaviors of individuals in the private sphere, untransformed, nontranscendent, unredeemed.”³⁸ In the absence of some larger public apparatus designed to shift each act of memory from “the sphere of one-at-a-time individual personal loss to the public sphere of collective identity,” individual mourners remembering road deaths are left to take matters into their own hands.³⁹ But it is more than that. The very feature that gives a roadside shrine its material affect—its unique spatial relationship to a site of trauma—is the thing that keeps car crash memorial practices dispersed, and thus mitigates seeing them as a collective. Shrine builders consistently maintain that the site of death is central to the practice of building car crash shrines, mostly because shrine builders tend to see the sites not as death sites, but as “last alive” sites.⁴⁰ Moving the memorial elsewhere would negate the shrine’s function as a spatially unique portal between the living and the dead, where mourning intervenes in the site of trauma.

Ubiquitous but dispersed, roadside shrines do not cohere in time or space to seem like anything more than a statistical (as opposed to a cultural)

collective. One of the purposes of my larger study of car crash shrines, then, has been to build my own archive—to perform my own act of collective witnessing of road trauma so that I can then share it with others, as I am doing in this chapter. This is a goal I share with Jennifer Clark, who takes a similar approach in her study of roadside shrines in Australia and New Zealand. Clark argues that roadside shrines represent “the only way to register and put into public debate repeated road death as the disturbing outcome of automobility”; and even then, they exist as “an accumulation of small crashes” that have “the numbers” but not “the purpose” to elevate them or collect them into a palpable group.⁴¹ Learning to see shrines “can challenge us to broaden our idea of motoring heritage” to include the “dark side” of the cultural history of the automobile and car culture into a collective heritage, or cultural memory, of both the benefits and costs of automobile-centered mobility.⁴²

As a form of memory, car crash shrines are as quiet as they are ubiquitous. Experienced as they are by most people as small features of a striated landscape flying by outside the windshield or window, they can’t hope to “say” much beyond their materiality. Compared to other more official and elaborate forms of cultural memory such as statuary, historical markers, named buildings, streets, etc., a roadside shrine is particularly mute. But it does carry a certain power—the power of “spatially anchored” material self-evidence.⁴³ Indeed, the material situatedness of a roadside shrine—its location at or near the location where someone died on the road—is its primary claim for authority, forming the foundation of the self-evident material appeal to undeniability it makes upon passers-by: here, right where the shrine is, something terrible happened, and this shrine simultaneously represents and performs that fact. This material self-evident appeal carries with it other implicit appeals: This should not have happened; I do not accept this as a matter of course; I will not allow you to ignore it either; by building this shrine where I have, I am making my personal story public; I refuse to forget, and I refuse to let you forget either. In short, in addition to their explicit communication, they “say”: don’t let *this* happen to you or someone who loves you or someone you love—where “this” is not only the crash and the death but also the materially present grief and anguish that drives the construction of the shrine itself. And this is exactly where the memory politics of roadside shrines are located. For if they demand recognition of private loss in public, they also attempt to make their own grief public, to demonstrate their own attempts at sighting memory.

But in actively working to sight memory, roadside shrines are a material reminder not only of memory but of a structured forgetting. Kenneth Foote argues that the American landscape is “shadowed ground,” repeatedly inscribed, erased, and re-inscribed with acts of violence and tragedy, some of which are remembered extensively and many others which are forgotten—either through intentional suppression or by the slow erosion of neglect.⁴⁴ The unspoken, invisible past traumas of car crashes haunt

the landscape of roadside America and the people who drive through it. Sometimes the materializations of these “shadows” are faint and easy to ignore, as in the ubiquitous but barely visible figures of the dented guardrail and the tree scar throughout the roadscape, or in the material history of past crashes inscribed in the dented bodies of vehicles driving alongside you on the road. When there is not a shrine to materially perform a memory of a death to passers-by, the roadscape can sometimes still remember the crash—contained in these even more subtle material reminders. The sites carry their memories more like a large-gauge wire is said to have a tensile memory: as a material representation and performance of its traumatic reshaping, with only limited access for passers-by to narratives about how or why the reshaping has occurred.

When these materializations of past crashes are incorporated into a larger shrine site—especially when they are accompanied by other material traces of the crash itself, such as burn patterns, skid marks, police outlines, and the ruins of crashed cars—tree scars, bent guardrails, and smashed car parts become spatial anchors that further materialize the traumatic content and form of a roadside shrine by *speaking out of* the material of the crash itself instead of *speaking of* the crash. Then, the shrine site becomes what Pierre Nora calls a “*lieu de memoire*”—a particular space where memory

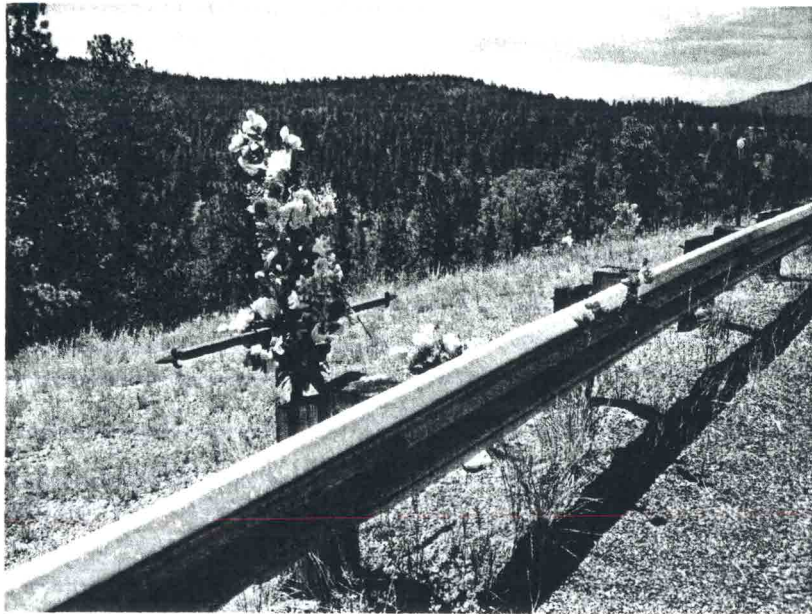


Figure 7.2 US Highway 64, Carson National Forest, West of Tres Piedras, New Mexico, 2003. Photo by author.

both “crystallizes and secretes itself” in material form through multiple visual, material, and spatial means.⁴⁵ However, unlike Nora’s sites, shrine sites do not appear to be always already *national* sites. They remember citizens without a clearly collective identity in a space that by itself makes no apparent claim to collectivity as well.

Jörg Beckmann argues that “automobility ‘works,’ because its accidents are denied. Collective denial enables individual mobility.”⁴⁶ In a system where drivers’ rights to autonomous mobility are not structured as conscious choices but are experienced as naturalized, taken-for-granted citizenship rights, the naturalizing of automobility in general and driving as a performative practice is dependent on denying the risks to self and others implied in the system from the beginning. Beckmann reasons that “if it wasn’t the subject of denial, the wreck would simply be left in the ditch, as a testament to the dangerous aspects of driving along that particular stretch of road”—as a kind of *memento mori* displaying the risks of driving to discipline its drivers.⁴⁷ Each time an accident scene is “cleansed” by police, EMS, and road crews, the evidence of the risk of driving is materially denied. By rendering evidence of the lack of safety invisible, the crash clean-up not only reasserts the discourse of safety but facilitates the discourse of automobility by reinforcing the structured forgetting of the everyday traumas embedded in automobility.⁴⁸

However, this “cleansing” of road crashes does leave its own traces in the roadscape. At some shrine sites, the deathsite is not only represented by a shrine but also by markings on the road and roadside placed there by police investigators: spray-painted outlines of vehicles where they came to rest, spray-painted skid paths, and the resonant letters “POI,” or Point of Impact. One day these markings will fade, but their presence is a clear reminder not only that a car crash happened, but also that it was significant enough to mobilize the state apparatus around building a theory of cause, effect, and blame. They remind us that an investigated car crash encodes a different kind of public memory: the official determination of personal responsibility and innocence represented in the police report, which, along with parallel insurance company investigations, seeks to render a public interpretation of the crash—especially when there are criminal and civil charges at stake. But this is not the kind of public I have in mind when I say that car crashes have the potential to form new collective memories. Indeed, the process of officially determining or denying responsibility is the most forceful neoliberal form of re-privatizing of death that can happen in the case of a car crash: whether through absolution or conviction of individual drivers, the official determination of cause always lets the culture off the hook.

PRESENTING MEMORY

Roadside shrines are places where strangers visually and materially encounter an “intimate resonance” of the person who died *and* the people who

build and maintain the shrines.⁴⁹ Whatever else you know, you know that they were here, right where you drive by or where you stand—that they died here or they constructed a shrine here. The shrine provides material evidence of both. In this way, roadside shrines, *by their very presence in the public right of way* (and even more by their form and their content), inscribe the past in the present, the sacred in the profane, the private in the public. As they do, they bring the politics of affect into the discourse of automobility, challenging drivers to remember that the risks of automobility are inscribed into the apparatus itself.

Given this inscription, it is important to recognize that a car crash reveals both the breakdown *and* the apotheosis of automotive sociality—the collision of simultaneity that demands exchange, a crash of previously dispersed individual realities colliding into one another, a breakdown of one system and a breakthrough of another. And a shrine speaks of, to and from this dynamic, registering both a belief in and a betrayal by automobility: their location on the roadside presupposes that people in automobiles will see them in roadspace, which itself presupposes continuing automobility. As such, roadside shrines inscribe the landscape with affective, traumatic memory sites where memories intrude on our lives as drivers of public space unexpectedly, without us asking for them to do so, and they come in an evocative form, a visual/material/spatial form that shares with the language of dreams an iconicity that communicates visually and materially in excess of their explicit messages. Roadside car crash shrines take the “Museum of Accidents” to the accident sites themselves. They remind us that the trauma occurred, and they do so in a material context contiguous with the original context of the death.

For even if we do not know the narrative details, shrines on the side of the road insure that we remember that people die on the highways doing the exact thing we are doing when we see them: driving, going about the business of living everyday lives, believing in reaching a projected destination—believing, in short, that the future exists. After all, we can see the future up ahead, through the windshield, and we are driving into it, performing freedom and autonomy. But then again, the shrines are there to remind us that other drivers were doing the same thing when they died as well.

NOTES

1. Sylvère Lotringer and Paul Virilio, *The Accident of Art*, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotexte, 2005). For a more extensive engagement of Virilio, acceleration and car accidents, see Arnar Árnason, Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson, and Tinna Grétarsdóttir, “Acceleration Nation: An Investigation Into the Violence of Speed and the Uses of Accidents in Iceland,” *Culture, Theory & Critique* 48 (2007): 199–217.
2. Lotringer and Virilio, *The Accident of Art*, 103.
3. *Ibid.*, 98.
4. *Ibid.*, 102; italics in original.

5. *Ibid.*, 96.
6. Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (London: Hogarth Press, 1983), 187–89.
7. See National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, “Traffic Safety Facts: 2008 Traffic Safety Annual Assessment—Highlights.” Retrieved June 16, 2009 from <http://www.nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/811172.pdf>.
8. While car crashes may be “hard to see” within spaces of automobility, they are continually rehearsed—even fetishized—in cinema and television. See Mikita Brotzman, ed. *Car Crash Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); and Paul Newland, “Look Past the Violence: Automotive Destruction in American Movies,” *European Journal of American Culture* 28 (2009): 5–20.
9. In the U.S., several states offer individual survivors the option of purchasing an official state-produced sign that memorializes crash victims. For example, where I live, in Texas, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) has a Memorial Sign Program that allows survivors of victims of “impaired driving” fatalities to pay to have official “Please Don’t Drink and Drive” signs installed at the site of a fatal crash. The survivors must apply to be considered for such a sign, and program guidelines also explicitly stipulate that “An impaired driver is not eligible for a Memorial Sign.” Accessed July 10, 2009, http://www.txdot.gov/public_involvement/memorial_program.htm. This is clear example of the necropolitics of road death memorialization, where states use their control over the roads to make some road deaths more abject than others. When the state determines that a car crash death is abject, the road death is institutionally forgotten. See Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 11–40.
10. See Robert M. Bednar, “Touching Images: Towards a Visual/Material Cultural Study of Roadside Shrines,” *Brown Working Papers in the Arts & Sciences*, Southwestern University, 7 (2007), <http://www.southwestern.edu/academic/bwp/vol7/bednar-vol7.pdf>, accessed June 29, 2009; Robert M. Bednar, “Making Space on the Side of the Road: Towards a Cultural Study of Roadside Car Crash Memorials,” in *The World Is a Text: Writing, Reading and Thinking About Culture and its Contexts*, vol. 3, eds. Jonathan Silverman and Dean Rader (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2009), 497–508, available online; <http://www.southwestern.edu/~bednarb/roadside Memorials>, accessed June 29, 2009; and Robert M. Bednar, *Road Scars: Trauma, Memory, and Automobility* (forthcoming).
11. See Rudolfo Anaya, Denise Chavez, and Juan Estevan Arellano, *Descansos: An Interrupted Journey* (Albuquerque: El Norte Publications, 1995); Alberto Barrera, “Mexican-American Roadside Crosses in Starr County,” in *Hecho en Tejas: Texas-Mexican Folk Arts and Crafts*, ed. Joe S. Graham (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1997), 278–92; Bednar, “Making Space on the Side of the Road”; Jennifer Clark, “Challenging Motoring Functionalism: Roadside Memorials, Heritage and History in Australia and New Zealand,” *The Journal of Transport History* 29 (2008): 23–43; Jennifer Clark and Ashley Cheshire, “R.I.P.: A Comparative Study of Roadside Memorials in New South Wales, Australia and Texas, USA,” *Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying* 35 (2003–2004): 229–48; Jennifer Clark and Majella Franzmann, “‘A Father, a Son, My Only Daughter’: Memorializing Road Trauma,” *RoadWise* 13 (2002): 4–10; Jennifer Clark and Majella Franzmann, “Authority From Grief: Presence and Place in the Making of Roadside Memorials,” *Death Studies* 30 (2006): 579–99; Charles Collins and Charles Rhine, “Roadside Memorials,” *Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying* 47 (2003): 221–44; Holly Everett, *Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas

- Press, 2002); Sylvia Grider, "Roadside Crosses: Vestiges of Colonial Spain in Contemporary New Mexico," in *Descansos: The Sacred Landscape of New Mexico*, ed. Joan E. Alessi (Santa Fe: Fresco Fine Art Publications, 2006), 11–28; Kate V. Hartig and Kevin M. Dunn, "Roadside Memorials: Interpreting New Deathscapes in Newcastle, New South Wales," *Australian Geographical Studies* 36 (1998): 5–21; Rebecca Kennerly, "Getting Messy: In the Field and at the Crossroads With Roadside Shrines," *Text/Performance Quarterly* 22 (2002): 229–60; Mirjam Klaassens, Peter Groote, and Paulus P. P. Huigen, "Roadside Memorials From a Geographical Perspective," *Mortality* 14 (2009): 187–20; Anna Petersson, "Swedish Offercast and Recent Roadside Memorials," *Folklore* 120 (2009): 75–91; Jon K. Reid and Cynthia L. Reid, "A Cross Marks the Spot: A Study of Roadside Death Memorials in Texas and Oklahoma," *Death Studies* 25 (2001): 341–56.
12. My work on automobility is situated in a larger body of work on the "discourse of automobility." For an introduction to the field of automobility studies, see Mike Featherstone, "Automobilities: An Introduction," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (2004): 1–24. See also Mimi Sheller and John Urry, "The City and the Car," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24 (2000): 737–57; Sheller and Urry, eds., *Mobile Technologies of the City* (London: Routledge, 2006); John Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities For the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2000); John Urry, *Mobilities* (London: Polity Press, 2007); Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (London: Routledge, 2006). For work specifically on automobility as a discourse and apparatus of neoliberal governmentality, see Jeremy Packer, "Disciplining Mobility: Governing and Safety," in *Foucault, Cultural Studies, and Governmentality*, eds. Jack Z. Bratich, Jeremy Packer, and Cameron McCarty (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 135–61; Sudhir Chella Rajan, "Automobility, Liberalism, and the Ethics of Driving," *Environmental Ethics* 29 (2007): 77–90; Jeremy Packer, *Mobility Without Mayhem: Safety, Cars, and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
 13. Cathy Caruth, "Trauma and Experience: Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 3–12; Cathy Caruth, "Recapturing the Past: Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 151–57; Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 158–82. See also Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 2nd edition (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
 14. Roger Luckhurst, "Traumaculture," *New Formations* 50 (2003): 28.
 15. E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 34.
 16. See especially Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, and *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*; Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2001).
 17. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
 18. See Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*; see also Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).
 19. Roger Luckhurst, "Traumaculture," 38.
 20. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
 21. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 106.
 22. Divya Tolia-Kelly, "Locating Processes of Identification: Studying the Precipitates of Re-Memory in the British Asian Home," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 29 (2004): 314–29 (316).
 23. *Ibid.*
 24. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 3–4, 7.
 25. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 39; See also Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Lauren Berlant, ed., *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (London: Routledge, 2004); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Mark Seltzer, "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," *October* 80 (1997): 24; and Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
 26. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 39.
 27. Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory & Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 125–6.
 28. Jack Santino, "Performative Commemoratives: Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death," in *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, ed. Jack Santino (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 5–16. See also Erika Doss, "Death, Art, and Memory in the Public Sphere: The Visual and Material Culture of Grief in Contemporary America," *Mortality* 7 (2002): 63–82; Erika Doss, "Spontaneous Memorials and Contemporary Modes of Mourning in America," *Material Religion* 2 (2006): 294–319; Erika Doss, *The Emotional Life of Public Memorials: Towards a Theory of Temporary Memorials* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008); Sylvia Grider, "Public Grief and the Politics of Memorial: Contesting the Memory of 'The Shooters' at Columbine High School," *Anthropology Today* 23 (2007): 3–7; C. Allen Haney, Christina Leimer, and Juliann Lowery, "Spontaneous Memorialization: Violent Death and Emerging Mourning Ritual," *Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying* 35 (1997): 159–71; Jack Santino, ed. *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death* (New York: Palgrave, 2006); Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
 29. Diane E. Goldstein and Diane Tye, "'The Call of the Ice': Tragedy and Vernacular Responses of Resistance, Heroic Reconstruction, and Reclamation," in *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, ed. Jack Santino (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 233–54 (243); Haney, Leimer, and Lowry, "Spontaneous Memorialization," 160.
 30. *Ibid.*, 161. Spontaneous shrines speak to and from "highly conflicted" contemporary attitudes towards death, and thus reflect and are structured within larger trends in death, dying and bereavement practices. See Doss, *The Emotional Life of Public Memorials*, 27. Modernist practices of medicine, death, and burial that institutionalized living, dying, and burial made death more predictably ritualistic, but also much less present in everyday life. Cultural codes against showing grief in public have also shifted, emphasizing

- if anything that people are now expected to actively grieve. Contemporary practices are both more visible and more improvised, giving over to (or leaving it up to, depending on your perspective) private individuals to decide the most appropriate ways of memorializing individual deaths. See Cas Wouters, "The Quest for New Rituals in Dying and Mourning: Changes in the We-I Balance," *Body & Society* 8 (2002): 1–27. This seems to be a foundational impulse towards what may best be called the "public-izing" of death and memory in contemporary culture. More important, the private-in-public nature of spontaneous shrines is also related to a growing emphasis on the continuity between life and death in the culture. See Doss, *The Emotional Life of Public Memorials*, 20.
31. Santino, "Performative Commemoratives," 13, 5.
 32. *Ibid.*, 10.
 33. See Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
 34. Jill Bennett, "The Aesthetics of Sense-Memory: Theorising Trauma Through the Visual Arts," in *Regimes of Memory*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Katherine Hodgkin (London: Routledge, 2003), 28, 32–33. See also Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005).
 35. *Ibid.*, 37.
 36. Doss, *The Emotional Life of Public Memorials*, 7. Doss extends this work further in *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). For related work on the "contemporary culture of public commemoration," see Carole Blair and Neil Michel, "The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Contemporary Culture of Public Commemoration," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10 (2007): 595–626; Kristin Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
 37. Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History*.
 38. Gregory Ulmer, "Traffic of the Spheres: Prototype for a Memorial," in *Car Crash Culture*, ed. Mikita Brottman (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 336.
 39. *Ibid.*
 40. For instance, in *Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture*, Everett quotes a mother of a teen car crash victim who maintains a shrine on the roadside more than the cemetery site because "the last place that Nathan was" before going "straight to heaven" was the accident site (95). She says she visits the site frequently not only to maintain the memory of her son but to talk to her son; she says the shrine serves this purpose well because "that's kind of where I felt his spirit was last" (96). Similarly, Charles Collins and Charles Rhine noticed that many who leave written messages to people who have died address victims as if they are "departed" instead of "dead" or "deceased"—as displaced, disembodied, or transformed, but not "ceasing to exist." Collins and Rhine, "Roadside Memorials," 234.
 41. Clark and Franzmann, "A Father, a Son, My Only Daughter," 8.
 42. Clark, "Challenging Motoring Functionalism," 23, 33; see also Kurt Möser, "The Dark Side of 'Automobilism,' 1900–1930: Violence, War and the Motor Car," *Journal of Transport History* 24:2 (2003): 238–58.
 43. See Hastings Donnan, "Material Identities: Fixing Ethnicity in the Irish Borderlands," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 12 (2005): 69–105 (96–99).
 44. Kenneth Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, 2nd edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).
 45. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7.
 46. Beckmann, "Mobility and Safety," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (2004), 81–100 (94).
 47. *Ibid.*, 94–95.
 48. *Ibid.*, 97.
 49. Divya Tolia-Kelly, "Locating Processes of Identification: Studying the Precipitates of Re-Memory in the British Asian Home," 316.