

ALTERNATIVE MEMORIALS: DEATH AND MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY
AMERICA

by

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Alternative forms of memorialization offer a sense of empowerment to the mourner, bringing the act of grieving into the personal sphere and away from the clinical or official realm of funeral homes and cemeteries. Constructing a spontaneous shrine allows a mourner to create a meaningful narrative of the deceased's life, giving structure and significance to a loss that may seem chaotic or meaningless in the immediate aftermath. These vernacular memorials also function as focal points for continued

communication with the departed and interaction with a community of mourners that blurs distinctions between public and private spheres. I focus my analysis on MySpace pages that are transformed into spontaneous memorials in the wake of a user's death, the creation of "ghost bikes" at the sites of fatal bicycle-automobile collisions, and memorial tattooing, exploring the ways in which these practices are socially constructed innovations on the traditional material forms of mourning culture.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is and always will be something fundamentally unknowable about the experience of death. It is where knowing stops. For all the technological innovations of modern science and medicine, there is a line that is simply uncrossable; ultimately we must settle for an outline of the void, an increasingly attentive gaze toward the approach of death, a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of entropy, but we cannot quite get *there*. When someone significant to us dies our relationship to that individual becomes forever altered. They become unknowable to us through the usual avenues of knowledge—we cannot speak to them, hear them, touch them—leaving us to rely on memory and the various technologies that have been created and continue to evolve through which we capture and preserve memory. In the absence of physical presence we turn to letters, diaries, photographs, videos, and increasingly, to social networking profiles and blogs: spaces in which we hope to find some remnant of the persona of the deceased.

But anyone who has ever lost someone can tell you that it is not enough. Again, the best we can do is to create an outline of an absence, a shadow tracing of the shape of a loss that can never serve as a proper substitute for a life. There is an almost unbearable tension between the stillness of memory and the vibrancy of life. Semiotician Roland

Barthes writes of his attempt to “find” his deceased mother in photographs: “I had acknowledged that fatality, one of the most agonizing features of mourning, which decreed that however often I might consult such images, I could never recall her features (summon them up as a totality) (1980:63). This attempt to reclaim the individual who was lost is perhaps doomed to be accompanied by disappointment and frustration—the best we can do is put together the scattered pieces of a lost life, restructuring its shape but never quite capturing the animating vitality of what was lost. Barthes goes on to describe the experience of “recognizing” his mother in photographs, saying, “Sometimes I recognized a region of her face, a certain relation of nose and forehead, the movement of her arms, her hands. I never recognized her except in fragments, which is to say that I missed her *being*, and that therefore I missed her altogether. It was not she, and yet it was no one else. I would have recognized her among thousands of other women, yet I did not ‘find’ her” (1980:65-66). The fragments never quite recreate the whole.

The act of creating a memorial is an attempt at re-piecing together the fragments of a lost life, and, for many mourners, is an important and therapeutic part of managing the experience of grief. Modern institutional methods of dealing with death have been in place since the turn of the century; hospitals provide care for the dying, and when the moment comes, they are given over to the funerary industry which handles everything from preparation of the corpse, to the funeral and disposal of the body. Many of the technical details surrounding the death are taken out of the hands of the mourners, who themselves are guided by the societal norms particular to cultural and religious practices in regard to the proper and expected means of negotiating grief. Funerals and wakes are

planned and attended, consolation is offered by friends and family in the form of food and company, and, when applicable, gravesites are visited on holidays and personally significant dates and anniversaries. Even cemeteries are regulated in terms of maintenance, hours of operation, and restrictions on what types of objects may be placed on graves. Rules and expectations shape nearly every aspect of the management of death.

Often a mourner is left with a collection of memories, photographs, letters, emails, etc., and a physical gravesite or memorial marker in place of the life that has been lost. The existence of a socially proscribed role and expectations of a person in mourning can be a stabilizing force in the aftermath of death, but in terms of the desired reclamation of what was lost, are of course unsatisfactory. The more routinized the mourning process becomes, the less it is able to capture and honor the individuality of the deceased. Perhaps especially in instances of traumatic death, accidental death, or the death of the young, the established methods of dealing with death become particularly inadequate to handle the needs of the mourner. The creation of vernacular memorials originates in the desire of a mourner for a more dynamic means of commemoration.

Vernacular Memorials

My use of the phrase *vernacular memorial* refers generally to memorial forms created outside of the official or institutionalized forms of memorialization (tombstones, plaques, commissioned monuments . . .). They can take the form of, but are certainly not limited to, roadside crosses, spontaneous assemblages at sites of major catastrophes, shrines to deceased pets, pages on social networking sites, window decals on

automobiles, clothing patches, tattoos, and so on, being limited only by the limits of individual innovation. They are evidence of a larger need for individualized avenues for the expression of grief, attempts to reclaim, or at least more properly represent, the uniqueness of the person mourned.

The most visible, and subsequently the most studied examples of vernacular memorial forms are temporary memorials—physical memorials often accompanied by assemblages of flowers and personal artifacts that appear at the site of a traumatic death or catastrophic event. Roadside crosses or “makeshift memorials” like those that sprang up at the site of the September 11th attack or the Columbine High School shootings are popular examples of this phenomenon. The terminology used to discuss these types of memorials is variable and subject to much debate, including the designations “makeshift memorial,” “temporary memorial,” and “spontaneous shrine,” among others, and depending upon the particular emphases of each author. For the purposes of this project, however, I have decided to use them more or less interchangeably¹, most often referring to them simply as vernacular memorials.

Spontaneous shrines, roadside crosses, and makeshift memorials have been part of American culture for a long time, but they have recently been the subject of greater attention than at perhaps any other time in history. In the wake of highly publicized tragedies like the school shootings in Littleton, Colorado; Thurston, Oregon; and Virginia Tech, and the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, vernacular memorials have caught national attention as the tangible evidence of massive outpourings of grief began to appear at the sites of these tragedies in the form of flowers, notes,

poems, photographs, stuffed animals, and many other personal artifacts left by those affected by the tragedies. As they have been the most often studied, much of my own approach in this work is based upon the literature devoted to roadside memorials and spontaneous shrines, and it would be beneficial to touch briefly on some of that work, as well as the reasoning behind a few of the variations in terminology, before proceeding.

Roadside Memorials and the Literature

Roadside memorials have long dotted the American landscape, most often in the form of small, wooden crosses erected at the sites of automobile fatalities. The practice has been traced back at least to the 18th century in the American Southwest in the form of *descansos*, makeshift wooden crosses left to mark the graves of travelers who died en route to their destinations.² While certainly prevalent in the Southwest, roadside crosses can today be found all over the country, and all over the world. Everywhere they mark scenes of unexpected, and often violent, death.

Folklorist Jack Santino coined the phrase “spontaneous shrines” to describe these often anonymous public memorials, noting by this terminology both the sense of immediacy and ephemerality that surrounds these creations, which often spring up overnight after an accident, and the sense that these memorials function as a connection between the living and the dead (2006). In choosing the word ‘shrine,’ he is highlighting the memorial as a place of spiritual communion, a bridge between the living and the dead. Several folklorists have noted the hierophantic quality of spontaneous shrines—the sense that the place of death maintains some connection to the life force of the departed

spirit. Holly Everett writes of the importance of roadside memorials in contemporary traditions of mourning, where they act as altars, sites of “an ongoing dialogue with the deceased,” as evidenced by the assemblages of items left at the memorials by mourners (2002:80). Others have written on the importance of these memorials in the lives of the bereft, providing sites of spiritual pilgrimage where the performance of ritualized mourning can aid in grief management (Grider 2001; Everett 2002; Doka 2003; Santino 2006; Margry and Sanchez-Carretero 2007; Wojcik 2007). Art historian Erika Doss has studied extensively the role of the material “things” which accumulate at vernacular memorials in the work of grief and mourning in modern, consumer-oriented society. (2006). Far from the description of these memorials as “makeshift” in most media reportage, the reality is that these “sacred folk art assemblages” (Grider 2001) are richly constructed, informed by ritualized behavior, and complexly functional on a variety of levels.

The bricolage style of temporary memorials allows mourners to reconstruct the identity of the deceased using personal items in a public setting. Participation in the creation of a memorial assemblage imparts to mourners a sense of regained control in response to feelings of powerlessness in the face of unexpected traumatic death. The issue of control has been a fundamental part of studies on roadside memorials as most writers link the relatively recent increase in the number of these memorials to the much discussed distancing of death in modern American culture. The funerary industry and advances in medical care have effectively removed death from our direct experience, while perpetuating the notion that the time of death can be controlled, or at least predicted

with some degree of accuracy (Haney, Leimer, and Lowery 1997; Grider 2001; Everett 2002; Santino 2006). The construction of roadside memorials and spontaneous shrines returns a level of agency and emotional involvement to the bereaved that modern society is perceived as having taken away.

Theoretical Viewpoint and Methodology

In this work I will draw together much of the general scholarship on the phenomenon of vernacular memorialization and apply it to three specific memorial forms which have so far not been the subject of much scholarship. I will focus on MySpace pages that are transformed into spontaneous memorials in the wake of a user's death, the creation of "ghost bikes" at the site of fatal bicycle-automobile collisions, and the act of getting a memorial tattoo to commemorate loss. I am interested in the ways in which these practices are socially constructed innovations on the traditional material forms of mourning culture.

I am approaching the subject of modern memorialization practices from a viewpoint grounded in theories of folklore and folk belief. Leonard Primiano's theory of *vernacular religion*, or religion as it is lived and experienced on an everyday level, is a guiding principle in my theorization of memorialization. It emphasizes several important components of folklore studies—the informal, the traditional, the communal, the expressive—and brings them into a discussion of modern religious belief. I consider the practice of memorialization to fall directly under the sphere of religious practice, and I will make the case that the types of memorialization that I am studying can be considered

modern incarnations of traditional, informal community expressions of grief and memory—in a word, folklore.

The folkloric perspective necessarily entails an attempt to privilege the voices of those whose communicative expressions are being studied. To that end an important component of my research has been to gather data from those directly involved in these acts of memorialization. Some of my data was taken from extensive cyber-ethnography conducted by reading the message boards of over 100 MySpace pages of deceased users in an attempt to understand the ways in which social networking is being utilized in the mourning process of American teenagers. I have interviewed people connected with the ghost bike movement, specifically those connected to the Portland, Oregon, bikes in an attempt to gain some personal insight as to how the decision to create a bike is arrived at, as well as the relationship between the very private memorial of an individual life lost and the larger, bicycle advocacy movement in which the ghost bikes are contextualized. I also interviewed a variety of people who have memorial tattoos, and several tattoo artists, in an effort to understand the personal motivation for opting to memorialize a lost loved one with a permanent inking on the skin.

Conclusion

Spontaneous shrines function on several complicated and intertwined levels. They offer a sense of empowerment to the mourner, bringing the act of grieving back into the personal sphere and away from the clinical, official realm of morgues, churches, and cemeteries (although it should be noted that spontaneous shrines do not replace the

official practices, they generally supplement them). The physical act of constructing a spontaneous shrine often helps the mourner to symbolically reconstruct his or her own life around the absence of the departed. It also allows the mourner to create a meaningful narrative of the deceased's life, giving structure and meaning to a death that may seem chaotic and meaningless in the immediate aftermath. These memorials may also function as focal points for continued communication with the departed, acting—as the designation *shrine* suggests, as altars at which another realm of existence may be accessed and communicated with.

Vernacular memorials are created through the synthesis of the fragments of a life cut short by tragedy and the fragments of the lives of those left behind, their own lives violently disrupted by the chaos of death. Much of the emotive power of these memorials is generated in the friction between the mourner's desire for the wholeness of the deceased and the inadequacy of the remnants that remain, frozen in web pages and photographs. To return to Roland Barthes, searching for his mother, it seems important to add that he found her—or at least the most satisfactory representation of her available to him—in a single photograph, which he called the “Winter Garden Photograph,” of his mother as a very young girl. The photo is still unsatisfactory, as all attempts at “finding” what was lost necessarily are, yet it satisfied Barthes in a way that no other photograph could. In it he was able to see something of his mother's essence, something of the truth of her individuality; he writes that it is a photograph in which he can “do much more than recognize her . . . I discover her” (1980:109). It is this re-discovery of the deceased that is so powerfully sought in a vernacular memorial. It is something *essential* and

unequivocally indicative of the life that was lost. But at the same time it must also represent something of the experience of the loss to the mourner. Barthes describes the Winter Garden Photograph as being so affecting because it “accords with both my mother’s being, and my grief at her death” (1980:70). In this way the photograph both preserves his memory of his mother and his memory of her loss.

In this way too the vernacular memorial functions by becoming a focal point for tensions created by the desire to properly represent what has been lost and the frustration at that representation’s inadequacy. Through the public expression of grief, the frustration becomes mitigated and manageable through the existence of a community of mourners; as a vernacular communicative form, the memorial approaches the “truth” of what has been lost much nearer than more official forms. And while vernacular memorials have been with us for some time, there is much to be gained from an examination of the ways in which new forms of these memorials appear to mirror evolving social trends and concerns. Modern Americans interact with reality through a variety of mediated forms and constructed identities, and there are just as many ways of interacting with grief.

Notes

¹ For a good survey of the various terms in use, see introduction to Margry and Sánchez Carretero (2011).

² The Spanish word *descanso* translates to “resting place,” and originally referred to the spot where pallbearers would pause for rest while carrying the coffin from the church to the cemetery. It has since been used in reference to the wooden crosses left along trails in the southwestern United States and Mexico marking spots where Catholic travelers died along the way and were by necessity interred in unhallowed ground. The crosses were erected in the hopes that future travelers would stop to pray for the souls there buried. For more, see Anaya, Chavez, and Arellano (1995), Doss (2006), Everett (2002:27-29) and Griffith (1992).

CHAPTER II

MYSFACE MEMORIALS

Social networking websites like MySpace.com have exploded in popularity over the last few years.¹ Teenagers use the Internet to join online communities of peers who share virtually every aspect of personal experience in the public arena of cyberspace. MySpace in particular has become a major facet of modern American youth culture. Corporate analyst Bill Tancer for Hitwise.com reports that MySpace achieved a 4,300% increase in visits over the last two years and a 132% increase over last year's figures (Tancer 2006). In the span of a few years MySpace has become familiar to an entire generation of American youth as an indispensable means of experiencing and communicating with the world. The events of everyday life are documented on MySpace profiles, from schoolyard gossip to weekend plans; it has become a forum for daily interaction with peers.

Unsurprisingly, life-changing events in the lives of MySpace users also are represented on user profile pages. Marriages, births, graduations, military service, and relocations are all incorporated into their user page and assimilated within the context of the Internet through pictures, blogs, and user comments. Death is similarly represented online, often in striking ways. MySpace users continuously update their pages to reflect

changes as they occur. When a user dies, however, the site remains unchanged—except for the message board. The deceased's online network of MySpace “friends,” (composed of real-world friends and people met *through* MySpace) continue to leave comments on the message board of the dead user. These comments are generally personal expressions of grief and an attempt to mitigate the permanence of the loss by keeping up a direct correspondence with the departed. Communication with the dead via MySpace message boards functions within a matrix of intermingled contexts: social, spatial, and temporal. It involves a unique overlapping of several spheres of influence including the public and the private, the progressive and the static, and varying patterns of grief and otherworldly belief.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact demographics of MySpace, a report by owner and Fox media mogul, Rupert Murdoch, announced the creation of the 100 millionth MySpace account on August 9, 2006 (Adest 2006). The site has experienced exponential growth since its launch a few years ago, and it has become a byword in any discussion of current youth culture (Tancer 2006). Teens use the site as a way to create and perpetuate individual identity as well as a means of staying in touch with one another outside of school. A typical MySpace page includes pictures of the user, links to blogs written by the user, links to the MySpace pages of the user's friends, and a comment board where friends can post messages to the user that are visible to all visitors at the site. Personal modifications can be added to this basic format, such as the creation of unique web backgrounds and a feature that allows the user to choose a song that will play whenever his or her page is viewed. The result is an online representation of one's self

that each user has complete control over. And it is this very personal representation of self that gives a MySpace page increased importance when the user dies.

I have observed that bereaved friends often continue to comment in the present-tense upon the MySpace page on a wide variety of topics: from the sharing of memories, to updates on daily life, to asking for guidance and signs from the deceased. In conducting a survey of the types of comments left on the pages of dead MySpace users, I have found that several trends seem to arise from the mass of various comments. In this paper I will provide an overview of some of the scholarship relating to the memorialization process; give a description of the various trends found in the MySpace comments, with special attention to the contexts in which these trends should be viewed, and conclude with an analysis of this phenomenon as an important area of study in the field of folk, or vernacular, religion.

Roadside Memorials

Given the recent emergence of social networking sites like MySpace, there has been a deficiency in the scholarly literature that examines the role that the Internet can play in the expression of grief. However, the scholarship on roadside memorials² can be very useful in building an approach to the topic. In *Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture* (2002), Holly Everett discusses roadside memorials in relation to the history of American death rituals from the early tradition of funereal preparation occurring wholly within the private home, to the modern and much-discussed “denial of death” where the preparations are performed in seclusion by the third-party, objective

mortuary industry. Everett emphasizes the uniqueness of the roadside memorial as occupying “a space in the *public* landscape, and imagination, in between the home and the often geographically removed modern cemetery” (2002:82). It is just this interstitial nature that imbues the roadside memorial with such affective charge. Public memorialization makes the act of mourning accessible to anyone in the vicinity of the memorial, personalizing the mourning while still separating the mourner from the physical body. Anyone who is affected by the death is free to visit the memorial and experience grief in their own private manner.

In addition to allowing for individual grief, roadside memorials place great emphasis upon the individuality of the deceased, affirming personal identity in the face of the anonymity of adolescent highway deaths. Making up thirty-six percent of all teenage deaths in America in 2006 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007), the sheer statistical prevalence of automobile deaths blurs the victim's personality and relegates the tragedy to the realm of cautionary tales and newspaper obituaries. Robert James Smith makes this point in his examination of roadside memorials. He describes a site maintained by a man to honor two victims of a fatal accident far from their own homes as “an attempt to declare and maintain a public grief against the seeming anonymity and erasure of most highway deaths” (1999:103-104). They also “reflect a deeper unease about modern mobility, transience, the fragility of life, even the difficulty of identifying those responsible for the tragedies” (1999:105). The American highway is symbolic of the modern high-speed world (the information superhighway) in which attention is always pushed forward to focus on the next thing. More literally, the highway system is

maintained in such a way that the physical evidence of an auto wreck vanishes within weeks of an occurrence, effectively erasing the tragedy. As a result, the bereaved become determined to create and maintain a physical reminder to set apart the deceased from the mass of highway deaths that occur each year.

Public and Private

There is a sense of spiritual mystery about the death site, as though something of the essence of the deceased might linger in the area, imparting a hierophantic aura to the physicality of the monument. The accident site becomes a publicly accessible space for interaction with and contemplation of the dead. It is an active process in that it is common for personal items to be left at the site, such as the crosses covered in writing, engravings, and pictures that Everett documents in her study (2002:87). The public nature of these memorials allows anyone to mourn; the rights of grieving are not restricted to immediate friends and family. There is a communal aspect that is not as obvious at the more sober and austere cemetery plot where the physical body rests. This communal aspect is similarly noted by George Monger in his writing on spontaneous memorials: “It is an act of remembrance and of solidarity, a symbolic coming together of the community in mourning” (Monger 1997:114). MySpace grief similarly involves an active involvement in the grieving process, although it is questionable whether or not the mourners who post to these sites should be viewed as compromising a “community” in the normal sense of the word.

The act of posting a comment on the message board of the deceased is essential to active participation in the grieving process. Because MySpace is usually a public forum, the profile of a deceased member can be viewed by anyone at anytime, but the simple act of anonymously visiting a page does not appear to be enough for many mourners. A more direct and active engagement with the deceased becomes necessary. This can be seen in the hesitance that many posters show in their comments, as well as in the feeling that they are somehow obligated to express their feelings in the public forum of the message board. In the following comments pulled from the message boards of deceased teens, the posters are struggling to understand tragic loss with emotional words to the departed. The first three are from the MySpace page of a young woman, Valerie, and clearly show that for some mourners, time was needed before they felt able to comment, an act which seems to signify the permanence of the loss:

Valerie - I have not been able to bring myself to comment because I do not want to believe this is even true.³

Valerie, Valerie, Valerie...this has taken me awhile to leave you a comment since you've been gone and I thought it was time that I really need to do this...I hope you will get this somehow, but I know that you can't reply back to me

It's been a week since you've been gone and I think I really need to do this...

In the next comment a poster questions the public nature of the MySpace page:

Jason, I have trouble understanding why I would write to you for everyone to see, when I know you understand anyway, but, damn, sometimes I'm just compelled to. I miss you bro.

Similar themes are found in these comments posted to the page of a young woman:

Hey Kate!!! I'm sorry I haven't left you a message yet but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I'm gonna try now but just thought of writing this to you knowing that you are gone makes me cry. It's not fair.

Hey baby girl just wanted to let you know that I am still thinkin of you and I visit your site all of the time it's just hard to always stay long enough to leave comments I love and miss you everyday.

For many mourners it appears that posting a comment is a step toward dealing with the loss. This seems similar to a loved one visiting and possibly speaking to a grave marker in the cemetery, only on MySpace, the act is done in a public sphere. Each comment will theoretically last as long as the site itself

In a recent article in the Miami Herald, MySpace researcher Larry Rosen suggests that “when teens visit a crash site or grave marker they grieve alone. But at virtual memorials they meet an entire peer grieving community” (Bird 2006). The existence of a “community” of grief online is debatable. The very attitude of society toward the Internet seems to be that anything communicated online becomes public domain, independently of the scrambling legal networks that are constantly evolving around Internet usage. The much-publicized debates over the legality of music and movie piracy are evidence of this mindset. Anyone who expresses personal, private grief through a comment left on a MySpace message board knows that his or her message can potentially be viewed by anyone who wishes to look. And the similarities in the types of comments left on the same pages show a congruity in grief, but I have found very little evidence of any of the bereaved acknowledging the grief of any other message-poster. Commonly, the posters express feelings of loneliness and abandonment in the absence of the departed, giving the impression that MySpace mourners grieve alone, together. Nothing can be inferred about

the coping mechanisms in place outside of the cyberworld, of course, but in terms of virtual memorialization, the community of grievers seems to be united in isolation. For instance, these three comments left by three different female posters on the MySpace page of a 15-year-old girl who died in a car crash indicate intense feelings of loneliness and isolation in their experiences of grief:

lisa i really need you right now things are going wrong...my life is so turned around and i am lost.i dont know what to do anymore.

im beginning to hate life, once again... i know that i shouldnt, but what do you do when you feel like theres no one around to be there for you or even wonder whats wrong.... i just want to leave, and be with you... it seems that you are the only person that i could rely on to love me and care about me

I miss you sooo much and I think about you everyday. I can't wait to be with you and see you again. I don't know if you know or not... but you were really the **only** person I could tell everything to. I could trust you... like no other person. I'm not afraid to die anymore, 'cuz I know... that when I do end this life here... I'll be with you. And I don't want to sound crazy, but that would make me soo happy... to be able to spend time with you again. But I'll write more sometime else... sometime soon. I love you! and I miss you terribly. I'll talk to you later. <3

It is possible that these comments function as cries for help, given the public nature of MySpace, but it also seems quite likely that there is a high level of teenage solipsism occurring in these comments. It is hard, if not impossible, to determine to what extent these expressions of grief are public posturing and to what extent they are genuine, personal expressions of deep feeling.

As discussed above, a main feature of MySpace is the creation of individual identities or “profiles,” which serve as thoroughly constructed personae to represent the essence of a personality. All MySpace interaction, then, is carried out along the lines of these public-oriented expressions of the private. Because all MySpace identities are so

specifically manufactured, and the representation of self may differ from the reality of self, the only means of truly sincere expression must focus on the individual's voice, or the text of comments and messages. The amount of posturing involved in the construction of these identities makes it difficult to gauge sincerity, though the undeniable presence of casual conversation, fraught with jarring slang and mistaken grammar, grants a much clearer picture of true personality reaching out from the manufactured profiles. The ideas conveyed in these casual comments are often so heartbreakingly direct and unselfconsciously fumbling that it leads me to believe that the expressions of grief communicated on these message boards are quite genuine. They seem to be in most cases intended by the posters to be very personal, private transmissions to the deceased, although it must be stressed that the public component is so thoroughly pervasive in Internet culture that the extent of its influence, conscious or not, upon communication, is impossible to delineate. As Montana Miller stresses in her work on the subject of web memorials, one never knows exactly which “frame” these teens are working in, and to further confuse the issue, the teens themselves do not know: “How are the performances keyed? The senses and sensibilities we used to use to gauge this no longer apply. It’s like trying to apply the rules and ethics of friendship to your 387 MySpace ‘friends’” (Miller 2007).

In some instances it seems that the public aspect becomes more important to the griever than the private. This may be the case in the frequent postings by people who claim to have not really known the deceased well, but who are nonetheless struck by the loss. The sense of community becomes especially important to these posters both in the

sense that they experienced the loss of the deceased on a community level—in that the sudden death confronts the poster with the fact of his own fragile mortality—and in the sense that the act of expressing grief on a public page joins them to the supposed community of grievers. In this community of isolated mourning, the grieving acquaintance can easily enter the online grieving process, avoiding the awkwardness of interacting with the close friends and immediate family of the deceased, to whom the grief is socially supposed to belong. As could be expected, this seems especially prevalent in cases of particularly random deaths, such as a Wal-Mart employee who was killed in the parking lot by a stranger who began indiscriminately firing a gun. With car accidents and suicides, there is often still some notion of personal responsibility—maybe the victim was driving too fast or going somewhere he should not have been—but in cases of random violence,, the pure unpredictability of death is shocking:

R.I.P Billy! u will be missed buddy..Didnt no u that well but everytime we chilled or talked it was always something funny..u cracked me up... You are a caring person n dont no why such a thing would happen to u...

This world is quite a scary place to live in at times.
Even though i never met him he is part of my family, the walmart family, i along with him both work there, i a cashier and he a cart boy.

Billy,
Though we only hung out once this tragedy has really impacted me. Why someone could do that to someone innocent is sick.

The posters can be seen struggling to understand violence in the world. They are expressing confusion and fear at the simple abruptness death can impose on anyone's life at any time. Although “Billy” was a peripheral character, or even a stranger, in their lives, the unpredictability of his death could just as easily happen to any one of the posters or

their own loved ones.

The idea of a supporting community of grief is often very apparent in the studies of roadside memorials. Everett writes of a memorial as a “gathering place” for friends of the deceased, and of reports of “groups of teens” congregating at a site to mourn. The parents of the deceased often come to take an active role in the creation and maintenance of a memorial out of concern for the emotional health of the deceased's friends. While there is some direct evidence of parents communicating with friends of the deceased through MySpace, there is perhaps greater evidence that this is often not the case. Every profile lists the most recent login date for each user. Many accounts have not been accessed since the day of death, suggesting that there is no adult participation in the grieving process of the bereft adolescents.

Motion and Staticity

Central to the importance of a roadside memorial to the grieving friends of the deceased is the existential resonance of the point of departure from life into death. The memorial, often a cross at the side of the road, can function as a physical representation of the transition from life into death. Visitors to the memorial are confronted with the fact of a deep and long-lasting change; they visit the site because they feel that something of the deceased's spirit remains, but the irrevocability of the loss is symbolized in the traditional Christian symbology of life-into-death transition, the cross. Contemplation of death's permanence coupled with belief in the persistence of the soul can be an aid in dealing with grief. A woman interviewed by Everett describes this occurrence at a

memorial site for her daughter: “[Tara’s] friends tell me all the time that when they’re feeling down or they’ve got a problem or whatever that they’ll go up there and sit at the cross. And then they’ll feel better when they leave. So I feel like to them it’s, it’s a place to go, someplace that they feel like Tara’s still there, you know, and I, it’s hard to explain” (2002:93).

There is a sense of progression, or at least of motion, in that a life was lived and then underwent a drastic and visible change into the form of a departed soul. This movement of being may be behind the affective charge of the memorial over the actual grave site. Everett quotes another woman who has lost a son: “...even though I go to the cemetery, I don’t, it didn’t seem like that was where I was drawn because he’s not really at the cemetery. For some reason or another this location is where he was, so I would go there and so I wanted to put a cross there because that was where I went the most. And so I guess the symbolism is that that’s kind of where I felt his spirit was last” (2002:96). The mourners experience a feeling of the momentum of a life force that hangs about an accident site.

MySpace memorials for the most part lack this sense of motion, which is all the more striking in the context of the Internet which is characterized by constant motion and fleeting temporality. Many MySpace users check their accounts at least once a day, visiting the profiles of their friends to see the latest posted pictures, comments, blogs, and music. If a profile does not experience steady change, it becomes increasingly less likely to be visited. The page of a dead MySpace user necessarily remains static. Comments accrue, especially on birthdays, holidays, and the anniversary of death, but the personal

aspects of the deceased's constructed online identity experience no change. The pictures remain the same, no blogs are added, and often the last log-in date remains painfully close to the date of death. The song picked to play for the visitor never changes, even though it has often well out-lived its pop chart expiration date. In an arena so dependent on fluid and constant motion, these sites possess an eerie stillness. This staticity seems on the surface to be appropriate for the funerary atmosphere of the message board; however, the representation of physical change—like the progressive nature of the roadside cross or even the solid finality of a granite slab—is wholly absent. The teens who visit a dead friend's site sometimes seem unnerved by the lack of change. They express distress at the tension between the staticity of the deceased's profile and the continuance of their own lives, now marred by pain of loss. The following quotes, taken from several different message boards, all reflect the emotional turmoil of confronting on MySpace pages the unchanging song choices and photos of their lost friends:

This song makes me really sad...

I think cuz I listened too them ALL THE TIME in 8th/9th grade when we hung out so much.. i hate how memories hurt so bad...
i love you.

Its so hard for me to come on here and see this

damn girl i miss u sO much! when i lOok at ur pics. i think abOut ur smile, ur laigh..just everything n i miss it sO much! sO much has changed cOurT! so much! n it hurts.

fuck man im missin you! i look at your page still everyday n can't believe ur not around ne more. love ya man stay up n keep on ballin man! :(

Everytime I look at this page, and your last login, it's almost as if I expect something to change, but it never does... a tear will always shed in my eye.

One result of this conflict of motion and staticity is the increased desire of the mourners for permanence of the deceased's page. A great deal of this feeling is probably an extension of the same desire to protect the memory of the deceased from the anonymity of teenage death exhibited in the erection of roadside memorials. Because there is no physical, real-world "space" involved in a MySpace page, the apparent possibility of forever losing the traces of the deceased becomes intensified. MySpace has been plagued since its inception with persistent rumors that it will be either taken down or start charging members to maintain accounts. The increasing frequency of spamming, phishing, and other chronic email and Internet hazards throughout the MySpace community may also be weakening general user trust in the site. Many comments emphatically promise the deceased that they will not be forgotten, using all caps and bold type to stress phrases like "never forget" and "always remember," but there are also frequent examples of this fear of "losing" the deceased in specific relation to the MySpace profile:

does the pain ever go away angie? like a part of me wants it to bc im tired of hurting all the time, but another part doesnt want it to go away bc in a sence thats me forgetting a part of you and not remembering what happened and how much i fuckin love you! i really just hope you know how much i love you angie... and thats one thing that'll never die... i miss you and love oyu with all my heart!

i hate how your MySpace is deteriorating :/

Who ever is running Billy's profile now...plz NEVER delete it.

The idea that time erodes all traces of the departed seems to be especially poignant to MySpace grieverers. There is evidence that many of these MySpace dead have active roadside memorials and grave sites in addition to their online profiles, but the

motionlessness of the profile seems to possess more immediacy in its static depiction of the deceased at the time of his or her death. More than simply a depiction even, it represents an act of creation by the deceased, who put something of “himself” into the construction of his online identity. While the physical memorial sites make manifest the physical loss of the person, the MySpace profile holds the memory of the deceased frozen in time, keeping the deceased unchanging in the minds of the mourning. The transformative aspect of death is removed, and the deceased becomes effectively a “ghost” in a space that is not tangible and a time that is arrested. This is not necessarily a hindrance to the healthy overcoming of grief by the bereft, but it is something I believe to be unique to the medium of the Internet. The passing of time in the “real” world affects the mourners who are sometimes distressed, as above, and sometimes take a kind of comfort in the staticity of the profile, though mindful of the sense that it too could vanish. The act of checking the deceased's MySpace page and commenting on it becomes ritualistic for some users. There is often a sense of disbelief in the amount of time that has passed as well as the idea that the deceased can be held onto in some manner through the continued activity on his MySpace profile:

every time i come in here, i always want to tell you the same thing. and that is, i love you. but i want to say something more than that this time. something like i think about you all the time and how i love to see your face everyday even though they're just pictures. i still love you tons and i miss you very very much.

It sucks that its been 7 months today. Time has just been flying and I dont want it to. I wish it was like May 3rd when i was talking to u in class before i left for my game.

heey tyler i was lookin at ur page like everytime im on here lol i cant believe its been almost a year. it seems like it was jus yesterday but then again it seems like

4ever its weird :[but i miss u just the same especially now that its summer. i keep thinkin about last year and how at this time we were havin so much fun* everyone Loves u & misses you down here *xoxo*

There is evidence that as time increases the distance between the mourners and the deceased, the posters worry that the deceased will lose importance to their lives. These posters express the fear that if they overcome their grief and they “go on with their lives,” the dead friend will cease to exist altogether, not just in the physical mortal sense. There is a sense that the passage of time lessens the importance of past friendships and events, and we can plainly see attempts on these MySpace pages at safeguarding memory against the steady sweep of time. The widening gap between the time the deceased was alive and the mourner's present-day is especially visible on a MySpace profile, where the unchanging personality of the dead exists seemingly forever.

Grief Patterns

Certain trends emerge in the comments left on the pages of dead MySpace users. Some grieverers exhibit a more intuitive, feeling-based connection to the spirit of the departed, while other grieverers tend to focus on past memories and what they imagine the deceased might be up to in heaven. Some posters write of “sensing” the presence of the deceased and a certainty in the knowledge that the deceased is actively watching over them and participating in their lives. Others seem to focus on the continuation of past activities into the afterlife, often instructing their deceased friends to get the party in heaven ready for their own eventual arrivals. They much less frequently experience the immediate presence of the dead than do the intuitive grieverers.

The patterns emerging on the MySpace message boards fit the descriptions of grieving trends discussed by Terry Martin and Kenneth Doka in their book *Men Don't Cry . . . Women Do*, written in 2000. In this work Martin and Doka write of “intuitive” and “instrumental” patterns of grieving, which the authors stress are related to, but certainly not determined by gender. The intuitive style is characterized by an intensely feeling-based affective experience of mourning and is generally more prevalent in female mourners, while an instrumental griever experiences mourning on a more physical, cognitive level, and is more prevalent in male mourners. Intuitive grievers find solace in the outward expression of anguish and the sharing of feelings with other mourners, while instrumental grievers are less affected on a gut level, transferring their energy into action, often in the form of physical or written dedications to the deceased. Again, the authors are careful to assert that both intuitive and instrumental patterns of grief are found among mourners of both sexes, and that the prevalence of the intuitive and instrumental among the female and male genders respectively, is almost certainly the result of the socialization of gender roles. The examples used in this paper tend to fall along these gender lines, with female and male mourners often exhibiting aspects of the intuitive and instrumental styles of grief, respectively; however, more data would need to be collected before this observation could be discussed conclusively.

These findings echo those of Gillian Bennett in her study of supernatural beliefs among women, *Traditions of Belief* (1988). She describes the commonality of the belief in the “good dead” among women, referring to spirits that are helpful and protective. Bennett writes, “As they describe it, they are made aware of the souls of the good dead

more often through sensing their presence than by seeing them in physical form”

(1998:30). Belief in the good dead reinforces the traditionally “feminine” intuitive notion that the world is an inherently good and deeply meaningful place. “A traditional belief is accepted most readily if it depends upon the utilization of intuition, imagination, insight; if it is an involuntary experience rather than a chosen activity; if it enhances or extends personal relationships; and if it gives reassurance of the goodness of God and man”

(1998:31). Many female MySpace mourners comment very directly thanking the deceased for protection that they seem certain has been provided:

i got my license 2 days ago..i wore your necklace for good luck.. a butterfly landed rite next to me and stayed there for like 5 mins before i went in the car... hmmm maybe it was you :) i miss you like crazyyy keep me safe while im driving. i love youo and miss you so much
918 forevrr

Kelly...

You've been so heavy on heart the last few days. When I get into my car accident a few weeks ago, I know you were there to protect me, bcuz my accident coulda been way worse than what it was, and I think you were watching over me, not letting the air bags go off, bcuz everyone is shocked they didnt go off...but its a good thing they didnt bcuz I woulda got really hurt just from the air bags...Thank You for being my angel and always watching over me and everyone down here... I love you and miss you sooo much, I think of you everyday, every song on the radio makes me think of you, and I know you enjoy my kisses I blow you everyday when I drive by! I love you girl!

♥Nicole

Hey Pete! Well I just wanted to thank you for being my angel today and making sure that my accident didn't end up much worse... I know you were there and everyone told me I was very lucky I didn't flip, and that I walked away unharmed... They all said that I must have had an angel looking out for me... And I knew it was you... I love you Pete!

Interestingly, these young women assume that because the deceased died in car accidents, the realm of automobile safety somehow falls under their personal jurisdiction, similar to

the functions of Catholic saints.

Many intuitive grievors also express thanks to the deceased for the manifestation of certain “signs” to communicate their continued presence in the lives of the posters. This can range from the above-mentioned appearance of a butterfly to the playing of a certain song on the radio or even significant formations in the clouds:

the other day, you randomly came into my mind right when I felt alone... and then, for some reason, I turned around and immediately looked out the window and there was a sunstreaked sky just about to begin one of the most beautiful sunsets I've ever seen... it brought tears to my eyes. It was as if you took my chin and turned my head to show me that you are still with me and to show me how beautiful life can really be when put into it's simplest forms.

I love you sweetheart and think about you EVERYDAY! Yesterday I saw that rainbow :) U knew exactly what I needed... Thank you!

There is even some evidence that the public nature of MySpace may influence the experience of otherworldly communications. On the message board of a young girl who died in a car accident, many of her friends write of the same types of signs from the deceased. The quantity of these experiences on this one page may indicate that the mourners are taking cues from one another. Numerous examples are given by different posters of the popular Shakira song, “Hips Don't Lie,” being used by the deceased to offer reassurance and various phenomena in the sky are reported, including one girl who posted a photograph of a cloud formation loosely in the shape of the number '3,' the uniform number of the deceased:

hips dont lie has come on the radio like twice everyday when i'm listening to it.. and right away i'm like yup, vals with us! i know it =) i love youuuu soooooo much girl. i'll keep praying and i can't wait to see you again! ♥

I was at rehab today and while I was doing my excercises doesn't hips don't lie come on. I had a big smile on my face because I knew you were telling me you

were there with me. I miss you so much! I can't wait to see you again someday!

Everytime I'm stressin over school or upset, your song comes on Val. And I know it you, telling me to smile, and that I'll get through it. Miss you. Love you.

Ashley and I went to Subway to eat today and has soon as we sat down doesnt hips dont lie come on.. we both looked at each other and said thanks val for letting us know your with us.. you just love to do that to us... i miss you soo much.. love you hun cant wait to see u again!!!

the other day at field hockey it was soo shitty out and as soon as michelle scored it got soo sunny out and we know it was you letting haley know you were proud ... me and ruth just looked at eachother and we were like ahh VALERIE. and today for the first home game everyone kept finding 4 leaf clovers ..we know youre always with us girl.

we lost to palmerton tonight.
 how depressing is that.
 i know you were watching.
 @ the beginning of the game. i kept starring @ the clouds around the moon..
 then the letters L.. A.. V appeared..
 VAL.. then a big heart formed around the moon.
 that brought the biggest smile to my face.. and i started to get teary eyed.

I love you val..and i know your looking over all of us. I saw another number 3 in the sky when me and my friends were going out last week!! Love you girl. **[Left several weeks after the user posted a photograph of a cloud formation to the site.]**

It is common for intuitive grieverers to use the MySpace message boards to confirm to the deceased that they are receiving the communications from the afterlife. Naturally, due to the life-altering nature of the loss of a close friend, many teens find themselves dreaming frequently of the dead. Many times they seem to recognize this as a product of stress and grief, but sometimes it becomes apparent that these posters are interpreting the dreams as attempts by the deceased to make contact. As a result, comments spring up assuring the deceased that the attempt has been acknowledged and should be repeated.

The subconscious nature of dreams, however, leaves these posters frustrated by their inability to control the situation or say the things they wish to say. MySpace message boards give them this control, but it is only a one-sided conversation with the dead:

hi leah.... i know we talked and u gave me a hug good bye the other day in my dream.. i know it was real because even in my dream i was crying to you telling u that u were gone n beggin u not to leave me, but wen i turned to look at u again u were gone!

Baby girl, I'm trying, I had a dream of you the other night, thanks, You know I need the visit!!! I Love You BH FOREVER & EVER

Call me again please !!! My dreams feel more real every time I have them. I long to have them, that at times all I want to do is sleep all day just to get close to you. I need you so bad right now. I want to hear your voice and see new pics of you.

hey ant-man i love you so much i had a dream like a while ago that you came down from heaven and all i said was i love you and good bye then you went into the sky and i woke up crying i hope you have seen courtney in her dreams like i asked you to well i love you soo much!

Comments on the pages of MySpace dead relating experiences of otherworldly contact mostly fall under the rubric of the intuitive style of grief. They *feel* the dead as a continued presence in their lives, and often readily interpret daily events and dreams as communications from the beyond. There may even be something in the general communicative nature of MySpace that readily lends itself to these intuitive experiences.

Trends in the comments left by instrumental grievers are generally more oriented toward the past and future, focusing on old memories and looking forward to continuing the friendship in the afterlife. These posters seem to view life and death as distinctly separate spheres with much less evidence of spirits actively interacting with the living, although they do share with intuitive grievers the belief that the dead are able to read the messages they are posting. The posts usually stress past memories and future reunions,

with the only mention of the present arising in the form of creative dedications. The following are examples of future reunion posts:

so im thinkin a keg... a few kegs lots of food, im talkin like all the snacks man. cookies chips dip crackers(not like the kind we are) an island to party on(im sure theres a good one big enough to fit us all on up there)fire wood guitars and the sax fa sho. i dont know how long you have but it better be there when we get there brother because its gonna be the biggest party youve ever seen!!!!!! love ya bro

wutup my nigga, me dave n jimmy bout to visit u n smoke a blunt with u jus like old times

Hey bro i think about you all the time and everytime i do it brings a tear to my eye how something so horrible happened to some1 so nice. i Miss you cant wait to see you once again but we all know you are living it up where you are now. see ya when i get there.

made some pumpkin pies like we did last year...
make jesus one.. tell him Shawn Carter taught me that bomb ass recipe..=-)

And creative dedications:

ill smoke my next blunt to you =/

r.i.p. i'll lay down a sweet ass happy hardcore set for ya at the next party at the endof the month

happy birthday angela i still miss u so much u'll neva kno we haven a party 2nite jus 4 u gurl

Instrumental expressions of grief on MySpace pages mostly fit this pattern of viewing death as final and divisive. Communication with the dead on their part appears to be a one-sided endeavor; the dead can hear them but can not interact with them. As this conception effectively removes the dead from the present realm of existence, the comments of these grieverers more frequently focus on the continuation of earthly activities “in the name of” the deceased, with the idea that the dead is appreciating this from the afterlife and even anticipating the future reunion. These comments exhibit a

more cognitive approach to grief in that the mourners seem to accept that the loss is permanent and begin to reshape their lives around the loss, dedicating their lives, songs, and drugs to the deceased, without the intensity of feeling exhibited by the intuitive mourners.

MySpace Mourning as Folk Religion

Communication with the dead via MySpace message boards recontextualizes the grieving process for the cyber-orientated generation of American youth. This virtual arena for the experience of death and grief exists at the intersection of the public and private lives of teenagers, and on an existential level much of the emotional charge of dead users' profiles is born of the dynamic contradictions of motion and staticity in Internet space-time. The active engagement and communication with the deceased can be described in terms of patterns of grief. What emerges is a complex and multi-layered depiction of teenage grief adapted to and influenced by the cyber medium.

Functionally, the phenomenon of MySpace mourning reclaims death from the clinical hands of highway statistics and the funerary industry, making it accessible to the individual on a very personal level. Every poster on a MySpace profile is free to express grief in whatever way he or she feels best pertains to his or her personal experience of the death. Specific trends in comments do indicate the possibility of public influence on the poster (as may be the case when multiple posters relate nearly identical experiences of signs from the deceased), but the *sense* of the allowance of personal approaches to grief remains present. The casual conversational tone of many of the comments abounds with

individual fumbling towards a coming to terms with loss.

Folk religion, based on Don Yoder's definition (1974), is often conceived of as a set of beliefs existing apart from and along side of "official" religious beliefs and practices. Leonard Primiano responded to this conception by placing more emphasis on the individual, personal aspect of religious belief (1995). The act of commenting upon the profile of a dead MySpace user brings many of the folk religious aspects of the creation and maintenance of roadside memorials into the digital age. Both phenomena can be viewed as a folk reaction to the objectivity of the modern American death industry. They personalize death, keeping the individual characteristics of the deceased alive and preserved in a space exterior to memory and photographs. Any individual who wishes to participate in the grieving process, including communication with the dead, may do so, whether it be talking to a cross at an accident site or via the medium of a MySpace message board. They are both unique approaches to mourning that offer alternatives to the traditional funerals and cemetery rituals which seem cold and impersonal by comparison.

The psychological aspects of Internet mourning compared to roadside memorialization remain to be seen, but could prove to function differently as MySpace profiles have a lack of motion contrary to the transformative symbolism of roadside memorials. The oldest profiles of dead MySpace users are no more than a few years old and already possess a haunting stillness. A few of the sites, just a year after the user's death, have already experienced a dramatic decrease in the frequency of posted messages. Except for a few who post with regularity, many mourners post only on birthdays,

anniversaries of death, and holidays. And of course, the deceased remains unaffected by time and space, frozen at the age of death for as long as the MySpace phenomenon maintains popularity.

Only time will tell what effects the transition of grief into the digital world will have on the memorialization process. The ubiquitous presence of the Internet in today's society is still in many ways an emergent phenomenon, with new advances and trends appearing almost daily. The current popularity of MySpace and the movement of everyday life into the sphere of cyberspace affect youth interaction in a complex variety of ways. As traditions of grief are adapted to the new virtual world, many exciting vistas for folkloric study are opening to the observant, and the rapidity of change makes the continued documentation of the digital influence all the more important in understanding modern culture.

Vernacular memorialization practices as folk expressions of grief and mourning continue to appear in modern society in part because of their adaptability. As MySpace pages become converted into memorial sites, echoing the increasing presence of the Internet in daily interactions, other areas of contemporary importance are similarly incorporated into the creation vernacular memorials. In the next chapter I will discuss ghost bike memorials, a particular form of urban commemoration which combines aspects of other vernacular memorials with modern ecological concerns.

Notes

¹ Versions of this chapter were presented at the 2007 meeting of the Western States Folklore Society, and the 2007 meeting of the American Folklore Society, where it was awarded the Don Yoder Prize for the Best Student Paper in Folk Belief or Religious Folklife.

² This chapter owes much to the work of Everett (2002), Santino (2006), and Miller (2007), as well as to the encouragement of Dr. Daniel Wojcik at the University of Oregon.

³ All names of MySpace users have been changed to protect users' privacy. I have replicated the spelling and grammar of all comments in their original public syntax.

CHAPTER III

GHOST BIKE MEMORIALS

In October 2003, the first “ghost bike” appeared in St. Louis, Missouri, to memorialize the death of a bicyclist hit by a car.¹ A local bicycle shop owner witnessed the accident and placed a mangled bike, painted stark white, on the scene, with a sign proclaiming, “Cyclist struck here.” The movement quickly spread beyond St. Louis, and similar memorials have since appeared in 30 other cities across North and South America, Europe, and Australia, creating a network of mourners and activists working to increase vehicular awareness of bicyclists. The sudden popularity of ghost bike memorials raises questions of meaning and intent: What exactly do these memorials say and to whom? How do they function in relation to other temporary memorial forms? With special emphasis on ghost bikes in Eugene and Portland, Oregon, this paper, illustrated with visual examples, explores the dynamics of vernacular expressions of grief and folk art as resistance to mainstream American automobile culture.²

As expressions of mourning performed in the public sphere, ghost bikes, like other temporary memorials, redefine public spaces as significant and contested. Similar to roadside crosses commemorating automobile fatalities, these bicycles seem to both memorialize individual deaths and serve as warnings to drivers. This cautionary aspect

may be a motivating force in the spread of the ghost bike movement—its proponents often view the creation of these sites as a form of resistance to modern automobile-dominated society. Various social activists, including politically-minded artist co-ops, environmental groups, and advocates of pedestrian and bicycle safety, have found expression through the creation of these memorials. Candles, pictures, notes, and other items accumulate at these sites, as individual mourners offer personal expressions of grief, often anonymously, in the material culture forms traditionally associated with roadside memorials.

Existing at the site of death, separate from the “official” means of memorialization in cemeteries and urns, ghost bikes operate on the vernacular religious level, offering a means of personalized mourning beyond the institutionalized avenues of expression.³ Primarily an urban phenomenon, the ghost bike movement is locally autonomous, with different groups operating more or less independently of one another in major metropolitan areas. Yet the different city groups are connected through several websites that catalog the creation of ghost bikes with uploaded pictures, offer online maps to the different memorial sites, encourage perpetuation of the practice through recruitment, and provide links to other ghost bike-related websites.

The underground, politically motivated character of the ghost bike movement converts the site of memorialization into a rallying point for the cyclist subculture, transforming the emotional energy of mourning into a force of protest. As ecological concerns continue gain attention, growing interest in alternative forms of transportation may seem to threaten the traditional dominance of mainstream car culture in American

society. Could these ghost bike memorials be markers of a larger culture war being waged along political lines, dividing cyclists and car drivers into the traditionally opposing camps of the more ecologically-minded left and the conservative right?

The Appearance of Ghost Bikes

In the first week of June 2008, a ghost bike was placed on the corner at the intersection of 13th and Willamette Streets in downtown Eugene, Oregon to commemorate the life of David Minor. The 27-year-old was killed when a car hit him as he was riding his bike through the intersection at 3:45 p.m. on June 2. A few days after the accident a bicycle was chained to a streetlight on the corner, bike, chain, and lock all painted white. A sign was set above the bike stating Minor's name and the date of his death, and a wide variety of freshly bundled flowers, potted flowers, photographs, poems, articles of clothing and various other presumably meaningful material items. Typical of the kind of assemblage that is frequently built around a temporary memorial, the grouped artifacts seem to be both offerings to the departed and a sort of narrative in bricolage form to reconstruct the identity of the deceased for a public audience. Messages written directly to Minor abound, usually some variation of "We love you" or "We miss you." Graffiti has been incorporated into the shrine; some of the messages are spray-painted onto a utility box attached to the lamppost, others have been written on the sidewalk⁴. Most of the photographs left at Minor's memorial are of the deceased himself at different ages, some with friends and family. A poem left at the memorial was written by Minor in the fifth grade, laminated and with a handwritten message from a mourner. An empty

whiskey bottle lies near a cymbal; a little farther away an old shoe has been placed among the flowers. These items taken together provide a glimpse of the life that has been lost, piecing the identity of the deceased back together in the wake of sudden tragedy.

But of course the most striking component of the memorial is the bicycle itself. There is something fundamentally eerie and solemn about the image of the ghost bike, even before it is known what the bike represents. It is a bicycle, a symbol of motion frozen in stillness, painted white as a skeleton, glowing and distinctly separate from the familiar cityscape that surrounds it. There is an uncanny quality to ghost bike memorials that demands notice. Literary theorist Nicholas Royle defines the uncanny as a “peculiar commingling of the familiar and the unfamiliar. It can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context or of something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context” (Royle 2003:1).⁵ In the case of ghost bikes we find a familiar object, the bicycle, in a familiar setting, the city. Yet the effect is unsettling from the first glimpse, and all because of the strangeness of white paint. Approaching the Eugene ghost bike, located on a busy sidewalk in front of a Kinko’s copy center, one is struck by the incongruity of the stillness and solemnity that hangs about the memorial, placed as it is in a center of bustle and commerce. This incongruity of appearance, the uncanny quality, imparts an authoritative aura to the memorial which makes the public take heed.

Bertolt Brecht’s “alienation effect” (A-effect) describes a similar process of making the familiar suddenly strange. He writes, “The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one’s attention is to be drawn, from

something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected” (Willett 1964:143). To Brecht, the A-effect has a potential political application, a “combative character” (Willett 1964:270). When the familiar is made strange, it demands special attention from an audience forced to reconsider what it thought it knew, what it thought was natural. Once the familiar, the previously hidden, is brought to light, we can question its naturalness, and by extension the naturalness of many of our suppositions. A bicycle painted white and symbolic of a particular style of human death (bicycle-car collision) invites a reconsideration of the place of the bicycle and the bicycle operator in the urban landscape. At this point a political agenda of increased awareness on the parts of both cyclists and motorists of the issues concerning bicycle safety can be introduced to the audience.

The Message: Cyclist vs. Motorist, Intention vs. Reception

But exactly what does a ghost bike say, politically speaking? One of the primary intentions of the original ghost bike in St. Louis in 2003 was to express outrage at the carelessness of auto drivers and to give voice to the cyclists whose safety was being daily jeopardized by a general lack of awareness. The man behind the original bike is Patrick Van Der Tuin, who worked in a St. Louis bicycle shop. After witnessing a car swerve into a bike lane, severely wounding a local cyclist, Van Der Tuin took a junk bike, painted it white, and smashed the front of it with a sledgehammer. “I wanted it to be as shocking as possible,” Van Der Tuin says of his creation. “I had no problem completely wrecking the front end of the bike to get the point across” (Mitchum 2008). He was not

alone in his concern. Largely spread through word of mouth via Internet message boards, the ghost bike phenomenon exploded, and ghost bikes have been found in more than 35 cities around the world, from Los Angeles and New York City to Sao Paulo, Prague, and Hobart (www.ghostbikes.net).

Yet the same message boards that transformed one man's outrage into a widespread symbol of growing unrest in the cycling community show conflicting takes on where the attention is drawn. The specter of blame hovers over every ghost bike memorial and increasing tension between cyclists and motorists is heightening the issue of personal responsibility. Nearly every message-board posting that mentions a ghost bike leads to often heated online debates over whether the fatality was caused by recklessness on the part of the cyclist (not wearing a helmet, riding against traffic, failing to obey traffic signals) or the motorist (failing to recognize marked bicycle lanes, not heeding pedestrian signals, driving under the influence). A recent article in the *New York Times* titled "Moving Targets" refers to relations between cyclists and motorists as on the mutually antagonistic level of "Hatfield-McCoy hostility" and proceeds to list a number of violent clashes between individual cyclists and motorists that have occurred over the past year (Hoffman 2008). The sighting of a ghost bike evokes strong, though varying, reactions from both camps, although all seem to agree that they are distinctly unsettling.

One blogger posted the following on his livejournal page: "they choke me up when I see em. I saw a little girl's one once. I couldn't deal when I read the story. I think people need to obviously wear their helmets."⁶ Another commenter, calling himself "varro" posted on the same page,

We should put a "Wear your helmet, or this might be you" by the Ghost Bikes. There are some blameless bike riders, but there are way too many bike riders who ride without lights or a helmet, wearing dark clothing at night, drunk, and who disobey traffic laws. Hopefully, the ghost bikes will disabuse them of the notion that wearing a cap or hoodie will protect their head if they collide with a car or object.⁷

The opinion shared by many on this page is that ghost bikes are intended to raise awareness among cyclists of the dangers of not wearing a helmet. In comments such as this one, cyclists are villainized as willfully ignorant of traffic laws and common safety precautions. Blame is shifted off automobile drivers, who face the potential danger of becoming entangled in tragedy caused by the self-destructive behaviors of egocentric cyclists. As opposing sides of the culture war line up, charges of a dangerous lack of personal responsibility are tossed back and forth between cyclists and motorists, with both sides sharing partial claim on the truth.

This is different from the stated intention of some of the groups responsible for spreading the ghost bike movement, as expressed on their official websites. Ghostbikes.org offers the following explanation: "We hope to create a space where those lost on dangerous streets can be remembered by their loved ones, members of their local communities, and others from around the world. We also hope to inspire more people to start installing ghost bikes in their communities and to initiate changes that will make us all safer on the streets."⁸ Here the twin goals of commemoration and bike safety activism are in the forefront. Susan Minor, the mother of the young man for whom the Eugene ghost bike was created, likewise sees the potential for multiple meanings, saying, "I think that the bike memorial serves many purposes and has different meanings for different people. I don't feel a need to balance the individual commemorative meaning with the

political messages. Instead, I think that they simply coexist.”⁹ Minor has also worked to protect her son’s memory from reductive generalizations on the importance of bicycle safety.

After the accident, the woman driving the car involved in the collision, worked to get legislation enacted that would require all cyclists to wear helmets. While David Minor had not been wearing a helmet at the time of the accident, his family was informed that a helmet would not have prevented Minor’s death. In subsequent debates about the helmet laws, Mrs. Minor and her husband were dismayed to see their son’s name and memorial invoked as proof of such a law’s necessity. In a letter published in local paper, *Eugene Weekly*, the Minors wrote:

Certainly, we support the use of bike helmets, and wish he had worn one every time he rode his bike, but implying that it would have saved his life is not only inaccurate, it is painful for us to continue to read about our son in this way. He was so much more than “the young man who didn’t wear his helmet.” He was a passionate believer in the environment, sustainability, and social justice, and we feel it is much more appropriate that he be remembered for these things.¹⁰

Shannon Sprouse, who created the bike for Minor, shares these feelings, saying, “I think the main thing the bike is supposed to do is just make people notice . . . make them pay attention to all their little daily things and how they’re affecting people around them.” She would like the bike to encourage awareness, of social concerns, bicycle safety, and, in a general sense, of each other: “. . . because that accident was a moment of two people not really paying attention, which sort of goes against a lot of the stuff that Dave was working towards in his life. It’s just like, ‘Come on, people! Wake up! Pay attention!’”¹¹ This is not a universal sentiment, however.

There are many who view ghost bikes in a less favorable light. Another livejournal commenter posted “What you don't see is an explanation of whether the biker killed himself by being a dumbass, or the car killed him by inattention or something. I disagree with making someone a martyr for your cause just because they died on a bike.”¹² The issue of responsibility for the death of a cyclist is called into question, contesting the sanctimony of the ghost bike memorial. From the Portland blog “Yamabushi Mon Amour”: “It just drives me crazy to beatify these people who were essentially victims of their own carelessness.” The poster continues:

They are not really memorials to the dead, like those crosses you see along the interstate, as much as self-serving efforts to portray the deceased cyclist — and by extension any cyclist — as a helpless victim, free of any responsibility. They should be called “Saint Bikes,” since I believe what they are really intended to do is make the dead kids into guiltless objects of veneration in order to transfer blame from those (and all) cyclists to (all) cars and drivers.¹³

Here again is evidence of a cultural divide and resistance to bicycle culture. Ghost bikes are viewed by this blogger as a singular and concentrated attack on motorists. The assumed political motivation behind the creation of these memorials is overwhelming any claims of individual commemoration in the view of this poster. In these comments, it appears that ghost bikes are having an effect opposite to the intention of the creators.

And who are the creators? While often placed anonymously at accident sites, they appear to be created both by mourners intimately acquainted with the deceased and by activist groups. The ghost bike memorial for David Minor in Eugene was created by his friend Shannon Sprouse, who heard about ghost bikes from a friend in Portland, Oregon.¹⁴ Yet on June 6, four days after the accident, someone posted the following to a local Internet forum: “A cyclist was killed in downtown Eugene on Mon. 6/2. Would

anyone locally be interested in trying to set up a 'Ghost Bike?' The preliminary evidence suggests that it was probably the cyclist's fault, but it would be a good reminder for drivers and cyclists."¹⁵ A few posts down someone responded, "I went by the intersection of 13th and Willamette today (Monday), there is a ghost bike in place."¹⁶ The original poster wrote back, "Well, it's good to see someone's on the ball here in Bluegene [Eugene]. I wonder who installed it?"¹⁷ These comments provide further confirmation that all ghost bike memorials are not necessarily created by mourners close to the deceased; rather, as in the case of the first ghost bike in St. Louis, they could be put up by a member or members of the community drawn to the tragedy through a sense of shared community.

This sense of community is a motivating force behind the formation of "The Street Memorial Project," a New York City activist group for the rights of cyclists and pedestrians which is responsible for the creation of 46 ghost bikes around the city since June 2005.¹⁸ The project was formed in 2007 to continue the work of arts collective "Visual Resistance," which began making and placing ghost bikes in 2005, and to expand the work to include memorials to pedestrian casualties. Their goal is expressly political as they seek to "cultivate a compassionate and supportive community for survivors and friends of those lost and to initiate a change in culture that fosters mutual respect among all people who share the streets." Michael Jones, a creator of the Ghost Bike Project, a grassroots group of concerned cyclists in Portland, Oregon, also points to the importance of community in these memorials: "When you're in a car you don't feel connected to other drivers . . . [As a cyclist] you feel a common bond with other people on bikes.

When you're a cyclist you feel it a lot more when a cyclist dies. When you do something you love, you feel a bond with other people who do it."¹⁹ For the cycling community a ghost bike memorial can function as a reminder of a shared vulnerability on city streets. Leah Todd, who works with the Street Memorial Project, describes this shared vulnerability as "recognition that it could as easily have been any of us. Often these crashes are termed accidents and treated as anomalies; we want to remember and recognize the individual lost and the tragic consequences to their family, community, and the city, to recognize the epidemic nature of the problem."²⁰ Todd's words highlight the overlapping of the cycling community with the friends and family of the deceased in respect to the ghost bike's commemorative function. The memorials that show evidence of frequent visitation often seem to combine the deceased's identity as a cyclist with more individual aspects of his or her personality.

Pictures on ghostbike.org of various ghost bike memorials show that some have accrued assemblages similar to the Eugene ghost bike while others have remained bare. It is unclear exactly why this is, though it most likely has to do with the lack of immediate involvement of friends and family of the deceased, relegating the memorials in these cases to the ranks of more "official" commemoratives such as gravestones, statues, and war memorials. And the relative distance from the deceased in terms of friend or family member likely further affects the function of the memorial in the lives of the various mourners. For instance, the Eugene ghost bike was created by a friend of David Minor while his parents were initially hesitant even to visit it. Minor's mother expressed this

sentiment in a letter to the local radio station, KLCC, which was read on the air by a staff member:

Originally, I thought that I would never go near 13th and Willamette again, but I woke up one morning not too long after the accident and felt that I needed to see it. We went as a family and while it was understandably terribly sad, it was also a comfort to us. The flowers were beautiful, and the ghost bike was a somber and noble tribute to our son. We cry every time we are there, but we have read every note and poem, looked at everything that has been placed there, and been so grateful for those who have chosen to honor our son in this way.²¹

The creation and initial maintenance of a grassroots memorial by friends of the deceased, followed by greater involvement on the part of the immediate family of the deceased is similar to observations made by folklorist Holly Everett in her work with roadside memorials in Texas (2002).

Performativity

Kenneth Doka, in his study of contemporary public mourning practices, understands the creation of temporary memorials as a modern ritual, working on both the conscious and unconscious level to “reaffirm community” and to permit “meaningful action at a disorganized time” (2003:180). This function of temporary memorials has been described as “narrative,” allowing a community of mourners to place the departed into a larger story, often verging on the status of folk hero (Goldstein and Tye 2006; Wojcik 2007).²² The fallen cyclists commemorated by ghost bikes may not fit the typography of the folk hero, but the contextualization of their deaths in the frame of a struggle for cyclists’ rights certainly helps to fit the tragedy into a comprehensible

narrative, and online debates over the appropriation or martyrdom of dead cyclists for the cause indicates that the cyclists may share some attributes of the folk hero.

The function of artistic creation as a way of reinstating a sense of control in the aftermath of traumatic events echoes the observation of folklorist Michael Owen Jones that “the [artistic] expression ... helps the person find and express order and meaning. Incapacitation, incarceration, or the loss of a friend, a relative, or one’s own health fosters introspection, which in turn may promote the production of a song, a story, or other work. Such expressive activity helps the individual readjust to life and its vicissitudes” (1989:192). These ideas are intriguing and may have some bearing on the meaning of ghost bikes, especially in the case of Van Der Tuin’s creation of the first bike. Shannon Sprouse, creator of the ghost bike for David Minor, describes the experience of building the memorial in similar terms:

It was really so shocking for all of us, you know, because it was so just all-of-a-sudden. It was really surreal, like an ‘I just saw him yesterday’ kind of thing. It was so . . . it was relieving when I found out about ghost bikes and that there was something that I could physically do that would be positive, instead of just feeling like so depressed and upset about it all, that I could do something that would have more of a positive spin, and sort of enlighten other people.²³

While the physical creation of a ghost bike may be therapeutic to a mourner, the very existence of the bike, as has been written of other spontaneous memorials, “symbolically ‘cleanses’” the site of tragedy, transforming it into “a consecrated place of remembrance, love, and communion” (Wojcik 2007:216).

As Jack Santino notes, spontaneous shrines may be considered “performative commemoratives,” because of the interactional aspect of these shrines (2006:9).²⁴

According to Santino, spontaneous shrines are performative commemoratives because

they invite participation and interpretation from an “undifferentiated public” (2006:11). By their very existence these memorials often call attention to social issues, stirring up debate to levels whereby change may be enacted (Santino 2006; Margry and Sanchez-Carretero 2007). An obvious example of this can be found in the roadside crosses placed by MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) to commemorate the victims of drunk driving. These crosses commemorate lives lost while simultaneously drawing attention to the social evil of drunk driving. Santino describes this dual function of spontaneous shrines as “the conjunction of the memorializing of personal deaths within the framework of the social conditions that caused those deaths, the performative with the commemorative” (2006:5). Christina Sanchez-Carretero refers to the grassroots memorials that emerged in Madrid in the wake of the March 11 terrorist bombings there as “mechanisms of agency,” used as “a means for performing and initiating changes” (2006:338). The Madrid shrines created a forum for the vernacular expression of dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of the tragedy. Similarly, the ghost bike memorials signify attempts to raise awareness of the safety concerns of the cycling subculture.

Several factors have been credited with the seemingly recent ubiquity of the roadside memorial: the increasing hiding-away of death by the funereal industry, a growing sense of the medical profession’s ability to control the time of death, and the heightened awareness of the public to the dangers of automobile travel—especially the dangers presented by drivers under the influence of alcohol—due to more thorough media coverage and programs like MADD (Haney, Leimer, and Lowery 1997; Doss

2006; Owens 2006). So what factors have led to the inclusion of bicycles in these roadside shrines? In today's environmentally aware climate, bicycle use has been on the rise as a way of conserving energy, cutting down on pollutants, and saving on the cost of filling up the gas tank. The emergence of the ghost bike phenomenon in the past six years may be tied to this increase in environmental conscientiousness. Bicycle advocacy group League of American Bicyclists reports a nearly 78% rise in the number of New Yorkers who commute to work over the past 15 years.²⁵ The Pacific Northwest is the scene of the most drastic rises in bicycle use: in 2007 a record 6% of Portland, Oregon residents claim identified the bicycle as their "primary commute vehicle." A survey from 2005 cited by League of American Bicyclists shows a 144% increase in the number of bicycle commuters in Portland over the number reported in 2000. Rising oil prices and a greater focus in politics and the media on environmental preservation have affected the material culture of spontaneous shrines. Ghost bikes are in this way a product of our specific current cultural context.

Environmental concerns are evident in the construction of the Eugene ghost bike.

Sprouse says of creating the bike,

[David Minor] was so into sustainability and the environment, and making the world a better place, and it seemed fitting to raise awareness . . . The bike was a friend's bike that he wasn't using anymore, and somebody else gave us a chain to lock it up with, and somebody else gave us a lock. So there were a lot of people involved in getting the supplies together. I didn't buy anything for that, which I also thought was fitting for Dave, being a recycling and sustainability thing—it was nice to not use anything new, have it be a sort of recycled project.²⁶

Susan Minor, David Minor's mother, says, "He loved a good discussion and he would appreciate how the ghost bike has inspired debate about biking as an environmental

choice, and how the city government says it supports that concept, yet doesn't provide enough clearly marked and separate bike lanes or roads for people to commute safely.”²⁷ Ghost bike memorials seem particularly suited to the merging of current social concerns and personal commemoration, emergent forms to voice emergent concerns.

Conclusion

Ghost bikes haunt the urban landscape, vehicles of the restless dead, the wrongfully killed. Baudrillard writes of Western civilization's changing relationship with death, which Benjamin Noys characterizes as describing our attempt at excluding the dead from our daily lives (Noys 2005:24), so that “little by little, *the dead cease to exist*” (Baudrillard 1993:126). Only the more we push them away, removing them from the centers of our towns to hilltop cemeteries outside of our cities, the more they push themselves back into our consciousness “in traumatic forms” (Noys 2004:25). Folklorist Harriet Senie echoes the idea of the return of the dead: “Although the bodies are buried elsewhere, almost every detail of spontaneous memorial practice revives the role cemeteries historically played in public life. The dead were once buried in the center of town, where they served as a daily reminder of the fate awaiting us all” (Senie 2006:44). Santino likewise expresses this opinion: “Spontaneous shrines 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” (Santino 2006:13). Ghost bikes can be seen in this light as the re-emergence of the dead-that-won't-be-denied in the heart of our modern cities.

Like the deaths they are meant to commemorate, ghost bike memorials resist neat comprehension. They exist in a matrix of social and political ambiguity, generating multiple meanings from instances of overlap in the often conflicting spheres of personal expression and anonymous commemoration, private and public grief, and official and unofficial modes of mourning. Ghost bikes are often created by those directly connected to the deceased—family, friends, coworkers, etc., as is the case with the ghost bike for David Minor. Many, however, are created by those who never knew the deceased in life, but felt some connection to him or her in death, whether through empathetic concerns over the manner of death, or a more general sense of belonging to a shared community of interests. These communal feelings can be galvanized by a perceived marginalization at the hands of mainstream society, as may be the case with many members of the cycling community. The fact that the very first ghost bike was an expression of outrage and political solidarity with a maligned and/or ignored culture of bicycle enthusiasts set a precedent from the very beginning of indirect connection with the deceased, making the creation of a ghost bike a way of giving voice to the voiceless in a manner that is perhaps more often associated with more explicitly political grassroots memorials.

It is difficult to establish the degree of officiality that plays into the construction of a ghost bike. The practice seems to have been spread largely by word of mouth, with interested parties banding together to perpetuate the creation of these memorials after the first couple of memorials began to gather media attention. Leah Todd, of the Street Memorial Project in New York City, says of the website ghostbikes.org, “I think the site has been helpful to spread the idea and explain the purpose of ghost bikes, but I would

note that they have existed since 2003, while the site only went live in December 2007. In that time, they had already appeared in many cities across the U.S., several in the UK, and a couple across Europe. There were even bikes in Sao Paolo and Hobart, Tasmania.” The intention of each memorial can obviously only be explained by each creator on an individual basis, but the presence of groups like the Street Memorial Project and Visual Resistance (from which the Street Memorial Project evolved) on the Internet has undoubtedly influenced the continued presence of ghost bike memorials. Todd says, “While the Internet is helpful for sharing information, the ghost bikes would still exist without it. However, they may have been more localized without the site [ghostbikes.org]: we now have contacts around the world and the idea of a worldwide hub helps us connect, share ideas, organize, and get more of a global perspective on why we do this. . . . Each city has their own autonomous project with its own intentions, mission, and goals, but we are connected by a common purpose.”²⁸ The organized groups that spring up around ghost bikes seem to share a conception of cyclists as a subculture, sharing a more or less homogenous core of principles, concerns, and interests that must be protected and preserved against encroachment by an oppressive mainstream car culture. In general, however, these groups have tried to be respectful of the wishes of those most closely and personally affected by the tragedies: the family and friends of the deceased. Michael Jones, creator of the Ghost Bike Project in Portland, Oregon, described an instance where his group contacted the family of a young cyclist killed in a collision with an automobile about putting up a ghost bike and was told that the family

did not want the memorial created. In deference to the wishes of the family, plans to erect the bike were abandoned.²⁹

The bikes definitely bear the marks of a connection to a politically motivated subculture, and, insofar as they are visually striking and generally located in places that maximize general viewership—busy urban intersections—lend themselves easily as symbols of a cause and rallying points for those feeling themselves marginalized. Yet, there is something in a ghost bike that reaches toward the universal, something inclusive and inviting, while simultaneously frightening and grim. It is the uncanny quality of the *memento mori*, the stark and unrelenting embrace of that most universal of human truths—the inevitability and unpredictability of death—which, when faced with a ghost bike, speaks most loudly to the viewer. The cyclist may see in it the particular manner of his or her own eventual demise, but the obviousness of mortality is visible to all. The ghost bike speaks in contradictions—it is uncanny in its commingling of the unfathomable strangeness of death with the abject familiarity of death’s certainty.

And yet, as a temporary memorial, the longevity of any particular memorial is never assured. As with many spontaneous shrines, questions of ephemerality surround the ghost bike memorials. Some have been removed by city officials, while others have survived several years.³⁰ As ghost bikes are most often placed on city-owned sidewalks, they are subject to removal by the city maintenance workers; however, the memorials are generally left untouched while they show signs of use. In an interview with *The Brooklyn Paper* Visual Resistance member Ryan Knuckle said, “The city’s been pretty good. They understand that they’re respectful memorials so they’re not treating them like graffiti or

visual pollution. (Corbett 2007). At least one case of vandalism to a ghost bike memorial has been reported: A Portland ghost bike for Brett Jarolimek was stolen from its post in February 2008. The bike was returned the very next day, however, along with a note of apology.³¹ An aura of sanctity seems to surround these memorials, rendering them, at least temporarily, inviolable to the realities of the outside world.

Ghost bike memorials are an innovation on the material culture of mourning. They exist on a vernacular level, spreading across the country, then across the world, largely by word of mouth, taking hold in urban areas because of something they express to mourners and cyclists that they have been unable to express otherwise, at least in the same powerful symbolism. By transforming sites of tragedy into sites of protest, they demand attention, calling for political action and increased awareness by amplifying the missing human element. Overlapping communities of bicycle enthusiasts and mourners are joined at these often anonymously-created rallying points at city intersections—new memorial forms that reflect the changing concerns of the modern cultural climate.

The political character of ghost bike memorials is necessarily tied in with the public nature of the bikes. Situated on busy sidewalks in urban areas, they have a larger and more anonymous audience than a MySpace memorial generally has. But not all vernacular memorials are so openly visible to an undifferentiated public. Some mourners choose to get tattoos, as I will discuss in the next chapter, to commemorate those they have lost, in a form intensely personal and which allows them a higher degree of control over the memorial's audience and the way in which its meaning is interpreted.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Susan Minor and Shannon Sprouse for their graciousness in sharing their thoughts and opinions with me on such a difficult subject. I would also like to thank Mariel Yuhas for her constant support and advice during my research of this topic, as well as Dr. Daniel Wojcik for his encouragement and feedback on this chapter.

² In the course of my research for this chapter, I visited many websites devoted to the phenomenon of ghost bikes, reading message boards of personal blogs and official statements made by groups devoted to the creation of these memorials. I conducted interviews over the phone and through email with several people involved in the creation and maintenance of these sites, specifically with ghostbikes.org. In researching the ghost bike for David Minor, I first contacted Shannon Sprouse based on her involvement with local media stories on the memorial. After interviewing Sprouse in person, I was put in touch with Susan Minor, who discussed the bike with me via emailed correspondence.

³ Leonard Primiano's conception of *vernacular religion*, or "religion as it is lived: as humans beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it (1995) expands upon more traditional notions of religious folklife, emphasizing the often negotiated and innovative everyday experience of religious belief. Primiano proposes the term 'vernacular religion' and argues for the necessity of a reflexive update of the terminology typically used to describe religious folklife, calling for an end to the misleading dichotomy of 'official' and 'unofficial' religious practice. I am following the contention of folklorists Sylvia Grider (2001), Jeannie Thomas (1996), Jack Santino (2006), and Daniel Wojcik (2007) that spontaneous shrines and roadside memorials exhibit elements of vernacular spirituality in addition to their function as commemorative materials.

⁴ Graffiti has been used to similar effect in ghost bike memorials around Portland. Messages to the deceased are frequently written on stickers which are then applied to lampposts at the memorials.

⁵ The association with death, inherent in the skeleton-whiteness of the ghost bike, as well as manifestly expressed in the assemblage that accrues, is, of course, a large part of recontextualizing the bicycle as strange. Freud writes of the uncanny, "many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (1919:364). Death renders the body strange, emphasizing its role as a vessel for life, haunted by the personality, or the spirit.

⁶ Posted to <http://community.livejournal.com/damnportlanders/9997526.html?style=mine> on 3 July 2007 at 6:46 p.m. by user "yourdannyboy." Accessed 11 August 2008.

⁷ Posted to <http://community.livejournal.com/damnportlanders/9997526.html?style=mine> on 3 July 2007 at 8:53 p.m. by user "varro." Accessed 11 August 2008.

⁸ From <http://www.ghostbikes.org>. Accessed 11 August 2008.

⁹ Email correspondence, 13 March 2009.

¹⁰ Letter published in *Eugene Weekly*, 19 February 2009.

¹¹ Interview conducted 17 February 2009.

¹² Posted to <http://community.livejournal.com/damnportlanders/9997526.html?style=mine> on 4 July 2007 at 5:05 a.m. by user "frostnoris." Accessed 11 August 2008.

¹³ From “Ghost Bikes,” posted to <http://yamabushi.wordpress.com/2007/02/09/ghost-bikes> on 9 February 2007. Accessed 11 August 2008.

¹⁴ From a radio interview on local Eugene, Oregon station KLCC aired on 31 July 2008 and posted online at <http://www.klcc.org/Feature.asp?FeatureID=665>. Accessed 11 August 2008.

¹⁵ Posted to <http://www.bikeforums.net/archive/index.php/t-426869.html> on 6 June 2008 at 9:07 p.m. by user “Highcyclist.” Accessed 12 August 2008.

¹⁶ Posted to <http://www.bikeforums.net/archive/index.php/t-426869.html> on 9 June 2008 at 7:41 p.m. by user “Shifty.” Accessed 12 August 2008.

¹⁷ Posted to <http://www.bikeforums.net/archive/index.php/t-426869.html> on 9 June 2008 at 7:46 p.m. by user “Highcyclist.” Accessed 12 August 2008.

¹⁸ Information taken from the sites main page at <http://www.ghostbikes.org>. Accessed 10 August 2008.

¹⁹ From a phone interview conducted 27 January 2009.

²⁰ Email correspondence, 2 February 2009.

²¹ From a radio interview on local Eugene, Oregon station KLCC aired on 31 July 2008 and posted online at <http://www.klcc.org/Feature.asp?FeatureID=665>. Accessed 11 August 2008.

²² Goldstein and Tye (2006) examine the “heroic reconstruction” of the lives of several boys in a small Newfoundland fishing community through the creation of spontaneous shrines. The creation of the shrines is presented as an act of resistance by which the community attempts to reclaim the lives of the boys from the “official” media representations of the tragedy. Wojcik (2007) describes the vernacular beatification of Oregon track star Steve Prefontaine, whose death site has been repurposed as a spiritual pilgrimage site for runners around the world, many of whom seek supernatural inspiration, aid, and intercession from the deceased athlete. Wojcik compares the narrative of Prefontaine’s life that emerges from the tales of visitors to the memorial to the structuralist pattern of the folk hero narrative described by Lord Ragland.

²³ Interview conducted 17 February 2009.

²⁴ Santino draws on the work of linguist J.L. Austin, whose work with “performative utterances,” statements which enact a social change through their very utterance (such as “I do,” or “I now pronounce you man and wife”), informs Santino’s conception of the spontaneous shrine as inviting interpretation (2006:11).

²⁵ Figures reported on the website <http://www.bikeleague.org/media/facts> are taken from United States Census findings and several individual city-sponsored surveys of bicycle use. Accessed 12 August 2008.

²⁶ Interview conducted 17 February 2009.

²⁷ Email correspondence, 13 March 2009.

²⁸ Email correspondence, 2 February 2009.

²⁹ From a phone interview conducted 27 January 2009.

³⁰ Nat Meysenburg, who helps maintain www.ghostbikes.org stated in a radio interview that the first ghost bike documented by his organization is still installed at the New York City street corner it was placed at in 2005. The interview was conducted by Eugene station KLCC which aired on 31 July 2008 and was posted online at <http://www.klcc.org/Feature.asp?FeatureID=665>. Accessed 11 August 2008.

³¹ A report on the theft, along with a link to a report on its subsequent return can be found at <http://bikeportland.org/2008/02/14/ghost-bike-gone-missing-theft-likely>. Interestingly, the thief claimed that as soon as he realized what the bike represented he wanted to return it, with the addition of an item of personal value to him. The note of apology which he affixed to the returned bike refers to the “war” between cyclists and motorists. The full text, posted to the above-mentioned website reads: *“I sincerely apologize for what I have done—I did not realize what it was until after fact. I know that there is a war between pedestrians/bicyclists and automobiles, and what I did constitutes high [t]reason, and for this I am truly sorry. I return this bike, along with one of my most cherished possessions, in respect to your memorial, and as a guarantee that your efforts have impacted at least one life; mine. – Bradford (The one who stole this bike.)”* Accessed 12 August 2008.

CHAPTER IV

MEMORIAL TATTOOS

As discussed in the previous chapters, the narrative aspects of an act of commemoration come to the forefront in the functionality of a memorial. The mourner is left to pick up the pieces of a life that has been fragmented—both the life of the mourner and the life of the deceased. The creation of a vernacular memorial is often a story-telling process, reshaping the fragments of a life into a purposeful narrative, and creating a means of understanding the continued flow of life around the absence left by the dead. MySpace becomes a medium through which a feeling of connection with the deceased may be maintained because the profile page is felt to be an accurate representation of a user's self. The creation of a personal profile is an act of self-narration, in a forum in which every aspect of identity can be controlled and managed. When a user dies, his or her identity becomes frozen, continued only through sustained interaction with his or her message board. A death ripples through the profiles of the deceased's friends as they restructure their identities around the experience of loss.

Ghost bike memorials similarly represent the reconstruction of a life narrative in the face of sudden loss. Here the physicality involved in the memorial's creation can echo the symbolic reconstruction of a life, as the chaos of tragic death becomes transmuted

into creative energy. Death is unknowable to the living, and sudden, tragic death carries with it a shock that is potentially very disruptive to the normal attitudes and behaviors of everyday life. The creation and placement of a ghost bike memorial, with the assemblage of photos, flowers, and personal items, is an attempt to represent something fundamentally un-representable—the void left by the suddenly departed. The resonance of this type of memorial is generated in the re-telling of the life of the deceased, along with the narrative of the deceased's importance in the lives of the friends and family left behind. In this way it acts as a narrative map, delineating the shape of the life and the borders of the absence that remains.

Memorial tattoos, as a form of writing directly in the living flesh of the mourner, represent a strikingly visual continuation of the importance of life narrative to the management of grief. The attraction of tattooing as a vernacular memorial form arises from the intersection of the cultural history of the tattoo in the Western world with the rising need for personal, non-official forms of commemoration. Echoes of the stigmatization of tattoos as 'deviant' still cling to the art form, and it remains a way of expressing feelings of separation and marginalization from mainstream society by those who feel themselves to be outside of the norm, even as tattoos have become increasingly socially acceptable in contemporary culture. A tattoo can signal difference to the outside world, and that 'difference' can apply to the extreme feelings of isolation and helplessness that can arise in the aftermath of tragic loss as easily as it can to those feelings when tied to a particular subcultural movement like punk or Goth.¹ The

symbolism of tattoo imagery combined with the painful and visceral nature of the process of getting tattooed make it an ideal means of memorialization for many individuals.

Tattoos and Mourning

As tattoos continue to gain mainstream acceptance, memorial tattoos have become an increasingly popular way to commemorate the life of a lost loved one, combining personal trauma with aesthetic creation in an intimate and symbolic form of folk artistic expression. The ritualistic aspects of selecting a tattoo and getting “inked” may also help the mourner deal with some of the anxieties of grief by offering stability in the form a concrete set of behaviors surrounding the decision to get a tattoo.² While the commemorative applications of tattooing have long been appreciated, the widespread popularity of memorial tattoos is a relatively recent phenomenon, and one that appeals to a wide variety of people, including those who might not otherwise choose to become tattooed.

Individuals who choose to get memorial tattoos often do so soon after a traumatic loss and are frequently people who have no other tattoos. The designs vary greatly, ranging from highly detailed portraits to simple names and dates. One man I spoke with got his tattoo several weeks after the death of his son, a police officer who was killed in an automobile accident on duty. He had an image of his son’s badge tattooed on his left triceps with a red rose and green stem underneath. Another young man got a tattoo on his arm to memorialize an older brother killed by a mortar during the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. He decided to get a black fleur-de-lis inscribed with his brother’s initials and told

me, “I chose the fleur-de-lis because it’s an iconic European symbol, and it is featured on the Bosnian crest. It’s both a symbol of a brother I didn’t get to know, and a war I was born and raised in for six years.”³ A tattoo artist I spoke with showed me a design for a memorial tattoo brought to him to commemorate a man who loved hunting. The sketch was of a crossbow stretched and shaped into a cross, combining traditional religious memorial imagery with a personal passion of the deceased. Functionally these tattoos have much in common with other processes of vernacular memorialization. As with spontaneous shrines and temporary memorials, they speak to a need for personal expressions of pain and loss that may not be met by official funerary practices, which can seem too homogenized and constrictive to properly represent the ineffable experience of grief. They represent a claim on the experience of grief—an attempt to separate it, mark it off, and preserve it as something uniquely personal.

Place and permanence are important factors in the creation of a vernacular memorial. Roadside crosses and spontaneous shrines derive much of their significance from proximity to the actual site of death, as removed from the site of burial or other officially sanctioned place of remembrance. A memorial tattoo is literally the incorporation of the memorial process into the physical body of the mourner and functions as a folk reclamation of the ownership of grief. Anxieties concerning permanence and location that cling to spontaneous shrines and temporary memorials are assuaged, as the memorial is wholly united to the mourner’s own mortality through the process of tattooing. The memorial tattoo will last as long as the mourner, visually

representing the experience of loss and marking the mourner as somehow different than before the experience.

Often associated with the marginalized—sailors and carnies and criminals, the disreputable elements of lower-class society—tattoos have been central to the style of many subcultural movements. They have been a powerful means of symbolically displaying dissatisfaction with oppressive cultural norms and their permanence proves a high level of commitment to a particular lifestyle. Cultural theorist Dick Hebdige wrote that subcultural style functions as a means of disrupting and violating the “authorized codes through which the social world is organized and experienced,” carrying a “signifying power” and acting as a “mechanism of semantic disorder; a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation...” (1979:121). Although Hebdige was writing in particular about punk style and not specifically about tattoo culture, these descriptions can be useful in understanding the meanings of tattoos. A tattoo, as an image written into the flesh, is a rupture in the bodily narrative, a site for the production of new meaning written over the body’s traditional narrative of growth and eventual death. As an illustrated break in the flesh, tattoos have often been useful vehicles for the expression of the internal break with dominant societal codes. Memorial tattoos change the body, translating inner pain to the exterior body, making use of the history of the shock value of tattoos to mirror the traumatic shock of the experience of grief.

Tattoo as Spectacle

Tattooing has long been used to transform the body into a spectacle, going at least as far back as turn of the last century sideshow illustrated man and woman exhibits, but the punk use of tattooing in the 1970s and 80s has gone a long way toward increasing the association of tattoos with the shocking and the gruesome in the popular imagination. As Hebdige and Wojcik each discuss, as the cycle of subcultural excorporation/incorporation continues, as subcultural style becomes appropriated into mainstream tastes, subcultures must go further and further to continue to shock, to purposefully disrupt societal expectations and norms. As Wojcik has pointed out, tattoos in punk culture abounded in images of death and decay—“skulls, crossbones, figures of death, and macabre imagery” were frequent subjects (1995:18). Part of what makes tattooing such an effective form for a memorial is this association of tattooing with images of death and decay, which itself grows out of the necessarily intimate connection between the tattoo and the mortal, living flesh of the tattooee. Walk into any tattoo parlor today and you will see that death imagery continues to be very popular. Tattoos are of the body and as such can never be disconnected from the earthy, physical concerns of the flesh, of which death is arguably the most important.

Perhaps most indicative of this blending of life and death, of inner and outer expressions of self is the trend of getting a torn or ripped flesh tattoo, in which the skin is made to look frayed, offering a glimpse of anything from internal viscera to grinning demons to the iconic Spiderman costume lurking beneath. While this style is rarely selected for a memorial tattoo, it bears mentioning because it is such a vivid example of

the eruption of the inner into the outer, much in the same way that memorial tattoos represent the experience of inner trauma.

Not only do the association of tattooing with images of death and inner feelings of marginalization make it an ideal medium for memorialization, but the increased acceptance of tattooing as a form of self-expression has also created a wider awareness of tattoos as an option for memorializing someone. In the last half of the 20th century tattooing experienced a renaissance of sorts, becoming a middle-class phenomenon and losing some of its traditional stigma. Margo DeMello, in her book *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (2000), attributes this to a combination of the infusion of a high art sensibility to tattooing and the inclusion of tattoos in the tenets of many of the New Class Social Movements that rose to prominence in the 1970s and 80s. Fueled by the highly stylized and innovative designs of big names like Ed Hardy and Leo Zulueta tattooing took a step closer toward the exclusive world of high art, while at the same time popular “consciousness movements” like the “self-help, new age, women’s spirituality, ecology and men’s movements,” stressed ideas of “self-actualization, personal transformation and spiritual growth” (2000:143) with which the process of becoming tattooed nicely dovetailed. DeMello claims that this renaissance carries with it a reinstitution of class hierarchy into the world of tattooing. The traditional images and designs that had been popular for so long were now eschewed as lower-class and lacking in originality and personal expression. In this way tattooing, or at least certain types and styles of tattoos, began to become more acceptable in mainstream society.

Memorial tattoos in particular have now become increasingly accepted forms of expression. While some of the language of personal growth and transformation that came out of the consciousness movements may have faded into cliché, the experience of death as transformative of the mourner remains undeniable. As noted, for many people, the memorial tattoo is the first tattoo they have chosen for an obvious reason: the experience of loss is something that is felt to be permanent. As Chris 51, a tattoo artist in Springfield, Oregon, told me, “it seems like for a lot of people, even if they’re religious or they have certain morals, for some reason with a memorial, since they’re memorializing somebody they love, or that passed away or something, it’s okay to them, it’s an acceptable conclusion to it. They feel like that stigma isn’t there because of what they’re getting.”⁴ A young male informant who told me he got a tattoo of his father’s firefighter’s badge after his father died of cancer echoes this idea, adding, “I always wanted to get a tattoo but couldn’t figure out what I wanted . . . when my father passed away I knew this is what I wanted.”⁵

Many of the people I spoke to also expressed the need to get the tattoo very quickly after the loss, indicating a sense of urgency, of wanting to become tattooed before the initial shock wears off. A young woman who lost her brother in a car accident told me she got her tattoo—her brother’s name with angel wings and dates—just six days after the accident, although she added, “I think I should have waited a little longer to get any tattoo. I do love it, but I think that if I was in my right mind, I probably would not have gotten it so big!”⁶ As with other types of memorialization, perhaps especially in the creation and placement of spontaneous memorials, there seems to be a definite drive to

do *something* before one returns to one's "right mind." Another informant got a tattoo commemorating her husband, who died of a drug overdose, three days after the death. "I was still pretty much a wreck and just wanted it done," she said. "I was crying through most of it but knew it was worth it. As I was getting it many of my husband's friends were coming in to talk to me about my husband, so it was hard."⁷ The decision to get a memorial tattoo becomes something definitive and concrete in the midst of the shock and confusion of sudden death.

Victoria Pitts in her book, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (2003), devotes a section of her first chapter to a discussion of theories of body art and the need to exert control over existence. Following the work of sociologist Paul Sweetman, Pitts describes the increased reflexivity experienced by body modifiers as their practices, ranging here from tattooing to various types of piercing and implantation, create a need for increased attention to the body as the modifications "make the body bleed, scar, and heal" (2003:31). The inner and outer components of a person's life, the "body-self relationship" in Pitts' words, become reflected in each other to create, according to Sweetman, "a coherent and viable sense of self-identity, in part through the establishment of a coherent personal narrative" (2000). Again, we can think of the torn flesh trend in tattooing and see a symbolic rupture of the split between body and mind, skin and soul, that tattoos have long been used to suggest. Memorial tattoos are in the unique position of both representing that rupture and suggesting the potentiality for healing around the wound.

Tattoos as Discursive Sites

Traumatic deaths are especially shocking because they remind us that the time and means of death is ultimately unpredictable. In a world that is increasingly characterized by the ephemeral—the constant barrage of information coupled with the falling away of the material world for the cyber equivalent—it becomes increasingly hard to be certain of the stability of anything. Victoria Pitts writes, “The postmodern conditions of social life, which include insecurity about the truth of human subjectivity, the erosion of tradition, nostalgia, and an expanding array of cultural possibilities with which to identify, create opportunities for new forms of body work” (2003:32). In the wake of a sudden and traumatic death, a tattoo becomes both a linkage between inner turmoil and the physicality of the body and a desperate grasping for something of permanence.

This is a sentiment that occurs frequently in the words of both tattoo artists and those who have chosen to get memorial tattoos. In interviews I heard over and over again: “I guess I just feel as if I carry a piece of him everywhere I go,” and “I want to have something permanent that reminds me of him. Something that won’t get lost or ruined, something that is always with me,” and “we thought it would be a part of us that we would never lose.” Some wishing to take the idea of permanence even farther opt to get tattooed with ink mixed with ashes from a cremation. While the procedure is fairly rare, and technically illegal, many tattoo artists are open to the possibility. Tattoo artist Chris 51 told me, “You know, if someone was adamant about it and they wanted to do it, I would certainly do it, and I have no problem doing it. And I think it’s cool, you know, it’s

a living piece of somebody in your skin, you know—well, not living, but it's an actual, physical piece of somebody. I think it's a really cool idea.”⁸ Scotty, a tattoo artist in Eugene, Oregon told me about a tattoo mixed with ashes that he had done recently for a friend, who had approached him tentatively, unsure of whether or not he would do it. “Her mom had passed away,” Scotty told me, “and we took the ashes and mixed it and tattooed her—it's fine to do, it's sterile—it was a pretty emotional experience. She was crying the whole time I was tattooing her. It just meant a lot to her.”⁹ Tattooing becomes a way of fixing an identity or commemorating a relationship as a means of safeguarding it from erasure in the constant flux of modern society.

This desire to save a loss from the threat of obscurity and to safeguard it in a form more substantial than memory is a prominent motive in the creation of any memorial. The physicality of a memorial seems to satisfy a longing to make the intangible web of memory and pain manifest and undeniably solid. In this way the memorial tattoo, like other forms of vernacular memorialization becomes a nexus of the seemingly contradictory impulses to heal the wound and to never let it fade. The permanence sought in the selection of a tattoo echoes the concerns that guide the construction of a roadside memorial. An attempt is made to reclaim an individual life from the anonymous deaths that make up highway fatality statistics, and the focus is placed upon the physical aspects of the loss—the material mementos that pile up reconstruct a life lost while the placement of the memorial works upon the proximal resonance of the site where the death occurred. A space is created in which to reconstruct a narrative of the life that has been lost, a narrative told through the accrual of notes, photos, flowers, and the material objects that

resonate with the life of the deceased in the memory of the mourner. These memorials often serve to symbolically cleanse the site of death through the creation of a narrative of the life that has been lost. This is done through what folklorist Jack Santino calls the performative function of a temporary memorial—the affective charge created in the mind of the memorial’s public audience as the memorial “speaks” to them (2006). It is similar to what Erika Doss refers to as the “kinesthetic paradigm”(2008:39) that informs memorials in the Western world—spontaneous memorials, especially in urban areas, physically engage people through their presence in busy thoroughfares (you have to walk around them or through them) or their encouragement of mourners to add their own material artifacts to the assemblage. As these memorials are physical disruptions of the landscape, so are memorial tattoos symbolic disruptions of the body, encouraging interaction through shared narrative rather than direct physical response.

DeMello writes that tattoos are a “discursive tradition,” (2000) claiming that the meaning of a tattoo is created through the act of narrating the tattoo, of telling the story of the tattoo—the experience of getting it and the context in which the decision was made. Again, she is writing primarily of the discourse that arises around modern “middle-class” tattoos which re-inscribes familiar classist hierarchies (for example, the neo-tribalist movement ‘naturalizes’ tattoos and the tattooed body by creating a discourse in which tattoos and body adornment are treated as human universals and so opposed to the mass-produced flash designs that characterized much of tattooing’s working-class history). But on an individual level, this discursive production of meaning for tattoos holds true.

People generally like to talk about their tattoos and share their stories with others, both the tattooed and the non-inked.

Ontological Security

A memorial tattoo represents an attempt to keep the thread of narrative running through a relationship that has been forever altered by death. The tattoo becomes a way to keep the story going, narrating the mourner's experience of loss in a way that gives it a sense of order. Sociologist Anthony Giddens writes much on the importance of self-narration in the formation and maintenance of personal identity in the modern era. To Giddens, the self "forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future" (1991:75), and one's conception of his or her individual self is dependant upon the narration of this trajectory. A person makes sense of his existence through the story of his relationship with his society: "Self-identity . . . is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography" (1991:53). And the narrative of each person's self is generated through his or her relationship with the agreed-upon social reality of that particular society—the set of norms, values, and expected behaviors that are collectively recognized as 'meaningful' to that society. As Giddens writes, "What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are the focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity—and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behavior" (1991:70). Being able to answer these questions at any moment, and to trace the answers backwards and forwards through the timeline of one's life, is the heart of belonging to modern society.

The daily act of ‘going-on,’ of acting and being in the modern world is reliant on a level of trust in a shared social reality. This is the foundation for what Giddens refers to as “ontological security,” or the “bracketing out” of “questions about ourselves, others and the object-world which have to be taken for granted in order to keep on with everyday activity” (1991:37). The meaning generated by self-narration based on socially accepted notions of lifestyle is only a social meaning, one which keeps at bay the outer, existential realities of uncertainty and death. “On the other side of what might appear to be quite trivial aspects of day-to-day action and discourse, chaos lurks. And this chaos is not just disorganization, but the loss of a sense of the very reality of things and of other persons,” Giddens writes (1991:36). Ontological security is what allows the individual to go on living and acting in society without being crushed beneath the dread and anxiety of the infinite number of dooms which could befall him at any moment.

There are moments in a life, however, when ontological security can become weakened, and even momentarily punctured, most often in the form of brushes with unexpected violence and death. As an example, Giddens writes, “Which car driver, passing by the scene of a serious accident, has not had the experience of being so sobered as to drive more slowly—for a few miles—afterwards?” (1991:40). But in order that a person does not become overwhelmed by anxiety, the sense of ontological security quickly returns: “the feeling of relative invulnerability soon returns and the chances are that the driver then tends to speed up again” (1991:40). The narrative aspects of memorial tattoos may be one way in which the mourner can reconstruct a sense of ontological security. A memorial tattoo represents an attempt on the part of the mourner to regain

some feeling of control, transforming the chaos of death into a meaningful symbol of the experience of loss. The imposition of control and order on an experience that is the antithesis of both is a step toward regaining a feeling of security in day-to-day existence.

Essential to the maintenance of ontological security is what Giddens calls the “sequestration of experience,” by which he means the removal, or bracketing out of everyday society, those experiences which present the most direct threats to ontological security: “madness; criminality; sickness and death; sexuality; and nature” (1991:156). These sources of existential angst are removed from our daily experiences for the sake of preserving our ability to go on living. But according to Giddens, these repressed elements of existence can not be entirely shut out—they frequently return. Sociologist Keith Durkin points to pop culture as a major avenue of return for sequestered experience. According to Durkin, the mass media obsession with death and morbidity, including nightly news crime reports, police procedural dramas on television, the ‘slasher’ genre of horror film, first-person shooter video games, and the popularity of gallows humor, is a result of the sequestration of death from the public eye. Durkin writes, “The treatment of death as entertainment and humor is simply an extension of, or another configuration of, death denial. By rendering death into humor and entertainment, we effectively neutralize it; it becomes innocuous, and thus less threatening, through its conversion and ephemerality in the media” (2003:47). This may be behind the popularity of morbid imagery that has abounded in tattoo art from the punk movement on. The existential dread and angst of mortality are socially neutralized in the preponderance of tattooed images of death and ruin, as in the description of torn flesh tattoos above.

To return to Giddens' example of the car driver momentarily sobered by the sight of an accident, only to quickly return to the relative oblivion of ontological security, it is important to remember that the sight of a car wreck is often met not just with solemn thoughts of mortality, but also with a lurid fascination that comes from momentarily giving in to the attraction of a darkness normally repressed. The death fascination with which Keith Durkin finds pop culture to be flooded, and which has institutionalized repression as its cause, indicates a desire to keep death close, but in a somewhat neutered form. Many of my informants spoke of the desire to never forget the loss and of a fear that without the tattoo, the experience would lessen over time and fade, a wound dulling into a scar. For the experience to maintain its validity and vitality it needs to be kept fresh and near. The breach in the ontological security that had made possible a sustained illusion of existential order needs to be closed, but maybe not entirely. Here the force of the *memento mori* asserts its right to a place in modernity. Ontological security must never completely occlude the terrifying, gut-wrenching fact of death, but at the same time, we have to be able to continue to live and act in the mundane social world, founded on mutually agreed upon rules and obligations and, to some extent, manage a sustainable belief in the underlying meaning of those rules and obligations. A memorial tattoo preserves the reality of death, keeping it close—as close as one can physically manage, perhaps—but channels the surrounding anxiety into a carefully selected and placed symbol, with its attendant rituals and maintenance procedures. The tattoo then becomes a constant reminder, not only of mourned, but also of the mortality of the mourner, a site through which unmanageable anxieties can become manageable, through the controlled

experience of creating the memorial and through the discursive opportunities presented by it. The act of telling and showing the memorial allows one to spin a narrative which reinforces notions of purpose and meaning through shared relations in the social world.

Meaning-making through story-telling is a part of the work of mourning performed by temporary memorials and by memorial tattoos. Chris 51, speaking about the issue of placement on the body of memorial tattoos told me, “Most people get them, I mean almost all of them get them where it can be a topic of discussion, where people can see it, because they’re proud of it and they want to remember it, and I think by getting it in a location where it can be seen, it’s like a piece of them is still living all the time, because they can always see it and talk about it.”¹⁰ Like a temporary memorial, a memorial tattoo is a representation of an absence, an absence that can be negotiated through the construction of a narrative, or multiple narratives, that strives to make sense of a world that continues to exist around and in spite of the sudden glaring absence of a loved one. Angie, the woman I spoke of earlier, whose husband died of a drug overdose, chose a Celtic knot tattoo that is a reproduction of a tattoo her husband had. Her experience of getting the tattoo features many ritualesque aspects—aside from getting a tattoo identical in design and placement as her husband’s, she had the same tattoo artist who had inked her husband ink her, using her husband’s tattoo gun and ink (he had been a tattoo artist himself). Her tattoo has become a focal point for sharing memories with the three sons she had with her husband. She told me, “My kids will sometimes come up behind me while I am doing something and trace the tattoo with their fingers and talk

about their dad.”¹¹ In this way the memorial tattoo serves as both the symbol of her loss and a site for negotiating that absence through shared narrative.

Conclusion

The selection of a tattoo as a form of memorialization can be read as an act of reclaiming a feeling of control over a situation that is overwhelmingly chaotic. Death is the most complete threat to ontological security, undeniable and unknowable, the ultimate end of existence as we experience it. When a loved one is taken suddenly and traumatically, the framework of reality—based upon habit, custom, and the socially agreed upon ‘meaningfulness’ that undergirds daily life—is threatened by the externally imposed suggestion of cosmic disorder, randomness, and existential emptiness. The threads of self-narrative that we weave to position ourselves along the trajectory of a lifespan, and by which we establish ourselves in relation to everyone and everything else, become truncated and new threads must be quickly spun to reconnect to the familiar world of social relations. To this end the mourner chooses a combination of words and images that will represent the disruption caused by loss and have it tattooed, written in the flesh. The chaos that has intruded so forcefully into the mourner’s life becomes focused into the selection and placement of a symbol that tells the story of the life and the loss, recasting both into a comprehensible and consumable image which helps make the anxiety of grief more manageable without taking away its sting entirely.

Notes

¹ The role of tattooing in punk subculture has been explored by Daniel Wojcik in *Punk and Neo-Tribal Body Art* (1995) and in Goth subculture by Paul Hodkinson in *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture* (2002).

² An examination of the rituals involved in the tattooing process can be found in Clinton Sanders' *Customizing the Body* (1989).

³ Email correspondence, 2 April 2010.

⁴ Personal interview, 11 January 2010.

⁵ Email correspondence, 2 April 2010.

⁶ Email correspondence, 17 March 2010.

⁷ Email correspondence, 17 March 2010.

⁸ Personal interview, 11 January 2010.

⁹ Personal interview 14 April 2010.

¹⁰ Personal interview, 11 January 2010.

¹¹ Email correspondence, 2 April 2010.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In this work I have restricted my focus to three distinct types of vernacular memorial forms: MySpace pages, ghost bikes, and tattoos. I selected these three emergent forms because they are different enough from one another, yet bear such similarities that they offered comparative insights into the subject of vernacular memorialization. There is certainly more that remains to be said concerning these memorials. I have attempted to explore this subject through the general lens of the discipline of folklore, allowing the mourners to present their own ideas about the subject, and framing the phenomenon within the discourse established by previous folkloric works. These memorials should be considered folk responses to the experience of traumatic death, existing alongside—both supporting and responding to—official societal norms of death and grief management. They strike at the heart of what it means to be mortal, representing deeply emotional attempts to locate and protect the unique vitality of the life that has been lost among the static forms of memory preservation most readily available to them.

MySpace memorials offer a glimpse into the role of the Internet in identity formation, as teenage users of the social networking site struggle to cope with death both on and offline. The stillness of these pages, animated only by the frequency of message

board posts, creates a disruption in the online flow of identity and social contact as established for MySpace users. Personal identity transmuted into the virtual realm has a momentum experienced by these mourners as they attempt to keep the deceased alive through continued contact via the Internet. In many ways, the style of a MySpace page, with its accumulation of messages, photos, songs, and descriptions of interests echoes the bricolage style of physical roadside markers. The MySpace page is a ready-made repository for the fragments of a life which become imbued with such importance in the wake of a tragedy. Something of the deceased's *essence* is sought, and to varying degrees found, by mourners through repeated visits to the profile page.

The collection of the pieces of a life help to construct a narrative of the deceased's identity and relationships which can impart a sense of propulsive motion—a flow or plot—to the lost life, imposing a meaning through the chronology of consecutive moments. The story of the deceased and of his or her impact on the lives of friends, family, and in some cases the public at large, creates a stable foundation against which the chaos of tragic death can be fought off. The public nature of many of these vernacular memorials, however, prevents a restrictive control over that story by the creators of the memorial. When a ghost bike is placed at the scene of an accident and the lost life is sought in the narrative function of the assemblage of flowers, notes, personal items, and photographs, the ultimate reading of the tragic event lies in the minds of each observer. In the case of ghost bike memorials this can become controversial as competing political and ecological ideologies present their own readings of the accident, both of which may differ from the meaning of the memorial to the immediate friends and family of the

deceased. The subjects of ghost bike memorials have been referred to as martyrs in both derogation and in praise, while the political character of the memorial is often secondary to those closest to the accident, who simply associate the bicycle with a particular passion of the deceased while living.

Issues of permanence plague all roadside memorials, and ghost bikes in particular because of their prevalence in urban areas where public space is often much more heavily regulated than in the rural areas where roadside crosses predominate. They are powerful symbols in the immediate aftermath of an accident and it is then that they are most heavily visited by those touched by the tragedy. But as patronage declines the bicycles become subject to city regulations and may be removed by city workers. In some cases family members, many of whom do not visit the memorials at first, take over the maintenance of the sites, removing dead flowers and adding seasonal ones as appropriate. It is often the case with physical memorials that they are most active immediately following their creation and activity at the sites drops radically as time goes on.

The nature of memorial tattoos is such that issues of permanence and issues of how the memorials are read by their audiences both become intimately united with the mourner. They exist as long as the mourner exists, offering a security of permanence that few other memorial forms can offer, and much of their meaning is generated through the stories told about the tattoo—the decision to get one, the selection of a design, placement on the body—by the person tattooed. The audience is controlled by the mourner's own restrictions based upon body placement—is it in a readily visible spot, or covered by clothing?—and by the mourner's decisions regarding to whom he or she shows and

narrates the tattoo. Designs are often selected to evidence passions held by the deceased while living, or to symbolize the nature of the relationship shared between the mourner and the mourned, often in deeply personal ways. The attempt to find the deceased in the fragments left behind is joined to the physical experience of becoming tattooed, replicating the hurt of loss with that of the needle and creating a wound that echoes the disruption of life caused by the death. In telling others about the tattoo, the mourner keeps the loss personal and meaningful, controlling the ways in which it can be read, while reconstructing the narrative of the life that has been lost.

Areas for Further Study

There are many areas that may be further explored in the study of vernacular memorials. From the time I began this project to the time at which I am currently writing (2010)—a period of about three years—MySpace has become increasingly passé as a topic of concern to today's youth. The social networking site Facebook has eclipsed MySpace in popularity, and will most likely be itself eclipsed in the years to come. The two sites are similar in many respects—allowing users to construct identities through a collection of photographs, personal statements, and shared interests—yet there are some differences, most notably that of privacy. Facebook allows greater control by the user over the privacy of his or her page, which could become a factor in the conversion of a profile page to a memorial page. Another potential issue is that Facebook has an aggressive policy regarding advertising, in which user's profile images are often appropriated by advertisers targeting the users' online friends. An examination of how

these differences affect the use of these sites in the process of mourning exceeds the scope of this study, but would certainly yield interesting results.

As I neared completion of this project, it was brought to my attention that a church in Portland, Oregon, a hotbed of ghost bike activity, had begun offering a sanctuary for bicycle memorials that were in danger of being removed from their sites on city streets. During the spring and summer of 2010, several of these memorials have been moved to a designated section of the church's cemetery where they are consecrated and maintained for visitors. While I have not yet had the chance to visit this church, it seems to provide an excellent opportunity to observe the ways in which official memorial practices and vernacular memorial practices interact when combined in a single space. The presence of vernacular memorials in an official church cemetery surely affects the functionality of the ghost bikes, and it would be very interesting to interview those involved for their perspectives on this practice. Does it increase or decrease visitation? Are cemetery restrictions placed on the use of material objects observed in regards to the ghost bikes? These are only a few of the questions that need to be explored in such a study.

Similarly, there is much more to be gained from a deeper study of memorial tattoos. I have here attempted to provide the groundwork for a folkloric approach to this vernacular memorial art form, but there are many additional areas for further research. There is perhaps much to be written on the various subcategories of memorial tattoos—for instance, I recently learned of the popularity of memorial tattoos among soldiers returning from the Middle East. Surely there is an entire language to be explored in these

tattoos with many points of intersection and variance with memorial tattoos in general. There are also identity politics tied up in the selection of some memorial tattoos, perhaps most readily apparent in those chosen by survivors of breast cancer or other potentially fatal diseases. The inclusion of survivor tattoos in a description of memorial tattoos is itself open to debate, and perhaps to a further refinement of terminology. Additionally it would be interesting to study the existence of different vernacular memorial forms functioning for single mourners. There are certainly visitors to ghost bike memorials who have tattoos memorializing the same loss. Vernacular memorials are not an either/or proposition and much could be learned from a study of the interaction of various memorial forms marking a single death.

It should also be remembered that vernacular memorialization and official memorialization practices are not as isolated from one another as it may seem from this project. It has been useful to separate them from one another in order to examine the properties of vernacular memorials as an innovative form. But individual desires in regards to mourning and funereal practices have been making inroads into normative, socially sanctioned options. There is currently a market for personalized funerals, complete with coffins specifically decorated to commemorate allegiance to a specific sports team or personal hobbies and lifestyles. There is a wide variety of options regarding what to do with the body or ashes of the deceased, ranging from eco-burials in which the deceased's ashes are placed in an ecologically safe container and added to the formation of a living coral reef deep beneath the sea, to the placement of ashes in jewelry or photographic ink to infuse objects literally with the essence of the deceased.

All of these avenues of exploration would greatly add to the formation of a field of study in which to better understand these emerging practices. There is perhaps no experience that touches more closely upon what it means to be human and to have social relationships than the experience of mortal loss. It touches everyone at some point, and yet it remains the most fundamentally unknowable experience that any of us will ever encounter. Reactions to it are among the most beautiful and elegant expressions ever produced by humanity, from the towering minarets of the Taj Mahal to the smallest teddy bear left at Ground Zero. Vernacular memorials are proof of a need to reclaim and preserve something of the individual presence that has been lost, something that can perhaps never be satisfactorily achieved, only approached through the gathering together of the fragments of a life. This need to invest death with meaning, to reaffirm order in the face of chaos, and to reclaim the individual life from the void, the absence that has suddenly supplanted a life, is characteristic of all forms of memorialization, and central to vernacular memorialization. Through the representation of a loss—a continued conversation on a motionless MySpace page, a smashed white bicycle standing solitary in the midst of a bustling city street, or an ink marking etched into the skin—narratives are constructed through which the mourner can commemorate life lost and begin to find meaning in a world that continues, somehow, in the face of death.

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