Rest in place: Understanding traumatic death along the roadsides of the Southwestern United States

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Abstract: Numerous discrete ritual sites called *descansos*, or "resting places" are located along edges of highways and streets across the Southwest United States (U.S.). These roadside memorials identify the place where a person or people experienced the final moments of life, and often, subsequent tragic death. During October-November 2013, I visited 57 *descansos* in southern Arizona and New Mexico to explore the hypothesis that *descansos* serve multiple integrated personal and social purposes. These roadside shrines connect personal and social aspects of grief and mourning on political landscapes and work as material coping mechanisms for experiencing the sudden traumatic death of a loved one. In the Southwest U.S., a region fraught with historical experiences of trauma, these small easily recognized ritual places are one way of expressing continued ties to the landscape. *Descansos* allow people to release intense personal emotion socially through the acts of building, visiting, altering, and dismantling (or abandoning) these memorials. As social meaning of roadside memorials is elucidated they are increasingly becoming the focus of discourse surrounding their control and regulation.

Sudden traumatic death of a loved one invokes a variety of articulated individual and social responses with complex objectives. Markers of traumatic death along roadsides memorialize locations where traffic fatalities, random shootings, or other sudden unexpected death occurred. Contemporary commemorative culture is increasingly focused on roadside memorials, sometimes referred to as spontaneous shrines, because more are being constructed and observed in countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), Ireland, Sweden, the Netherlands,

Arizona Anthropologist 26:53-75.

Russia, Czech Republic, Romania, and Australia (Collins and Opie 2010; Collins and Rhine 2003; Doss 2008; Klassens et al. 2013; MacConville 2010; Nešporavá and Stahl 2014; Owens 2006; Petersson and Wingren 2011; Santino 2004;Yudkina and Sokolova 2014). These memorials have several intentions identified cross-culturally, yet a more comprehensive approach using an anthropological perspective is needed.

Roadside memorials are material places that provide a connection to the landscape to establish personal and social control and communication. They serve as outlets for private and social displays of emotion, memorialize through ritual and religion, and exhibit mortality affect and warnings to those passing by. This study examines these relationships by constructing a visual framework that focuses on understanding how some places become significantly more meaningful when they are connected with traumatic death. A sample of 57 roadside memorials located throughout the Southwest United States (U.S.) are examined to apply the proposed hypothesis and framework.

Constructing and maintaining roadside shrines is increasingly regulated and criticisms abound regarding their safety. In the US, a federal law or policy is not in place to control who constructs and maintains roadside memorials, and legislation is relegated to individual states. Because people often situate these shrines on public land, they face complicated decisions regarding who can legally create, alter, maintain, and remove them. Even if roadside memorials are illegal in a state, removing them immediately may or may not be fully enforced. Roadside memorials are part of the political landscape, and are important to study when understanding systems of power controlling who is memorialized and who is not (Bednar 2013).

Public and private reactions to sudden traumatic death can take many forms, yet similar relationships link their social purposes and a shared belief in the personal affect communicated by the memorial (Bednar 2013). When one drives by a roadside memorial, it is meant elucidate certain thoughts and feelings depending on your connection to the individual

memorialized. These intended feelings are referred to here as "affect," and are an important component discussed in relation to roadside memorials.

This study focuses on the Southwest region of the US where *descansos* or "resting places" are found positioned along the roadsides, reported to have first originated 200 years ago (Durbin 2003; Grider 2001; Torres Smith 2000). The Tohono O'odham reservation, west Tucson, and Tucson metro, all located in southern Arizona, in addition to areas of southern and eastern New Mexico exhibit many syncretic cultural characteristics due to historical influences of Spanish colonialist's regimes and missions. The Southwest US provides an ideal setting for exploring how roadside memorials as complex systems shaped by the relationship between multiple social and personal factors.

Sudden death in the Southwestern United States

Beginning in the 18th century, *descansos* were built in the Southwest establishing a tradition of erecting small shrines with crosses and candles along the sides of trails and roads to mark the location where the soul had suddenly left the body (Durbin 2003). Travelers would stop and pay tribute to these places by praying, as the memorialized individual was thought to have died without the proper liberation from sin (Durbin 2003). For colonialist Roman Catholicism, "dying well" was extremely important in achieving salvation, attaining a place in heaven, and thus minimizing a soul's stay in purgatory. This was accomplished by receiving the proper sacrament and constructing a will prior to death, as opposed to dying in a traumatic struggle, or sudden unexpected way. Construction of *descansos* in the Southwest reflects syncretism between Catholic and Native belief systems and promote social cohesion (Griffith 1992; Florescano 1994). These roadside memorials work to transmit the past into the present, incorporating aspects of indigenous and Spanish traditions in the Southwest into contemporary public material representations.

Common customs practiced by the Church in Europe

and introduced to indigenous people of what is now the Southwest US and Mexico included the parish procession to the cemetery, the blessing of the graves, and the decoration of relatives' tombstones with flowers and candles which were unified with similar indigenous customs (Green 1972). *Descansos* have one main difference compared with cemeteries in that they mark the place of death or an accident that led to death, and are not where the deceased remains are buried, yet are still considered resting places. High death rates linked with the early years of the Spanish occupation in the Southwest played a role in merging Native American and Spanish culture involving death.

Another example of syncretism involving death customs involves the holiday All Soul's Day or El Dia de los Muertos where people in this region prepare special food and flowers for alters to their deceased relatives and loved ones (Brades 1998, 2003; Green 1972; Fernandez Kelly 1974; Marchi 2006; Moore 1972). Many different types of foods such as fruits, legumes, gourds, and breads are placed at the homemade altar with photos of the deceased often at the center. Mayan, Mixtec, Zapotec, Aymara, Quichua, and other indigenous groups in Latin America often place salt, incense, coffee, and a glass of water on the altar (Marchi 2006). In indigenous communities throughout Mexico, Central, and South American night time vigils are held to accompany the dead who are believed to visit the earth (Marchi 2006). Diverse cultural practices involving death are present in the Southwest U.S. and support emotional resilience in the living.

Tohono O'odham people live in both the Southwest US and northern Mexico. Starting in colonialist times they added candles, rosaries, and Spanish hymns into their traditional beliefs (Griffin-Pierce 2000; Spicer 1981). Beliefs regarding death involve a shrine complex including aboriginal trail-markers such as rock cairns, death-memorials (see Figure 1), and shrine chapels (see Figure 2), some of which are located along reservation roads. Death memorials or *descansos* discussed here are not limited to traffic accidents, but also include suicides and homicides. Death memorials and shrine

complexes provide material responses to contemporary unexpected deaths situated outside the home (Kozak and Lopez 1991). They are built only for people who die these sudden "bad" deaths and serve to locate and situate the spirt of the dead and the grief that accompanies these tragedies (Kozak 1991; Kozak and Lopez 1991).

Unexpected or "bad" death is thought produce dangerous socially disruptive souls, and death memorials attract these souls to places away from the home. In this region, souls of the dead can cause staying sickness, ghost sickness, or soul sickness if they return to the home of the living (Bahr 1974). The perception that traumatic death can cause additional sickness or death is related to the Spanish-American illness called *susto* that is caused by a traumatic emotionally unsettling experience, such as the sudden unexpected death of a loved one (Gonzales 2012a, 2012b; Skansie 1985). *Susto* is believed to occur due to intense suffering and grieving or even by thinking or dwelling on the death of the deceased individual(s). In an ethnographic study conducted with Spanish-Americans living in New Mexico, *susto* occurred when death within the community in turn caused multiple additional deaths (Skansie 1985). Ceremonial curing of *susto* is linked to situating the soul in a designated place as this can bring balance by releasing trauma from human-land relationships (Gonzales 2012b). Various soul sicknesses and death can then be avoided by grounding the soul at locations such as *descansos* where they can be reliably visited. Considered a culture bound syndrome, *susto* is interpreted a non-Western cultural expression of mental and emotional distress with physical consequences that can be avoided by situating a socially disruptive soul at a memorialized location.

Shrine chapels and *nichos* are built in response to troubling and ubiquitous death-memorials, and work to counteract the disturbing trend of tragic highway fatalities and help those needing aid, rather than marking sites of traumatic death (Kozak and Lopez 1991; Riley 1992). They are often dedicated to a Christian saint such as the Virgin of Guadalupe (see Figure 2). The Virgin's appearance to Juan Diego on the

Figure 9. *Descanso located on US 86 in the Tohono O'odham reservation.*

Hill of Tepeyac, her promise to help and protect the indigenous, and her request for a shrine exhibits syncretism with her perpetuated Christian image (Nolan 1973; Taylor 1987). Her presence at these places of trauma and memory extend her connection into images of protection and hope as she was the first common symbol that identified the diverse social components of what it meant to be indigenous in a post-colonial

world (Florescano 1994; Nolan 1973; Taylor 1987). Although shrine chapels are an important component of the Tohono O'odham shrine complex, the main focus of this study centers on death markers and roadside memorials. Images of the Virgin associated with *descansos* tie her image of indigenous and post-colonial roots with such sudden traumatic events and losses as she continues to serve as a protector for people living in the Southwest.

This study focuses on a sample of *descansos* observed along roadsides in the Southwest US in order apply a comprehensive framework for understanding their highly intertwined purposes and meanings. They help the living cope with sudden traumatic death by connecting personal and social spheres using material objects.

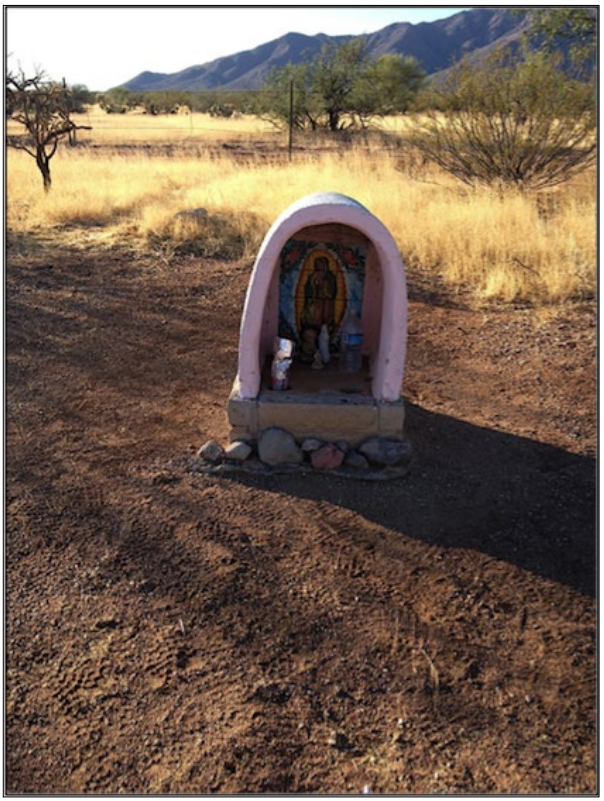

Figure 10. *Shrine-chapel located on US 86 on the Tohono O'odham reservation.*

Materials and methods

A total of 57 *descansos* were located and visited in the prescribed study area including the western portion of the Tohono O'odham reservation (n=8), west Tucson (n=28), and the Tucson metro (n=7) in southern Arizona. *Descansos* were also observed in south-central New Mexico (n=11) and eastern New Mexico (n=3) (see Figure 3). This region was chosen because of its complex syncretic history reflected in the construction decisions of these roadside memorials.

Photos and a set of ten variables were collected based on visual observations of the materials present at each *descanso* location. These variables include the presence of crosses, photos, flowers, candles, words and memorials, Native American symbols, platforms, holiday objects, and structures. Frequencies of the presence and absence of these variables were calculated and special objects or observations were recorded (Table 1).

This study also involved proposing a model for understanding the significant social meaning represented by roadside memorials though the relationships established between personal, individual experiences of sudden trauma and death with public, and material demonstration of grief and mourning (Figure 5). This model was constructed based on cross-cultural research conducted both in the United States and western countries throughout the world. This is not to say that roadside memorials do not exist in non-western countries, only that previously published research focuses mainly on studying the increased observance of roadside memorials in western countries reflecting a biased limitation to existing data. Discussion follows involving the relationships between the personal and social influences of roadside memorials, and how they tie in with our current understanding of roadside memorials.

Figure 11. *Map of locations where descansos were observed (1=Tucson Metro; 2=west Tucson; 3=Tohono O'odham reservation; 4=southern New Mexico; 5=eastern New Mexico). Image reproduced from the United States Geological Survey whose topographic maps are public domain.*

The majority of the *descansos* I visited are located in southern Arizona, primarily in the Tucson Metro area, west Tucson, and the eastern side of the Tohono O'odham reservation. However, other regional shrines are included in this study, including sites in south-central and eastern New Mexico along U.S. Highway 70. A total of 57 descansos were visited along the sides of roads and highways. This study does not represent all the *descansos* present on the landscape in either state or the U.S. Southwest region, but it does provide a glimpse into common materials and designs used in their construction. The vast majority of *descansos* visited were composed of crosses and flowers (see Table 1). Relatively equal numbers of descansos had associated words and memorials (including names and dates) often written on plaques or on the crosses themselves compared with those that did not have word or memorial associations.

Relatively equal numbers of *descansos* with incorporated boundaries, often built out of hedges, rocks, or short

fences, were present in comparison to those that did not. Few *descansos* exhibited photos, platforms (often constructed from permanent cement or blocks), holiday objects, or structures. Only one *descanso* located on the Tohono O'odham reservation exhibited a clear symbol of the god, *I'itoi*, and feathers (Figure 1). Plastic bottles filled with water were observed at both the *descanso* with the *I'itoi* symbol (Figure 1) and at the shrine chapel associated with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Figure 2). Objects and items observed in this study correspond to Torres Smith (2000), who also found that certain objects placed and observed *descansos*, such as crosses, flowers, candles, images of a saint, or photo of the deceased individual (Torres Smith 2000). Overall, the observed *descansos* contained materials made of artificial and imperishable materials such as cloth flowers and wreathes. Yet, few showed long-term permanence with associated concrete platforms, and structures that had stable foundations.

	Cross(es)	Photo(s)	Flower(s)	Candle(s)	Words/ Memorials	Boundary	Platform	Holiday Decorations	Structure(s)
% with object	**96%**	12%	**86%**	37%	**53%**	**54%**	23%	11%	19%
% without object	4%	**88%**	14%	**53%**	47%	46%	**77%**	**89%**	**81%**

Figure 12. *Table of object frequencies observed in study sample.*

Descansos are often constructed and maintained by the family and the friends of the deceased. Maintaining such a place aids the family in coping with the grief and loss of a loved one, especially if those still living encounter the place of death on a day-to-day or frequent basis (Owens 2006). Some key determinants involving the initial decision to construct a roadside shrine include the survivors living in close proximity to the location of traumatic death and age of the victim (Owens 2006). Crosses, often painted white, are the most frequent material symbol found with the *descansos* observed (see Table 1). Referred to as cruces, they are a ubiquitous symbol associated with roadside memorials, and are easily recognizable as identifying an accident site to memorialize a victim (Henzel 1991; Reid and Reid 2001).

Following the initial construction, additional gift-giv-

ing at a roadside memorial allows the living to maintain continual contact with the dead, expressed through the assemblage of material objects (Hallam and Hockey 2001). Within this context, material offerings are a tangible representation of the absence of life and may bear some emotional significance to both or either the regular visitor or to the individual who died (Collins and Opie 2010). Associated objects can be categorized as personal, ceremonial/religious, and trauma objects. Their presence is based on a dynamic network of diverse factors, including relationship to the deceased, personal religious affiliation, state ordinances, and cultural influences (Collins and Opie 2010; Everett 2000). Personal objects observed in this sample include photographs, stuffed animals and other toys, a pool cue, baseball, and clothing.

Along with crosses, small *nichos*, rosaries, and images of the Virgin of Guadalupe constitute observations with ceremonial/religious symbolism. These were present as frequently as objects from other categories. Some *descansos* had angel statues and figures, and one had a saint figurine positioned at the top. *Nichos* found associated with descansos were small and often had crosses compared with a solitary *nicho* (Figure 2). Many of the *descansos* visited expanded over a defined place on the ground. Sometimes these boundaries were marked by an arranged stone circle around the shrine; often these stones were painted bright colors such as white or yellow. Rocks were also observed to be stacked on top of each other, creating a small rock cairn, reminiscent of a trail marker, but associated with a cross. The locations of all but two *descansos* were easily accessible on roadsides. The two outliers were located within a barbed wire fence boundary on private land, but were still visible from the road.

Trauma objects were most often car or motorcycle parts including head lights, wheels, and a car front grill. Two ghost bicycles—bikes painted white as memorials for someone who died while riding a bicycle—on intersection corners were also observed (Figure 5). Some of the *descansos* observed were visited around Halloween or Christmas, indicated by associated holiday decorations. Many times, the grass was

mowed and trimmed neatly surrounding the boundaries of the *descanso*. Small solar lights, often used to mark walkways, were observed associated with 19% (n=11) *descansos*, allowing them continual visibility, even in the dark.

Integrating meanings in roadside memorials

The following model represents personal individual and social meanings and purposes embedded in roadside memorials. This visual framework emphasizes ways in which roadside memorials become significantly imbued with meaning following a traumatic death. Outward social and public meanings of roadside memorials are positioned around the periphery, including a contact point for the deceased, public display of emotion, memorialization, and a warning for others. Each of these projects significance and meaning, explored in detail in the following sections.

Some who experience the sudden death of a loved one establish a unique relationship with the decedent using material objects to mark the place of tragedy on the landscape (Baptist 2010). In a study involving people who had constructed roadside memorials, Collins and Rhine (2003) found that memorials were established to form a connection between the living and the deceased, acting as if the latter were still present at the location where they died. Memorials mark the place of death, being a physical location where the living can feel closest to the deceased (MacConville 2010). Using this perspective, the deceased remain attached to the location where life was lost and thus the location becomes a sacred focal point for both grief and communication (Clark and Franzmann 2006). The place of death becomes a contact point for communication between those living who knew the person that died.

Roadside memorials tied to the landscape act as a portal between the realm of the dead and living. People who visit the memorials believe they can access their beloved dead in these spaces (Solso 2015). Moraga (2011) recognizes feelings of impermanence applicable to an understanding of the integrated significance of descansos. She states, “What I learned

from death is that as human beings, we walk the road of relative truth—those social constructions of identity on the way to the absolute truth of our ever-impermanence" (Moraga 2011:126). Moraga's perspectives of seeing between the worlds (lifeworld and deathworld), or to *el otro lado* (the other side), can be applied to *descansos* as they mark locations where both worlds meet, allowing continued connection and communication. In this way, a personal connection to a place on the landscape enables communication between the living and the dead to continue.

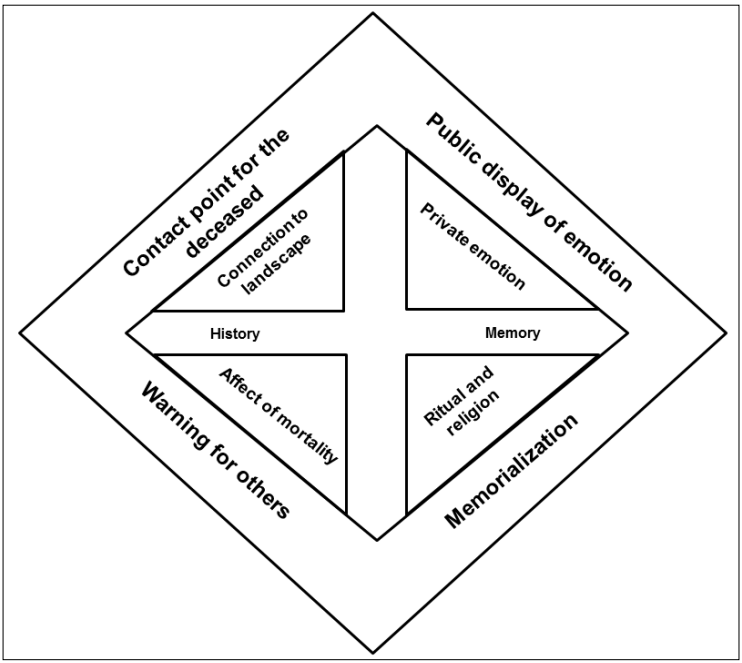

Figure 13. *Model of integrated relationships between personal and public influences of roadside memorials. Contact point and connection to landscape.*

Expressing public and private emotion

Roadside memorials provide a conduit for public and private emotion. Landscapes are transformed by sudden death as

they become sites of memory that are both highly personalized but open for public observation (Collins 2010). It is the personal, private expression of grief tied to a place or location that materially transforms it into a visible sacred space (Clark and Franzmann 2006; MacConville 2010). Solso (2015) suggests that roadside memorials are an outlet for personal grief tied to the sudden unexpected death of a loved one. As material culture, roadside memorials are equipped to deal with a wide-range of feelings by acting as a buffer. Through associating objects with the landscape, loved ones can instill their deepest feelings and release pain and suffering.

Following Santino (2003), material objects signify the relationship between the deceased, and those who leave objects and perform these relationships for the public. Negotiating between the private and the public, roadside memorials mark death and grant a space for working through loss in a form of visual material rhetoric (Collins and Opie 2010). Placing objects at a roadside memorial not only embodies private ungrounded emotion, it gives structure and meaning to them for public presentation and performance (Baptist 2010; Collins and Opie 2010). Thus they constitute a performance of grief that bridges private and public emotionality (Hallam and Hockey 2001). By building and maintaining these spaces, individuals are able to reconstruct their own agency from past memories to work through experienced trauma. Private messages of mourning and grief are communicated publically by gathering and displaying these meaningful materials.

Using ritual and religion to memorialize

Broadly speaking, roadside memorials are part of a collection of contemporary spontaneous mortuary rituals. They are used in the public domain, but are built by individuals with personal experiences and are considered a culturally determined ritualized form of expressing grief (Nešporavá and Stahl 2014). Roadside memorials become a sacred place, and a place of ritualized pilgrimage evidenced by holiday and birthday decorations and general upkeep of the location for months or even

years (MacConville 2010). Many people find personal comfort in knowing and visiting the memorialized site of death when they want to remember and continue to feel close to someone they have lost, regardless of whether that person's physical remains are located there (MacConville 2010).

Ritual activities and religious ceremonies accompany the consecration of places such as roadside memorials that mark trauma on a landscape which in turn become important because of the emotional energy invested into the process of remembering (Baptist 2010;Clark and Franzmann 2006; Collins and Opie 2010). Through ritualized visits and symbolically placing material objects, such as crosses and religious figures, a strong connection is built between sacred places, rituals and religion, and remembering in order to recuperate and cope with trauma (Collins and Opie 2010). The action of designing and building a memorial provides a metaphoric threshold that represents ending the numbness associated with losing a loved one through taking action: the physical building of a site of memory and catharsis (Grider 2001). Through public memorialization involving ritual and religious beliefs, these highly personalized and unique places not only allow people to cope with traumatic loss, but in turn affect others who are merely observing.

Warning of mortality and affect

These resting places where the soul has suddenly left the body serve as ritual locations reminding loved ones of those lost and strangers of their own mortality. Awareness of roadside shrines appears to be widespread, and they are powerful in that they tend to evoke feelings of mortality and the dangers that face us every day (Griffith 1992; Owens 2006). They influence people to take a closer look at the complex, fragmented, and often agonistic relationships we each have with death (Kennerly 2002). In this sense being able to view and understand the meaning of roadside memorials places continues to give the deceased a role within society in that they continue to make people confront their own driving, safety,

and mortality (Santino 2003). Many times they are located dangerous intersections or stretches of highway and are often visually distinctive and colorful (Collins and Opie 2010). One example includes ghost bikes (Figure 5), a newer form of roadside memorial that was reportedly as first observed in St. Louis in 2003, marking a place where a bicyclist was struck by a car (MacConville 2014). Ghost bikes are also observed in Tucson and are painted white and locked or attached to a street sign near the crash site. These serve a stark warning to cyclists and motorists alike about the vulnerability of bicyclists on the road.

Affect and roadside memorials

The culture of memorialization has a foundation in history, memory, and trauma and the study of these concepts constantly intersect due to the similarities in subject matter. Not all memory is traumatic, but all traumatic experience has the power to create a very specific type of memory (Traverso and Broderick 2010). Roadside memorials are unofficial memorials and their style and form is drawn from a diverse cultural practices, religious convention, and idiosyncratic choice. Clark and Franzmann (2006) argue that memorials and accounts of their construction demonstrate a willingness to express grief in individualized and un-prescribed ways that in turn can challenge authorities when memorial builders assume the rights to transfer public space into sacred space. Bednar (2013) questions the cultural politics of affect and memory at roadside memorials and addresses how politics work to control memory in public landscapes. In this sense, political authority and individual memorialization is at odds regarding who can memorialize others, and who can and will be memorialized.

Constructing memorials are performative events situated in public spaces that can trigger new actions in both the social and political spheres regardless of intentionality (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2007). They may be considered a distraction that could instigate additional accidents and trauma. Two studies conducted in Canada found that the place-

ment of roadside memorials did not have a significant effect on traffic speeds or headways, either in the short or long term, and concerns about the negative effects of roadside memorials on driver behavior was not supported by the results of this research (Tay et al. 2011). Regardless, they continue to gain presence along roadside landscapes, roadside memorials are predicted to face increased limitation and regulation.

Figure 14. *Ghost bike in the Tucson Metro area*

Focusing on the policies surrounding roadside memorials and their removal illustrates the conflicts between individuals and the state. A federal policy does not exist regarding roadside memorials, with their regulation being appointed to different states and even to specific jurisdictions within the state. Difficult decisions abound regarding who may legally be memorialized can be fraught with political struggle, often in the form of prohibitively expensive and inconvenient fees

(Solso 2015). Disagreement exists regarding who has the right to place and remove roadside memorials as stakeholders negotiate and shape how and when memories are materialized. What is recognized is a shared belief in the ability of roadside memorials to contain and communicate certain meanings (Bednar 2013). This study emphasizes the importance of roadside memorials due to their integrated objectives, relationships, and meanings on the personal and public level. More research is needed into the significance of these memorials as coping mechanisms when experiencing the sudden traumatic death of a loved one.

Conclusion

Descansos are roadside memorials found in the Southwest U.S., and are coordinated material places that serve to bridge many personal and social purposes in times of sudden unexpected trauma. They provide a physical connection to the landscape that can be utilized for control and communication by the living to gain access to their relationships with the deceased.

Working through personal emotions though such a public act memorializes the trauma, and provides the affect of warning others and reminding them of their own mortality. Overall, roadside memorials attempt to make tragedy both on the small and large scale memorable and manageable. Archaeological methods and interpretations such as geographic information systems (GIS) and tracking change over time of roadside memorial material patterns, as well as interviews of those who build and maintain these memorials in the Southwest U.S., could contribute to our understanding of roadside shrines as contemporary material culture.

Acknowledgements

Sincerest thanks to Dr. Patrisia Gonzales and Dr. James Watson for their feedback and suggestions regarding this research. I also thank my husband Michael Gillis for always being willing

to stop and visit descansos, and for his supportive interest in this study.

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