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## Roadside Media: Roadside Crash Shrines as Platforms for Communicating Across Time, Space, and Mortality in the Early 2000s United States

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### ABSTRACT

This article argues that since the 1990s, roadside shrines in the United States have become place-bound forms of media that provide multiple publics with platforms for communicating with the dead and for communicating with other platform users about the dead. Evidence that roadside shrines function as media today is accessible even to strangers who witness roadside shrines because people leave visual, material, and spatial traces of these communications at shrine sites themselves. There, you can see that people interact with shrines as if they are platforms for communication – demonstrating elaborately performed ‘continuing bonds’ between mourners and the site, and thus victims, as well as among mourners. Moreover, roadside shrines are today intertwined with the larger convergent media environment, where a shrine site often becomes a material manifestation of other representations of ‘the pervasive dead’ across the media environment. To trace the history of how roadside shrines came to work this way, I relate them to the larger cultural history of media and memorialisation in which they are entangled and then analyse three specific case studies from New Mexico and Texas at the crucial transitional moment in the first two decades of the 2000s when roadside shrines became established as media.

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This article argues that roadside crash shrines in the contemporary United States function as place-bound forms of media that provide multiple publics with participatory platforms for communicating with the dead and for communicating with other living people about the dead. Roadside shrines are built by ordinary people to mark the place where someone they know has died in an automotive accident as a driver, passenger, motorcyclist, bicyclist, or pedestrian. Scholars have analysed some of the communicative dimensions of roadside shrines but have not yet shown how they function as media themselves. For instance, scholars have shown that mourners who build and maintain roadside shrines think of them as places where a person’s spirit is thought to be present to communicate with as if the shrine serves as a kind of portal for communication.<sup>1</sup> Scholars also have analysed the ways that roadside shrines communicate an implicit warning to drivers driving by them and produce publics that can be communicated with.<sup>2</sup> There also

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is a growing body of work exploring ‘mediated memories’, especially the way multiple forms of media bridge between individual and collective memories.<sup>3</sup>

But most scholars who have analysed roadside shrines in relationship to media have focused either on how they are depicted in news media as a spectacle of public grief and trauma<sup>4</sup> or how they are intended to *counter* the effects of ‘fleeting, immaterial’ media with the ‘solidly material’<sup>5</sup> to create a more authentic ‘spontaneous’<sup>6</sup> or ‘grassroots’<sup>7</sup> vernacular material form that implicitly or explicitly resists or opposes dominant media culture. A few scholars, such as Robert Dobler, Avril Maddrell, and Candi Cann, have made direct comparisons between roadside shrines and virtual shrines, noting similar communicative practices and the fact that both are part of a larger ‘democratisation’ of memorialisation that features ‘highly individualised expressions of vernacular memorial-making’.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, these scholars have shown that practices associated with both material and virtual shrines started out as seemingly idiosyncratic but have since established what Maddrell calls ‘discursive norms’, normative practices of interaction that are part of what Béatrice Fraenkel calls ‘constitutive elements of a new globalised culture of disaster that gives a new prominence to shrines’ in both material and virtual forms.<sup>9</sup> Most important for the present article, these scholars have established that these emergent shrine forms produce connections that bridge spatiotemporal gaps between mourners and the dead, among different mourners, and even among strangers witnessing them in public space or mediated public platforms.

Here, however, I will take these lines of thinking further to show how roadside shrines function as a unique form of media in and of themselves, one that also is deeply interconnected to other media. I will do this by tracing the history of how roadside shrines came to function as media in the first decade of the 2000s. I will first relate them to the larger cultural history of media and memorialisation in which they are entangled and then analyse three specific case studies from this crucial transitional moment when roadside shrines became established as media in their own right in the USA. As I will show, the trajectory of roadside shrines as media in the USA over the last three decades is directly aligned with the development of both dominant media culture and the material culture of memorialisation during the same time. As such, studying the development of roadside shrines since the 1990s provides a concrete way of understanding a crucial transitional moment in the cultural history of the material and mediated practices around memorialisation, death, and distant communications.

Before the 1990s, roadside shrines were mostly simple markers of death sites that served as places for demonstrating filial responsibility to care for the victims of violent death within a very specific cultural scene. Then, shrines were connected to other media mainly in the form of news coverage from more traditional broadcast media such as television, newspapers, and magazines, which helped them spread more widely as a vernacular form. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, they started becoming more directly related to media because they featured user-created mediated memory objects built from and with digital photography, desktop publishing, and early Internet culture to represent the asynchronous distant communications of multiple people at different times. Now, after the widespread adoption of electronic social media platforms by ordinary individuals of all generations in the USA in the 2010s, roadside shrines are not only interconnected even more directly into the larger media environment, but are full-fledged media themselves. Now, shrines often not only become material

manifestations of other representations of the ordinary dead across the media environment, but actually also look and feel like miniaturised material versions of social media platforms themselves. Thus not only have they developed in tandem with and are interconnected with social media but they should be seen as forms of social media in their own right.

### **From ‘the separated dead’ to ‘the pervasive dead’**

Cultural historians of death, dying, and bereavement have demonstrated that a major shift occurred in dominant memorial practices among ordinary individuals in the United States, United Kingdom, and Western Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In a recent reconceptualisation of this phenomenon, Tony Walter characterises it as a shift from a discourse he calls ‘the separated dead’ to one he calls ‘the pervasive dead’.<sup>10</sup> The ‘separated dead’ discourse, dominant for most of the twentieth century, ‘encompasses a dead body separated from everyday life, a soul inaccessible in heaven, and mourners enjoined to let go and move on’.<sup>11</sup> The ‘pervasive dead’ discourse, emergent in the 1990s and now dominant, treats ‘the dead as no longer separate from everyday life but pervading it’.<sup>12</sup> As Walter notes, this trend ‘resonates academically with the growth in the same period of memory studies, and culturally with the ‘memory boom’ and the turn from modernism towards a ‘postmodern’ rediscovery of the past, old buildings, and ‘heritage’.<sup>13</sup> Now, Walter argues, ‘mourners express on social media their continuing bond with the dead who pop up on the screens of friends and acquaintances; the dead are addressed as angels with agency to hear and care; and the body’s physical remains are pictured as an active part of the environment’.<sup>14</sup>

This development is discernible throughout death, dying, and bereavement cultures today, most notably in the current model of bereavement called ‘continuing bonds’.<sup>15</sup> Whereas most 20<sup>th</sup> Century bereavement interventions before the 1990s in Europe and the USA and UK emphasised ‘closure’ and ‘moving on’ beyond ‘pathological’ grief, the continuing bonds approach emphasises maintaining relationships to the dead and continually working-through grief and trauma in increasingly public ways. This model also is reflected in the trend towards what Leonie Kellaher and Ken Worpole call ‘cenotaphisation’, whereby representations of the dead get separated from their bodies and dispersed and multiplied throughout public spaces.<sup>16</sup> Candi Cann calls them ‘bodiless memorials’: not only things like memorial benches, plaques, and cenotaphs, but also car decal memorials, T-shirt memorials, tattoo memorials, roadside memorials, and virtual memorials.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, as representations of the dead have become more pervasive, the material culture of death, dying, and bereavement has shifted as well. This is most evident in the kinds of objects now employed at gravesites, mausolea, and ‘bodiless memorials’ throughout the US, UK, and Europe. In an influential work published in 2001 when this phenomenon was first appearing in the UK, Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey noted a then-emergent practice of people in the UK decorating gravesites with ordinary objects from the dead person’s everyday life. They argued that mourners were beginning to treat gravesites as ‘spaces in which the “living” deceased reside and receive visitors and gifts’,<sup>18</sup> much the same way that by the early 1990s, visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington,

DC, were leaving personalised objects and notes written to the dead at the site, meaning that they were interacting with it more as if it were an active shrine than a static memorial as a way of resisting the potential invisibility of ordinary lives in contemporary culture.<sup>19</sup>

Hallam and Hockey noted that one outcome of this practice was that gravesites themselves were coming to look more like miniaturised domestic spaces—‘a mix of garden and living room display’ – where ‘virtually any object can become a material of memory’<sup>20</sup> and where people create assemblages at the gravesite that are ‘tailored to the interests, hobbies and personality of the deceased and incorporate objects treasured by the person while alive as well as new gifts consistent with their perceived preferences and tendencies’. Such practices are predicated on treating the material objects at a gravesite or memorial as a ‘replacement of the vulnerable body’ with the materiality of the objects themselves, where the memorial objects are treated ‘as though they are a body’, as ‘a means to maintain a physical proximity with the deceased – a sense of “being with” a particular person now, rather than simply recalling what has passed’.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, while these current trends in the material culture of death and bereavement reflect emerging cultural practices today, they also reclaim residual folkways that were supplanted by a more homogenised and controlled ‘modern’ bereavement culture by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. That is, while many of these folk practices had disappeared from urban and suburban cemeteries much earlier, cultural geographers, anthropologists, and folklorists documented decades-old material evidence of similarly elaborate and individualised practices of grave decoration in rural cemeteries throughout Texas and New Mexico, where the fieldwork for the current paper was conducted, at least as late as the 1980s.<sup>22</sup>

Today, all of these dynamics are especially pronounced at what Jack Santino calls ‘spontaneous shrines’, which have proliferated globally since the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> As Allen Haney, Christina Leimer, and Juliann Lowery first established in the early 1990s, spontaneous memorials and shrines are built to mark and negotiate the ‘unanticipated violent deaths of people who do not fit into categories of those we expect to die, who may be engaging in routine activities’.<sup>24</sup> This larger category contains not only crash shrines but murder shrines and shrines to victims of political violence. The early spontaneous shrines for the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, Princess Diana in 1997, and the Columbine school shooting in 1999 were harbingers of a practice that became solidified by the 2010s and is now a normative response to any tragedy that occurs in public space.<sup>25</sup>

## **From separated media to pervasive media**

These changes to death and memorialisation cultures in the last thirty years parallel broad changes to the media environment during the same time period, which moved from a media system featuring one-way, one-to-many ‘closed’ ‘broadcast’ media to one featuring interactive, many-to-many, participatory, dispersed, mobile, and ‘open’ media – what media studies scholars call ‘third-wave media’.<sup>26</sup> Unlike more traditional media that are produced and consumed by people located in very different material, spatial, and cultural contexts, third-wave media are converged and multimedia; are produced and consumed by ‘prosumers’ who both produce and consume media on the same platform; and are encountered on platforms everywhere, all around us.

For most of the twentieth century, people encountered media texts through separated media interfaces that were also geographically distanced from the spaces of production and from other media interfaces, whether it was in a movie theatre, living room, or car. As with civic monuments and memorials, popular media also were produced by the few but consumed by the many, and increasingly in isolation from one another socially. In the 1970s, Cultural Studies scholars began studying how audiences used these one-way media in divergent ways, but the fact remained that audiences at the time had little control over what was produced and how and when it was circulated. As such, audiences often faced the same limited choices in relation to radio, film, and especially TV afforded by civic memorials and monuments at the time: celebrate, accept, resist, or ignore.

Starting in the 1980s with the widespread use of VCRs for time-shifting and cassette tapes for creating mixtapes, media technologies became more and more customisable. By the 1990s, early adopters of the Web used the infrastructure to make more space for user-to-user file-sharing, user-created content, and ‘virtual communities’. In the first decade of the 2000s, these prosumer features were built into Web 2.0 platforms from the beginning and then became the primary affordances of social media at the same time that smartphones made ubiquitous, convergent, and mobile multimedia third-wave media the norm. Along the way, distinctions between producer and consumer, public and private, close and distant, few and many, and then and now, have collapsed. The result is what economist Frances Cairncross in the mid 1990s predicted would be ‘the death of distance’, where Internet-based third-wave communications media would achieve Marshall McLuhan’s 1960s vision of a mediated ‘global village’ by bridging spatiotemporal distances among cultures as well as markets.<sup>27</sup> Thinking of Walter’s terms, we might then articulate this shift as being from a system of ‘separated media’ to a system of ‘pervasive media’. That is, just as the dead have become pervasive, so have media.

Walter argues that ‘The presence of the dead within a society depends in part on available communication technologies’.<sup>28</sup> Older forms of civic memorials functioned as media, but were, like other media of their day, designed for one-way communication: they carried dominant ideological messages and structures and presumed a passive viewer who either accepted or ignored them. Any explicit on-site communication *with* such a one-way memorial would have taken the form of either ritualised celebration or resistive practices such as graffiti or protests. Any communication *about* the site would have occurred elsewhere, in a different place or time and medium. But as a form of both participatory media and experiential memorialisation, contemporary spontaneous shrines facilitate communication at different scales of time and space and contain multiple remediating media *within* them while also being connected to similar communications on other platforms.

### **Roadside crash shrines as manifestations of the pervasive dead**

Roadside crash shrines emerged as a global phenomenon in the late 1990s at the same time as the rise of the pervasive dead discourse, the continuous bonds model, and spontaneous shrines. However, while roadside crash shrines connect to these larger trends within mainstream American, British, and European cultures, they have a distinct and much older origin. Indeed, standard accounts of the United States as

a society emphasising the ‘separated dead’ discourse ignore not only residual forms of Anglo and African-American bereavement folkways but especially the continuously developing deathways in American Latinx Catholic culture, which has long maintained strong relationships between the living and dead through practices such as Day of the Dead ceremonies, family rituals for maintaining gravesites, and, of course, roadside shrines. The practice of building and maintaining roadside crash shrines has been intertwined continuously with many other ‘pervasive’ death practices within syncretic Latinx and Native American cultures in the American Southwest for generations.

Most of the early work on roadside shrines in the 1980s and 1990s focused on the Southwest for this reason.<sup>29</sup> This early work established that although there are many related practices in many different cultures, the practice of building roadside shrines specifically for automotive crashes at places other than the burial or cremation site began in early twentieth century New Mexico, not long after the first car deaths there.<sup>30</sup> Still today in New Mexico, crash shrines are called *descansos* (resting places) because they are a modern car culture adaptation of the centuries-old practice of placing wayside crosses at the places where pallbearers rested as they carried the dead from the place of death to the church and cemetery. The region also has a longstanding practice of placing crosses at the site of violent deaths to consecrate the site and, more important to the later practices associated with roadside shrines, to serve as the location for ongoing griefwork focused on helping the souls of people pass through to heaven 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.<sup>31</sup> 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 ordinary landscape. These last two points are crucial for understanding how all roadside now shrines serve as platforms today, as this conceptualisation of the person still being present at the site in some form (as a spirit, ghost, soul, or angel) while others witness and even participate is something that has persisted as the practice of building roadside shrines spread beyond Indo-Hispanic Catholic theological frameworks.

The practice of placing crosses at crash sites had spread from New Mexico across the American West by the 1950s; Robert Frank included a photograph of a set of roadside crosses in Idaho in his photo essay titled *The Americans* in 1959.<sup>32</sup> It took longer for the practice to include shrine activity outside the Southwest, but as early as 1986, Estevan Arellano noted that Anglo ‘hippy shrines’ were present alongside indigenous Native American and Latinx shrines in Northern New Mexico.<sup>33</sup> Holly Everett notes that the Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) built their first roadside crosses in Texas in the early 1980s, and by the 1990s, mainstream Anglos throughout the American Southwest had adopted the practice as well.<sup>34</sup> By the time Everett was doing her fieldwork in the late 1990s in Texas, the sites she analysed represented both Anglo and Latinx dead, with a mix also of Protestant and Catholic and secular imagery and cosmologies present at different shrines. Charles Collins and Charles Rhine confirmed the same pattern throughout many other parts of the USA by 2003 as well.<sup>35</sup>

### **Roadside crash shrines as pervasive dead media**

Now that I have established all the main strands of the story, it’s time to turn to case studies of actual crash shrines from New Mexico and Texas in the early 2000s. My

analysis of three sites will bring into focus the main features that roadside shrines share with other contemporary social media: the establishment of multi-use, convergent platforms; an emphasis on multivocal synchronous and asynchronous user-created content; and a mode of address that appeals to multiple publics on a single platform simultaneously. While my central argument here is that all contemporary roadside shrines serve as media for communicating with and about the dead, not all shrines *show* that in their material form to non-users. Moreover, even shrines that show this evidence might not immediately appear to be media without thinking of them within the framework I have developed here. Thus, the three sites I analyse here in detail are ones that not only serve as media, but provide clear material evidence of that use at the platform itself. There, even strangers looking at the site can see that people interact with shrines as if they are a platform for distant communications between mourners and the dead as well as with other mourners.

I encountered all three of these shrines as part of my larger ongoing fieldwork on roadside shrines conducted over the last two decades throughout the Southwestern USA. Because the main purpose of my research has been to analyse shrines as visual, material, and spatial forms of communication that involve multiple publics, I use a mobile fieldwork method where I drive around deliberately looking for shrines to encounter as a stranger. When I spot a shrine, I get out of the car to photograph and analyse the site up close, paying special attention to the material objects and spatial dynamics of the site. If the site contains a full name, I later do off-site research to learn more about the crash and the people commemorated in the shrine, but my 'fieldwork-first' methodology ensures that my primary focus is on closely analysing the complex material and spatial inter-relationships among material objects at the shrine as well as how they carry material evidence of being used in social practices. Wherever possible, I visit shrines recursively, analysing the way that shrines change over time as well as any tension between what I can see and feel at the site in relation to what I learn from off-site communications. Finally, I never change the names of the dead or the grieving for anonymity because shrines are public forms of communication open to everyone on the roadside.

Because I have been doing this field research since 2003, I have documented not only individual sites over time but the development of larger-scale patterns across sites over time as well. Therefore, before fully analysing the materiality of the three case studies, I want to first establish more foundational patterns about their linguistic content and form that might escape notice. The most direct evidence that roadside shrines represent the diffusion of the 'continuing bonds' model and 'pervasive dead' discourse as well as the clearest evidence that people use shrines as 'pervasive media' platforms for communicating with the dead is the mode of address people use on site. In both contemporary virtual and material shrines, people address the dead directly in informal diction and syntax in the second person: as an 'I/We' directly addressing a (presumably) known 'you' as a direct object, drawing on a relationship already established elsewhere that thus is capable of being 'continued'.

This is something other scholars have documented as well. For instance, Cann argues that this informal, direct mode of address works to 'place the dead here with us now, on the receiving end of our communications', where mourners can 'continue the conversation with the dead and acknowledge one's ongoing relationship with the person' beyond death.<sup>36</sup> Walter concurs that 'positioning the dead as listening has become normative'; it



‘imputes agency to the deceased. It implies they exist, somewhere’ where they are capable of ongoing communication.<sup>37</sup> While those using this mode of address might literally indicate that that ‘somewhere’ is heaven, the fact that this mode of address is employed only on certain platforms indicates that the dead are considered to *inhabit and use* those platforms.

Moreover, because these communications happen in public – whether embedded within a social media platform or a private shrine visible to the public roadway – there are always two functions of such a mode of address: to address the dead as a way to maintain ‘continuing bonds’ while also performatively *showing* that fact to anyone who scrolls or drives by. With a virtual memorial hosted on Facebook, for instance, people ‘gather’ around the memorial not only to witness it but to demonstrate their relationships to the dead and fellow mourners, especially close friends and family members, through visual and linguistic means that are often addressed to singular people while being viewable by a much larger public. This fact is evident in both virtual and material memorials in the phenomena of people writing messages and leaving offerings to the dead while identifying themselves as strangers. Online, this is even more prevalent, because anyone anywhere with a screen and an account can comment any time on a public-facing virtual memorial. But it also happens at physical shrines, often in messages that start with the same phrasing you see at virtual memorials: ‘I didn’t know you, but I saw this and . . .’

Whether produced by strangers or intimates, written messages using this mode of address at shrine sites appear in various forms: from messages that are purchased or appropriated by mourners to messages that are created by mourners; from messages that are handwritten to messages that are printed; and from messages that are produced off-site and brought to the site to messages that are produced on-site. When people write personalised messages on site, they often do so with a Sharpie, the pen-style permanent marker of choice in American culture since they became the normative tool to write titles on burned CDs in the late 1990s. The Sharpie is an apt choice for a roadside shrine because it allows people to write clear and fairly detailed permanent messages on objects that live outside, exposed to the elements, whereas words written with any other writing instrument would quickly fade. The central cross of a shrine is often used as a literal platform for these Sharpie messages, but they also appear on a number of different objects, especially photographs incorporated into the shrine. Most Sharpie messages at shrines match the informality and ordinariness of the Sharpie medium with informal and everyday content. That makes these inscriptions function the same way as many messages on social media function, particularly within virtual memorials, where comments beget more comments, and where visitors to the shrine not only address the dead but carry out asynchronous conversations with other visitors over time. The result is that both strangers and intimates write to each other and read each other’s communication the same platform, producing what Fraenkel calls a ‘collective enunciation’ that bridges spatiotemporal distances.<sup>38</sup>

On this point, it is worth noticing that this same pattern of using a memorial form as an asynchronous multivocal platform hardly ever occurs at gravesites, where cultural rules of decorum and performatively showing ‘respect for the dead’ prohibit writing directly on a grave marker or crypt, considering it defacement. The same applies for civic memorials and monuments, where writing on them would be considered vandalism or

resistant graffiti by both the people writing on them and the people charged with policing them, as has been the case most recently with the many acts of resistance to colonialist and white supremacist monuments. But where in these cases graffiti is considered an improper use of the memorials and monuments as a platform, using a roadside shrine (and most other spontaneous shrines) as a platform is now a dominant social practice.

### **Roadside shrines as social media interconnected to other social media**

On 1 March 2015, Ashley Nicole Farrell-Osborne and Garret Sumner died when the pickup truck they were riding in with friends in their hometown of Elgin, Texas, left the highway and flipped over.<sup>39</sup> Within hours, their friends and family learned of the crash on social media and created a shrine at the site of the crash, near the corner of US Highway 290 and Texas Highway 95. I first encountered the shrine on 6 March 2015, a week after the crash, when I drove by it on my way to do recursive fieldwork on another site the next town over. I visited the site two more times after that – once later that summer, when the shrine was at its most evolved, and then again in September 2016, when all that remained was a single blue metal cross with nothing written on it. Today there is nothing left of the shrine at the site. Because my main purpose in discussing this shrine first is to provide a representative example of how shrines work as and with media today, I will focus here on the materiality of the shrine that first week of March 2015, particularly how the shrine served as a platform itself while also being intertwined with social media platforms.

The shrine for Farrell-Osborne and Sumner centred on three white crosses with multiple objects hanging from them, including several photographs of Farrell-Osborne and Sumner pictured by themselves, pictured together as a couple, and pictured with other people. The ground at the base of the three crosses was piled with flowers, teddy bears, and sports team gear – all contained by a border of concrete landscape blocks that were painted in alternating white and purple, the school colours of Elgin High School. The small wooden cross on the left had Garret's name written on it in all caps in black Sharpie. An identical cross on the right had Ashley's name written the same way. In between them was a taller metal cross with the words 'Never Forgotten' written vertically in large letters with a purple Sharpie, with the words interrupted by a laminated photograph of a uniformed Sumner on the baseball field with the words 'RIP Garret Sumner' printed on top of the photograph. A shirt and cap identical to the ones he is wearing in the photograph were draped on the crosses.

Every surface of the central cross was completely covered with words written in different handwriting, comprised mostly of dozens of signatures written in Sharpie. Scattered in between were a few messages such as 'Never Forget You Bro!'; 'You will be truly missed 4ever'; and 'We'll Always Remember U'. On the ground at the base of the shrine, there was even a plastic box filled with Sharpies for visitors to use. And next to the box of Sharpies was a sheet of laminated paper weighed down by a dumbbell. On the sheet were the words 'In loving memory of Garret Sumner and Ashley Farrell' and two hashtags, one for each victim: #FlyHighGareBear and #RestEasyPrincess. This directly connected the medium of the shrine to other media, further collapsing the distinction between offline and online communications to complete the transmedia loop: learning of the crash online, engaging with the shrine offline, rejoining the conversation online.

While the physical shrine is now gone, and the hashtags are not currently being used, the hashtags continue to remain archived on Twitter alongside other hashtags that emerged in the mourning process: #DoingItForAshley, #DoingItForGarret, #GarBearMovement, #GareBearMovement, #GarrBearMovement, #FlyHighGarret, #PrincessAshley #RIPAshley, and #RIPGarret. The archived group of hashtags comprises a distributed virtual shrine for Farrell-Osborne and Sumner, revealing how mourners used Twitter as a platform for grieving together on the platform while also using Twitter to organise off-platform communications.

Most of the messages carrying the hashtags are short statements of support addressed to Farrell-Osborne and Sumner and their families, which, as performative ‘speech-acts’, are the functional equivalent of hand signing the shrine.<sup>40</sup> Several people shared snapshot photographs of Farrell-Osborne and/or Sumner, including several of the same photographs that had been printed out and incorporated into the physical shrine, particularly a close up portrait of Farrell-Osborne featured at the centre of her cross and the baseball picture of Sumner. People also used the platform to share information about and photographs of the funerals and commemorations at the school. There are tweets about the GoFundMe page created to help their families pay for the funerals. There are tweets showing other mourners how to get the commemorative T-shirts and decals people had produced. There are tweets by people dedicating their sports seasons to them, including writing their names and hashtags on their jerseys or cleats. There is a tweet by someone showing a tattoo she had gotten to honour Farrell-Osborne. A year after the crash, there were tweets about the anniversary, including people sharing pictures of themselves posing with friends and family at their gravesites.

There also were multiple photographs of the shrine itself. The different photographs of the shrine on Twitter document the shrine’s growth as a platform that first week while also giving it a mediated afterlife through pictures now that it no longer has physical form. Indeed, analysing this collection of tweets and photographs in relation to field research on the shrine shows not only that the shrine was designed to be a platform from the very beginning, but also that everyone knew how to use it as a platform. It also shows that the physical shrine and the ‘Twitter shrine’ developed simultaneously, with similar content and form even as the two types of shrines were shaped by and enabled by the affordances of their different media.

On 1 March, @katiecarranza\_ tweeted the first photograph of the shrine accompanied by the words ‘Still seems so unreal’.<sup>41</sup> In the photograph, the shrine includes the three crosses and only three other objects at this point: two bouquets of fresh flowers and the plastic box of Sharpies. That box of Sharpies got a lot of use in the next few days as people contributed to the growing platform. On Twitter, @Bianca4Ruiz shared three tweets that featured photographs of the shrine. On 3 March, a tweet from @Bianca4Ruiz includes two photographs side-by-side with the words ‘the amount it has grown is truly beautiful’.<sup>42</sup> On 8 March, she tweeted an updated photograph of the shrine, saying ‘this is truly beautiful’.<sup>43</sup> A day later, she posted a photograph of her posing with the shrine, wearing her Elgin High School letter jacket. The tweet says ‘had to go visit these Angels again’.<sup>44</sup> By this point, the shrine had grown to the size and structure it had the first time I had encountered it on 6 March 2015. In @Bianca4Ruiz’s photograph, an open black Sharpie is resting on top of the central cross.

In one last example of the crossover between the two platforms, there is one message that is written identically on both. On 1 March 2015, @betzyrdgz posted a picture of herself and six other high school-age students posing with the shrine, many of them wearing Elgin High School gear. The tweet says ‘we love you so much garret’ and includes an angel emoji and a purple heart emoji.<sup>45</sup> When I studied my photographs of the shrine from 6 March more closely, I saw that there, at the base of the tall cross at the shrine, were the words ‘We [heart symbol] U So Much, Garret. –Betzy R’.

## Vintage roadside media

Now that I have demonstrated how a contemporary shrine works as and with media today, I want to essentially go back in time to discuss two shrines from the early 2000s that will allow us to trace the recent history of the development of roadside shrines as a media form. The first is a roadside shrine commemorating Gabriel Alfredo Buentello, who died in a crash in February 2004 at the age of 23 on US Highway 77 near the South Texas town of Driscoll. I encountered the shrine first in December 2004, ten months after it was first established. A return visit to the Buentello shrine in August 2022 confirmed that the shrine is still in place, eighteen years after it was built. The site is now overgrown, but the shrine’s structure as a media platform is exactly the same.

The central element of the shrine is a framed desktop-published document printed on aluminium that features a formal studio portrait of Buentello surrounded on three sides by separate printed messages addressed to three different audiences and rendered in different voices. The portrait itself appears to be a classic American high school senior portrait. On the left of the portrait is a poem addressed to Buentello and signed ‘Love Forever and Ever, Mom and Dad’. In the middle, just below the portrait, is a message written also by Buentello’s parents but addressed not to Buentello but to friends and family grieving him. Finally, on the right side of the portrait is a poem voiced from Buentello’s point-of-view directly addressing his mourners. The juxtaposition of these multivocal and split-addressed messages all on the same plaque clearly shows that the parents think of the shrine as a platform for speaking to multiple people who are there to hear multiple voices, even if some of those voices are essentially the voice of a single ventriloquist.

The poem on the left side, ‘Gabriel – Just One More’, is structured as a celebration of small moments shared with Buentello and a longing for a chance to have ‘just one more’. The collection of intimate moments is clearly addressed directly to Buentello, but gives anyone reading a glimpse into the relationship his parents shared with him as well as their participation in the media culture at the time, with lines like: ‘Gabriel: A Kiss we shared with every single time we parted – Be it for a shift at work or a trip to Blockbuster – Yet, we Wish for Just One More’.

The message under the portrait and Buentello’s birth and death dates functions as an open letter from the family to the community of grief that formed around Buentello. The family thank all of Buentello’s ‘friends, relatives and neighbours for all the flowers, cards, food, prayers and other acts of kindness shown us in the loss of our beloved son, grandson, brother and nephew, Gabriel’. The family also address this broad group of friends and family in the second person: ‘Your attendance at our home, at the Rosary, at the church and at the cemetery were acts of love and honour’. The second paragraph even

more directly addresses this community of grief. Because this kind of message is something I have never seen at any other roadside shrine, I quote it in full here:

We ask two things of all our friends. First, if you have your parents (or a loved one), give them a big hug, a kiss, and an 'I Love You' in memory of our son, Gabriel, who was so loving. And second, if you can write and send us a short note telling us of a special remembrance you have of Gabriel, we would just love to hear and treasure it. The Parents of Gabriel Alma & Oscar Buentello PO Box 175 Alice, Texas 78333

The poem to the right of Buentello's portrait is something also rare at a roadside shrine: a poem presented in the voice of the dead and addressed to shrine visitors. As we have seen, most written communication at roadside shrines is addressed to the dead or to others in the community of mourning. But here, the parents have acted as ventriloquists giving *Buentello himself* a voice, creating a poem from his perspective addressed to visitors. In a different material context, it might read as a suicide note, but that is not how it works here, where it is clear that the parents have asserted the authority to know what Buentello wanted people to do after his death. This makes it similar to the uncanny presence of the dead in 'legacy' Facebook posts, where friends or family continue to post to the page in the voice of the deceased long after death.

Like many grief poems at roadside shrines, this one is an appropriation of an anonymous grief poem widely circulated still today on the Internet, one called 'For Those I Love', which is commonly heard in eulogies and seen in memorial programmes and at gravesites throughout the Anglophone world.<sup>46</sup> Some grief poems included at shrines are well known works by famous authors or popular music singers or groups, and are identified as such. But many of the grief poems that have appeared in roadside shrines since the 1990s, such as this one, are appropriations or adaptations of popular media cultural bereavement texts, and thus integrated within larger media circulation patterns enabled by the availability of clip art and desktop publishing templates on the Internet. That makes the poem function like a meme, as it appears to be self-generating and ubiquitous even as it is presented as if it was written by the person using it. Many of these templates also echo Victorian mourning art, which often featured photographic portraits or handwritten or hand-embroidered messages ringed with dried flowers or human hair from the deceased and would have been displayed prominently in the homes of mourners as a demonstration of appropriate grieving.<sup>47</sup>

The fact that this poem appears here next to two other grief messages and a portrait composed together into a single multivocal and multimodal text is what most interests me here, as it makes the Buentello family into ventriloquists speaking as, to, and for different people through the same channel simultaneously. More to the point, they use the plaque as a platform for channelling multiple voices and multiple texts collected from different platforms to make them temporarily cohere together in the shrine itself as well, where the plaque is only the central feature of many other communicative objects placed there. In this case, the plaque is placed at the back of the shrine, hung between two solar lanterns that light the shrine at night. At the front of the site is a concrete statue of an angel sitting on a bench reading a book. The angel faces Buentello's portrait on the plaque. In a further materialisation of the platform itself, the angel has their mouth open and eyes closed, perpetually comforting Buentello through the platform by reading or singing to him – another simulation of multivocality.

The entire site materialises a belief by the parents that the shrine is a communication medium that will be used by different people in different ways, including Buentello himself, but also that it is designed to generate communications off-platform, through other media. In this case, that would have involved a written note, sent through the mail, directly to the parents, who we can assume back then intended to curate these notes in yet another medium: a physical scrapbook. That shows two things: first, that the family expects people to visit the shrine as part of the same grief circuit they have already performed out of 'love and honour' to visit the home, the church, and cemetery; and second, that that same sense of obligation might also motivate mourners to contribute to the collection of personal remembrances of Buentello. Regardless, both paragraphs address people who already knew Buentello and are there to demonstrate their continuing bonds with Buentello and his family, not only by grieving him but also by showing their support of and to the family through social practices established and performed outside the medium of roadside shrines.

It is important to notice the historical moment represented here: Alma and Oscar Buentello built this shrine in 2004, the same year Facebook was founded, the same year Google went public with its first IPO, and two years before Twitter emerged. It would take several more years before social media would become the dominant means among American parents for communicating with and about their alive and dead loved ones. Therefore, while this shrine shows how it functions as a platform for communication, it is still more of a clearinghouse connecting multiple users through other media than a full-fledged multi-user platform itself. The historical context also is reflected in the choice of photograph included in the memorial plaque as well as the fact that it is the only photograph at the site. As we saw with the example from Elgin above, what is different from shrines today is that just as multiple people write messages to the dead and each other, multiple people now contribute their own photographs of the dead to shrines as well, creating a multiplying collage of images of the dead that circulate on multiple platforms before and after they get printed to be used as memorial photographs in shrines. And then of course there's that reference to Blockbuster.

Encountering the shrine today, knowing what roadside shrines and other media have developed into, feels like witnessing an anachronistic form of vintage media in the present – the equivalent in digital communications of stumbling across a basic HTML Web 1.0 website still being hosted in its original form today, or the equivalent in roadside media communications of driving by a functioning drive-in movie theatre. That makes it not only a memorial to Buentello, but also simultaneously a memorial to an older form of roadside shrines and how they were interconnected with their own contemporary media environment in a different era.

### **Broadcasting on a participatory platform**

While the two previous examples have focused on how mourners use shrines as platforms to communicate with the dead and each other, some shrines also mobilise that grief to explicitly serve as platforms for communication focused on broader political action. This is most apparent with crosses built by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and ghost bikes, which use a standardised platform to anchor explicit messages about drink-driving or cyclist mobility rights.<sup>48</sup> These are shrines where mourners can

communicate to their friends and family while also targeting strangers driving by with a public safety message. I now turn to a particularly complex example of a shrine like this in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Del Lynn Peshlakai (19) and DeShauna Peshlakai (17) lived in Naschitti, New Mexico, part of the Navajo Nation, and were in Santa Fe on 5 March 2010 with their parents as DeShauna played in a high school basketball tournament game. As they were driving home, they stopped at a light at the corner of Cerrillos Road and Christo's Road in Santa Fe. Suddenly, a Ford F250 pickup truck hit them from behind. The sisters, who were in the back seat, were killed. The parents, Darlene and Dave Peshlakai, who were in the front seat, were injured but survived.<sup>49</sup> The person who crashed into them at high speed, James Ruiz, tested at almost three times the legal limit, and is currently serving a forty-year prison term for vehicular manslaughter.<sup>50</sup> Since 2010, there has been a virtual memorial for the sisters on legacy.com, and the family has maintained a physical shrine at the corner of Cerrillos and Christo's.<sup>51</sup>

The central feature of the physical shrine is a large full-colour poster printed on vinyl and attached to a piece of plywood. The poster hangs from a white iron sign with large hand-cut metal letters reading 'Don't Drink & Drive'. At first glance it looks more like a small billboard than a crash shrine, especially in Santa Fe, where city ordinances require billboards to be close to the ground. But there also are two white metal crosses on either side of the sign and the space between it and the sidewalk is ringed with a red concrete landscaping border and local river rocks. These crosses are hand-welded, including the sisters' names cut into the metal, 'DeShauna L. "Brat" Peshlakai' on the left and "'Baby Del" L. Peshlakai' on the right. Within the border are sets of flowers in containers, solar lights, and a small metal sculpture of an angel. When I encountered the shrine in April 2021, there was also a set of seasonal Easter decorations and two unfinished milkshakes and a fountain drink in three symmetrically arranged Styrofoam cups from a Sonic Drive-in. The assemblage made it clear that this was not only a public service message or a memorial or even a shrine, but a multi-purpose communication platform. Like the Buentello shrine, and unlike the Farrell-Osborne /Sumner shrine, it is curated by the girl's parents, but functions as a hybrid between the other two case studies.

The poster is a striking example of desktop publishing and media circulation in the era of third-wave media. The main image on the poster is a gruesome photograph of the crash taken after the sisters had been removed from their vehicle. The photograph shows that the sisters were crushed to death as the truck's front end smashed in the trunk of the sedan, pushing the back seat into the front seat. Because the large white pickup truck is only slightly damaged and its hood is up but the entire back end of the Peshlakais' small white sedan is smashed in, it looks like a shark eating a smaller fish. I have documented hundreds of shrines to drunk-driving victims in the USA, and some include more general statements about drinking and driving, but I have never seen another shrine that includes a picture of the crash itself as part of the shrine.

Photoshopped at the top, bottom and left side of the crash photo are four other graphical elements. At the top in white sans serif letters are the words 'Angels -vs- Drunk Drivers'. At the bottom, in black letters and all caps and in the font used in many Internet memes are the words 'DON'T DRINK AND DRIVE!' On the left side are two super-imposed images: in the bottom left corner is a photograph of the sisters' gravesite, and just above it is a cut-out colour photograph of the two sisters hugging and smiling for the camera; someone has Photoshopped angel wings and halos on both girls.

The photograph of the gravesite shows that it, too, works as a shrine, as it is decorated with flowers and a set of matching toy animals, angels, and basketball-themed coffee cups. The central grave stone commemorates both sisters together, like a married couple. Featuring a combination of rough cut and smooth grey granite structures, it is a complex multimodal text in itself. Centred at the top, it says, ‘In Loving Memory, PESHAKAI “Angels”’. Just below this is a heart-shaped cut-out black-and-white portrait of the two sisters standing together side-by-side. Inserted in between the sisters is the colour photograph of them hugging, this time without the wings and halos. On either side of the cut-out are images of ceremonial Navajo/Diné eagle feathers. Each sister is identified separately on either side of the heart-shaped photo collage along with an engraved picture of a basketball with angel wings on it and their player numbers, #14 for “Brat” DeShauna’ and #44 for ‘Baby Del’. At the base of the stone is an inscription of a verse from the New Testament Bible: ‘My Command Is This. Love Each other As I Have Loved You. John 15:12’.

For years, the family has used the same ‘Angels vs. Drunk Drivers’ imagery present at the shrine in anti-drunk-driving campaigns focused on basketball tournaments, runs, bike rides, and police DWI checkpoint programmes. There was an annual ‘Angels vs. Drunk Drivers’ Bike Run as late as 2017,<sup>52</sup> and there is an ongoing annual basketball tournament<sup>53</sup> and an ‘Angels vs. Drunk Drivers’ DWI Checkpoint in Santa Fe to this day.<sup>54</sup> One Sheriff’s deputy in McKinley County, New Mexico, where the sisters grew up, put the same image of the sisters in the back seat of their patrol car, facing people who would be being transported to jail.<sup>55</sup> In all of these iterations, the shrine not only functions as a platform itself, but also serves as an anchor for all the virtual versions of the shrine that circulate across traditional and social media platforms.

## Conclusion

Roadside crash shrines are a means by which ordinary individuals are made present socially in the ordinary spaces they once inhabited so that they can be communicated with and about. As my analysis has shown, roadside shrines have come to function as communication media because they extend, enable, and shape the communicative capabilities of everyone who uses them in terms of both time and space, giving users a distinctive visual, material, and spatial means of working through their grief via embodied communication at unique places. Like all communication media, shrines extend the communicative capabilities of the human body to materially and virtually bridge the limits of embodied, interpersonal, synchronous, co-present communication. And like all dominant forms of media in the current media environment, they function as platforms where multiple individuals can communicate to one another through multiple forms across time and at a distance while others are not only watching, but participating alongside them as well.

But unlike most other media today, which are becoming increasingly mobile, dispersed, and virtual, roadside shrines are resolutely material and anchored to specific places, so that any communication that happens through them as platforms must occur at the shrine itself. Each crash shrine is a unique place where people located distantly in different spatiotemporal and cultural worlds meet and interact with one another on the same platform and within the same interface, over time. Increasingly, as is evident in the case studies analysed here, roadside shrines not only function as media themselves, but are entangled with many other media realisations of the pervasive dead as well. The goal in analysing roadside shrines is the same



that is there in analysing any contemporary medium – to attune to them as things made of things for doing things, designed to communicate with people at multiple scales, times, and places simultaneously. But to perform such an analysis, you have to go to the medium. And when you do, you will see the platform unfolding, *as a platform*, even for you.

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