
Roadside Shrines and Granite Sketches: Diversifying the Vernacular Landscape of Memory

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A renewed interest in public and private commemoration has reshaped the American landscape of memory over the last thirty years. In the public realm, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial revolutionized the architecture of public monuments, opening a period of invention and innovation. With every new flower and letter that visitors placed along or on it, the Memorial was ever more "owned" by those visitors. Each tear they shed, hug they shared, knee they bowed in this very public place has suggested a renewed willingness to show emotion in what rapidly became one of the most sacred spots in the nation. The American people's embrace of this memorial led to such innovations as the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the Oklahoma City National Memorial, and several poignant Holocaust monuments and museums. It has even shaped the way that some Americans interact with the new, conventionally designed National World War II Memorial.

At the same time, in the traditional precincts of private commemoration, the conventional cemetery, many Americans began using a new technology to turn the family monument into an etched portrait that shows a beloved country home or another special personal scene. Laser technology allows these portraits to realistically picture symbolic items, whether speedboats or roses, family pets or religious sentiments. Americans seem less willing to accept restrictions on their ability to express their emotions regarding the memories of the nation or the passing of a loved one.

The most illuminating trend, the roadside shrine, transcends traditional boundaries of public and private, creating private memorials in public spaces. Roadside shrines to ordinary victims of automobile accidents and to celebrities killed in tragic circumstances create a complex, at times contentious, use of public space to express private sentiments of grief and memory. From simple crosses to elaborate multi-symbolic complexes, roadside shrines incorporate traditional values and symbolic meanings into a participatory, democratic commemorative process. Just as the English royal family at first disdained the public show of sentiment after Diana's death, state transportation agencies and critics of American consumer culture wish to control such shrines or banish them

altogether. Critics seem to believe that the new memorials are neither in the right place nor do they contain death and memory to their appropriate spheres.

While scholars have extensively studied the renewed vitality of public monuments, we have not connected the revolution in public monuments to roadside shrines, or the shift in the public's participation in commemoration to that of private individuals designing cemetery memorials. Commentators sometimes act as if large public memorials were the only artifacts of this new expression of memory. This paper argues that a comprehensive approach is critical for a full understanding of the changes occurring in the vernacular landscape. We need to acknowledge the landscape of memory including the full range of memorials from the grand public monuments to the transitory roadside shrines. Further, this range of memorials suggests that in this postmodern age a myriad of modes may be necessary to support our society's needs for remembrance and solace.

As importantly, we need to recognize that each of these elements represents an effort by Americans to reassert the importance of memory and commemoration. Both the public and private elements of the landscape of memory were diminished in the twentieth century. Modernist commentators dismissed public monuments as an anachronistic mode of memorialization. Auditoria and highways became means of celebrating the past without controversy or public involvement. Similarly, burial places instituted rules that abandoned the individuality of the private commemorative landscape, focusing on generic symbols of shared values such as patriotism and family. Roadside shrines, etched family monuments, and the new generation of public monuments are more participatory, democratic, and individualistic.

A NEW ERA IN PUBLIC MEMORIALS

By the end of World War II, modernist commentators increasingly scorned the traditional public memorial. As the late art historian Kirk Varnedoe pointed out, "Modern art

is about one person's vision and the idea of a consensus vision is antithetical to it."¹ The result was, as Lewis Mumford wrote, "The notion of a modern monument is a contradiction in terms. If it is a monument, it is not modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument."² Monumental art was associated with an older ideology of art that architects and artists felt they had superceded with their sleek, essentialist designs and expressionist abstractions. Critics of the recently opened World War II monument in Washington have reopened this debate, arguing that the design is reminiscent of an earlier age, a neoclassicism dismissed by contemporary art and architectural critics.³

As Andrew Shanken has recently shown, proponents of "living memorials" overwhelmingly won the mid-twentieth-century debate regarding the appropriate war memorial.⁴ While the erection of multiple copies of a single design, such as the doughboy statue, followed earlier wars, "few memorials built in the years after World War II [were] figurative or iconic." Instead, traditional memorials were associated with "white elephants" that were "reminders of death" rather than living symbols of a democratic society. Instead, civic buildings, such as auditoria and recreational centers, were constructed as living war memorials.

The great exception was the Marine Corps War Memorial (commonly referred to as the Iwo Jima Memorial).⁵ Dedicated in 1954, the figurative statue presents a group of marines raising a flag at the end of the bloody but victorious invasion of the South Pacific island. The memorial explicitly "honors patriotic duty and self-sacrifice." In Shanken's view, it "seems to be the worst perpetrator of the sins of the traditional memorial." The "single heroic moment" "represented the war directly" not through the "abstract ideals" that living memorials "sought to embody." It proved a major success, becoming "a de facto national memorial to World War II." However, as Shanken concludes, ultimately "the failure to produce a new, modern form [of the memorial] would end, by default, in living memorials."⁶ The Marine Corps War Memorial's success was the exception that reinforced for many that the traditional memorial was dead.

Fifty years after the dedication of the statue, the nation finally unveiled its official memorial to the sacrifices of World War II.⁷ As wide as a football field and nearly as deep, the memorial is located on the site of the old Rainbow Pool between two of the nation's most celebrated and significant public sites, the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall (fig. 1). The memorial is centered by



Fig. 1. National World War II Memorial, 2004, Friedrich St. Florian, design architect. State pillars and theater pavilions ring the redesigned Rainbow Pool to create a celebratory memorial to the last good war. (Photograph, 2004, Author)

a large plaza and the reconstructed Rainbow Pool, which are surrounded by fifty-six seventeen-foot pillars engraved with the states and territories active in the war. Two forty-three-foot high pavilions engraved with the names of the primary theaters of the war, Atlantic and Pacific, anchor the plaza and pillars. In the interiors of the pavilions four eagles hold a suspended wreath in their beaks. At the bottom of each pavilion is a small semi-circular fountain. And, on the back wall flanked by small waterfalls through which one can view the Lincoln Memorial, is the “commemorative wall” with its 4,000 gold stars, each star representing 100 American deaths during the conflict.

John Bodnar has written that war memorials embody both “the ideals of patriotism and nationalism” and act “as an expression of comradeship with and sorrow for the dead.”⁴⁸ He notes that at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial sorrow clearly predominates. At the World War II memorial, the opposite is true. The size and magnificence of the memorial are indisputable, blocking much of the view of the Lincoln Memorial from 19th Street and replacing that vista with the heroic language of pillar and pavilion. The use of the state

names, the large pavilions filled with eagles, and the relative smallness of the commemorative wall signal that the memorial largely celebrates the nation’s victory over our enemies. It reflects the contemporary perception of World War II as the “good” war, an uncomplicated view of the past that leaves little room for democratic dissent, internment camps, and African American protestors. The individual GI is subsumed in the greater glory of the effort, the last great war to defend democracy. The difference with the most influential public monument of our day, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, could not be clearer.

Scholars agree that the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982 initiated a new era in public memorialization (fig. 2). The 247-foot “V” wall of black granite dips gradually into the National Mall, cutting visitors off from the surrounding landscape. Maya Lin’s perceptive yet controversial design was initially met with scorn and outrage because it represented for many the modernist ideals of simplicity and essences. Yet, it very quickly became enormously popular as Americans sensed that they could literally add to the memorial by bringing flowers, photographs, letters, and

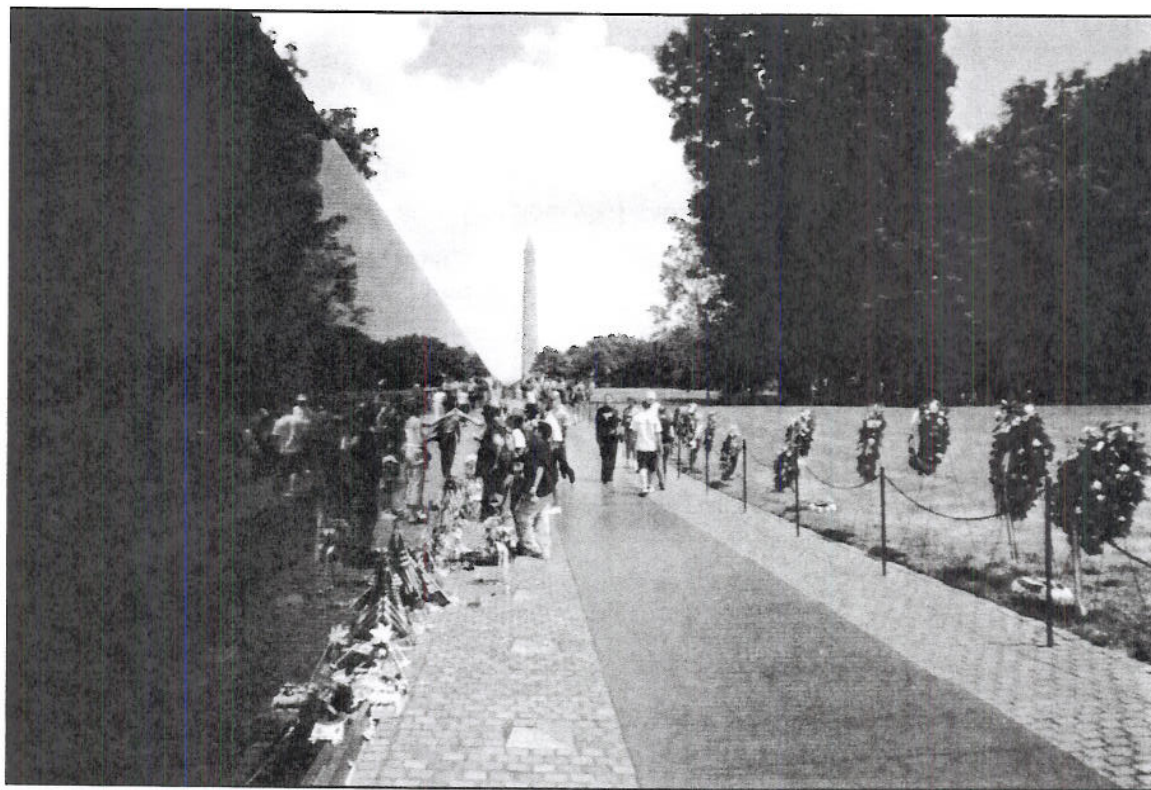


Fig. 2. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 1982, Maya Lin. Near Memorial Day in May, the wall becomes a virtual commemorative flag. (Photograph, 2002, Author)

other mementos of their lost sons and daughters, comrades, and countrymen.⁹ Lin's vision for the monument created an environment where emotion was acceptable. As she stated, the memorial was "a quiet place meant for personal reflection and private reckoning."¹⁰ The walk down into the "V" of the wall became a personal journey into the war, one's feelings about it and the individuals who gave their lives during it.

The emotional interactions that are taken for granted at the Wall are unimaginable at the Iwo Jima statue and stilted at the National World War II Memorial. The earlier monument was not designed to have the same sense of personal engagement. Surrounded by formal wreaths and guarded by vigilant docents, the monument is majestic and unapproachable.¹¹ The new memorial is much more interactive but still is intended to awe as well as welcome. Offerings, typically set below the name of the state from which the veteran came or on the short walls that surround the semi-circular fountains at the bottom of the pavilions, are often very personal, with handwritten notes from family members about a deceased veteran. Many visitors are immediately drawn to the offerings, finding in them the intimate and personal meaning of the war within the formal and abstract form of the memorial. The power of the personal is even greater at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. When visiting the Wall, one often feels as if one has intruded upon recurrent acts of private mourning as men and women cry, children salute, and teens quietly converse about a long deceased relative.¹² The new era was defined not only by Lin's innovative form, but also by the participation of the people who "created" the Wall as we know it today. That tradition is now being carried over even into the grander, abstract, and more conventional symbol of American victory and power.

Monuments built outside Washington in this rich era of public monuments either followed Lin's approach of providing a stark structure that encouraged engagement by the visitor or individualized the monument through symbolic statements and personal artifacts. At the Oklahoma City National Memorial or the Boston Holocaust Memorial, the FDR or the Biddy Mason memorials, visitors can interact with the memorial, leaving items, reading stories, touching parts of the monument—democratizing the memory and the landscape.¹³

The memorial that is perhaps the most personal of the new designs used a traditional medium to subvert American prejudice in the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Begun by Cleve Jones

in 1987, the NAMES Project now consists of roughly 45,000 panels that have been created by family members, lovers, partners, and volunteers in the US and around the world (fig. 3).¹⁴ The simplicity of the quilt media and its historical connotations with women's sewing circles reinforce the participatory nature of the project. Each panel represents an individual's life, while the whole Quilt creates a mosaic of memories.

When displayed in row after row of glorious color and texture, the Quilt becomes a fabric cemetery. However, the Quilt is not a conventional cemetery. This memory place (rather than burial place) incorporates items such as teddy bears, clothing, photographs, and other personal paraphernalia to embody the experiences and loves of the lost lives. In its exuberance, the Quilt differs from the late twentieth-century burial place, which often limits memorials to name and dates of birth and death.

Both the Wall and the Quilt elevated private memories to the public realm. With the Wall it was a consequence of the design, while with the Quilt it was integral to the design itself. The Wall provided an abstract tablet upon which visitors could write a note to other visitors. Through its central panels where visitors could write a note, the Quilt also encouraged textual reflections. However, the Quilt also provided a flexible medium through which panel makers could express love, anger, grief, and a wide range of other emotions. Cold war lawyer Roy Cohn could be portrayed as "Bully, Coward, Victim," while Quilt volunteer Scott Lago remained the "Georgia Peach." The Wall has been more acclaimed, but the Quilt may well be more in keeping with American needs to express heightened grief through new media.

Commentators have asserted that the popularity of the Wall, the emotion of the Holocaust memorials, the tragedy of the AIDS epidemic represented through the Quilt, even the accessible formality of the new World War II memorial, is due to the experiential nature of the memorials, their democratic values, and the designers' experiments in form. However, they have rarely recognized that these large, national memorials are only one way that the style and place of commemoration has changed over the last half-century. Indeed, the public has been increasingly unwilling to wait for an official monument to commemorate an event or to relinquish to the state the right to memorialize the dead. The growing desire to act immediately and in a personal manner is best exemplified by the increasing visibility of the roadside shrine in recent decades.



Fig. 3. NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, 1987, concept by Cleve Jones. The Quilt, shown here at a display in Washington, D.C., creates a fabric sculpture of memories and remembrances. (Photograph, 1992, Beverlie Conant Sloane)

ROADSIDE SHRINES AS "SPONTANEOUS MEMORIALS"

In August 1997, Diana, the Princess of Wales, was killed in a car crash in Paris. Almost immediately after her death people began leaving flowers and other memorial items in front of her residences, especially Kensington Palace. Within days, the number of flowers and other "offerings" became enormous.¹⁵ Neither the royal family nor the world's media expected such an outpouring of sentiment. Eventually, over ten tons of material would be removed. In the aftermath, commentators spoke of how in our celebrity culture, ordinary people come to feel a relationship with "media friends," whom they wish to mourn as if they were family. However, not being family or friends, rich or famous, they resort to leaving flowers and written notes outside the deceased's home as they know they will not be invited to the formal ceremonies.

The first corrective to this narrow perspective is that people have been doing this much longer than such comments suggest. We need only remember the flowers on the grassy knoll in Dallas in November 1963, the bouquets outside the

Dakota after John Lennon was shot in 1980, and the teddy bears and flags near the rubble in Oklahoma City in 1995.¹⁶ And, such "media friends" include the ordinary citizen suddenly and tragically raised to media star after a child kidnapping or horrific murder, for example in the Michael and Alex Smith tragedy (1994) and at Columbine High School (1999).¹⁷

Secondly, these "spontaneous memorials" have been erected in a wide variety of circumstances outside the glare of the television camera. They represent the pure emotion of the moment, the unwillingness to hold one's reserve, to wait for institutionalized rituals, and sometimes to defer to the wishes of the families. They suggest a deep need to perform an act of mourning that transcends the widely accepted modern process of mourning and burial. They provide public commemoration of a life lost in a society that struggles with representations of death and memory. While families may keep private shrines in their homes, the public commemorations typically occur on the sidewalk or other place along the roadside.

Such memorials, as the world saw in front of Kensington Palace, are rarely “planned” or “designed” in the conventional sense. They grow through individual offerings, shifting in style and meaning as they age. They are often accretions of memories, with individuals bringing new items that reflect their relationship with the deceased. New flowers might be placed alongside wilted ones, and some individuals might repeat their messages of love and remembrance each time they visit the site. Some “spontaneous” memorials eventually are made permanent. Others disappear.

The spontaneous roadside memorial derives its cultural power from the long history of religious shrines in Christian Europe as well as in other cultures and religions.¹⁸ Shrines to saints have been incorporated into many churches in Catholic North America, particularly in Quebec and Mexico. In addition, families have long constructed shrines in their front yards. Joseph Sciorra and Eric Ramos have reported on such shrines in Brooklyn and South Texas respectively.¹⁹ In each location, the central figure of the saint is surrounded by artifacts reflecting the families’ relationship to the shrine. Some are very simple, while others elaborately integrate sacred and secular items. Finally, some saint shrines have been situated alongside the roadways for passing travelers. In Texas, the “nichos” and “grutas” feature an iconography of a saint surrounded by a variety of other artifacts. Flowers are common, while some shrines include family photographs, candles, and other figures, such as a local healer.²⁰

These saint shrines are clearly the inspiration for the personalized roadside shrines (fig. 4). Alberto Barrera has documented how the religious shrines were transformed into “descanos,” shrines to ordinary people that focused on their lives, not a saint’s.²¹ Barrera and Holly Everett show that these have been in use in the “frontera” since the time of the Spanish colonization. In the early 1990s, Barrera found forty-five crosses in Starr County, Texas, one of which was erected as early as 1947. Everett found thirty-five around Austin, Texas, with the earliest from the 1970s.

Kenneth Foote writes in his book on America’s landscapes of violence and tragedy that such crosses were common along roadsides in past decades. He remarks that some “particularly dangerous stretches came to resemble small cemeteries, with rows of crosses marking dozens of fatalities.”²² Apparently as early as 1953, the Montana American Legion began a program to place white crosses along the road after six people were killed in a 1952 Labor Day weekend car crash.

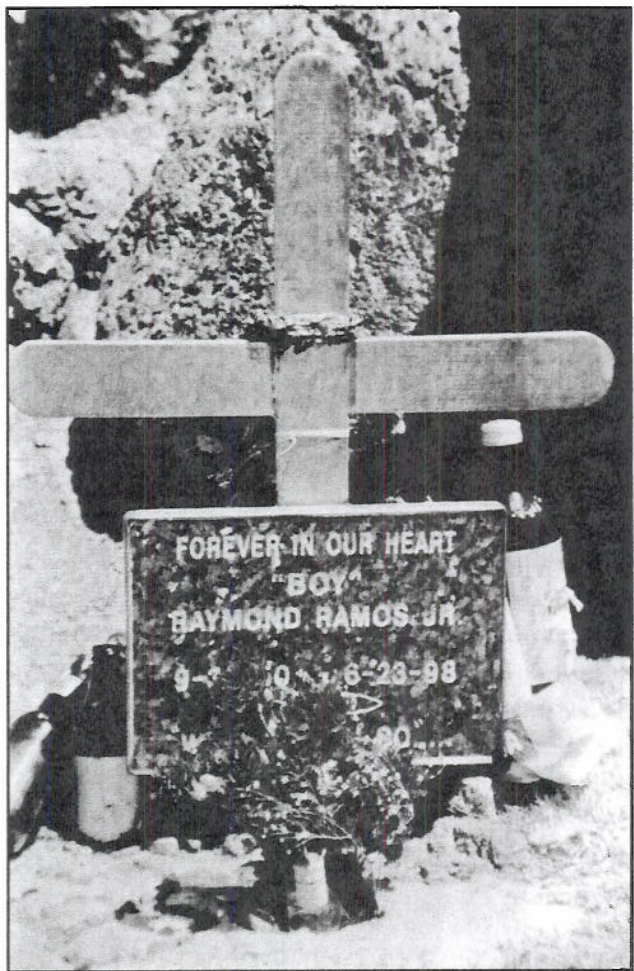


Fig. 4. Granite Marker and Cross, Maui, Hawaii. The traditional cross of the roadside shrine to an automobile accident victim is made more permanent with the addition of the granite marker and made more personal by the flowers and beers. (Photograph, 2002, Beverlie Conant Sloane)

Foote argues that the practice declined with the onset of the interstate highway system, as if that system meant “highway safety was now under control.” However, recently, they have become so common that many state legislatures have regulated their use, while others have prohibited them, citing concerns over separation of religion and state, or traffic safety.²³ A 2004 *Los Angeles Times* story reported on forty-two crosses that had been erected on the site of fatal accidents along a particularly dangerous road near Barstow, California.

Typically, family and friends create the memorials to celebrate the life and death of an ordinary person. Dean Olsen wrote in *The Peoria Journal Star* that such shrines had begun “showing up more” in Illinois and around the country.

As the sister of one auto accident victim recounted, "It's no different than Princess Diana, the Oklahoma bombing, the Capitol shootings. Everyone needs to be remembered."²⁴ After initially being applied primarily to automobile accidents, roadside memorials are being used to commemorate many types of incidents, and are becoming increasingly visible in urban and suburban areas. Shrines have appeared outside a supermarket where a shooting occurred, near a home where a family mourned their murdered child, in the aftermath of a fatal nightclub fire, even in a baseball locker room after a player died from complications related to his use of a diet supplement.²⁵

The architecture of the spontaneous memorial ranges from the simple white cross MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) popularized to elaborate assemblages of flowers, candles, mementos, and written sentiments (fig. 5). Most shrines provide at least a name, a date of death, and very personal expressions of grief. The primary components fall into five categories: crosses, flowers, candles, mementos, and

written statements. The cross is both the most prevalent and most controversial. Some critics argue that the cross violates the separation of church and state, while proponents respond that it transcends such concerns, becoming a symbol of the society's civil religion. As careful ethnographies of roadside shrines document, a wide variety of materials and styles of crosses are used. One difference between American Catholic and Protestant burial places is that crosses are much more prevalent in Catholic cemeteries. However, as Everett shows, this distinction does not hold along the roadside. In the official state roadside memorials, efforts have been made to offer people of different faiths an alternative to the cross, and in one state, they have searched for a new image to replace the cross altogether.

The association of flower and funeral, so strong in the popular mind, is actually rather recent. As Goody has recounted, the Puritans made only limited use of decorations such as flowers. Americans embraced flowers for the grave only in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth, as the process



Fig. 5. A Simple Assemblage, Lancaster, California. The laminated plate holds artificial flowers and a small stuffed bear, surrounded by real flowers in a vase, a cross and another bear. (Photograph, 2003, Author)

of death was commercialized, funeral directors joined with florists to promote the use of flowers. By the 1960s, "sympathy" flowers made up over half of florists' sales.²⁶ Strikingly, flowers at the roadside shrines typically are not constructed into wreaths, such as those so popular in front of traditional public memorials or at conventional burial services. They are more likely to be bundles brought directly from the seller. Their form reflects the spontaneity of the act of offering and reinforces the informal personality of the memorial.

Surrounding the cross and flowers are the candles, photographs, teddy bears, cigarettes, beer cans, saint's figures, and a wide variety of other items related to the person, their families, and their communities. As Everett shows in Texas, many times friends erect the memorials rather than families, who are often still too distraught to consider such an idea. One Texas mother drove past the scene of her daughter's accident the next day to find a cross marking the spot. Several of her classmates were painting the cross as she approached. "When I saw them doing that, I just started crying, going, 'Gosh, you know?'" As the mother noted, her family "wouldn't even have thought about it at that moment." But she was "real happy" that someone else had.²⁷

The type of mementos that are left at the site clearly relates to the society's perception of the victim. When friends and family set up a card table outside the home of Samantha Runnion after she was abducted and killed in 2002, it was covered with candles, photographs, and flowers. A small stuffed lamb and a ceramic angel were placed among the other items.²⁸ These two symbols of childhood have been used since the nineteenth century to signify the burial places of children. Other sites, for a teenager, might include favorite music or illicit items like a beer. In each case, though, the site asserts the need to remember in public a life lost.

Later, after the initial effort, the shrines need continuing care. Roth reported in 2002 that a "shrine keeper" typically cared for the 9/11 shrines by watering the flowers, changing the candles, and covering the fragile items with plastic. Near the author's home, a simple roadside memorial was erected in 2001 to a young man. At first, a red ribbon stood out from a telephone pole, with a poem in plastic tacked onto the pole just below the ribbon. At some point, some "shrine keeper" added a marking pen that numerous individuals have used to write messages of farewell and love up and down the pole. The poem was laminated and attached to the pole more firmly.

And, at an anniversary, traditional flower arrangements were placed at the base of the pole (fig. 6).

The need to write a sentiment is central to the memorial impulse. At Quilt displays, one or more panels are set up for people to leave a message. In front of Kensington Palace numerous notes accompanied flowers. In a society where dying occurs in hospitals, wakes are in funeral homes, and burials often occur without any but the closest family present, the venues to express grief are limited. Roadside memorials, conversely, encourage leaving an item (even slightly subversive) that expresses friendship (such as a can of beer or a cigarette) and writing a simple note to the person friends and family wouldn't see again.

Such efforts to visually and textually express feelings transcend the phenomenon of roadside shrines. At the funeral of one of the Columbine victims in 2001, mourners wrote final notes to their friend right on her white casket. In the mid-1990s, Cooper and Sciorra have documented dozens of memorial murals drawn by graffiti artists along the walls of New York City's barrios. These elaborate pieces incorporated pictorially many of the elements integral to the roadside shrine, including photographs, candles, flowers, and text. In addition, individuals placed those same objects in front of the mural. The walls then sometimes became the site of further comments and additions, such as one collective memorial, above which someone else has spray painted "WE LOVE YOU PJ RIP" and another person has added a series of small hearts.²⁹

The 9/11 tragedy reinforced the cultural power of the spontaneous memorials in several ways, including writing. Michael Judge noted in 2003 that the New Jersey Port Authority had recently painted over a popular "signing wall" where people had written messages about the tragedy. He noted the remarkable persistence of visitors in their "secular pilgrimage" to the site. They continued the practice even though the Port Authority had repeatedly painted the wall over and erased their messages. Finally, the authorities painted the wall black, hoping that would end the "nuisance." However, as Judge shows, people simply found other, less prominent places to continue writing their sense of pride, sorrow, and pain.³⁰

The "signing wall" was a later addition to the outpouring of sentiment and grief that accompanied the events in September. Immediately after the planes crashed, relatives and friends rushed around posting handbills with people's names,

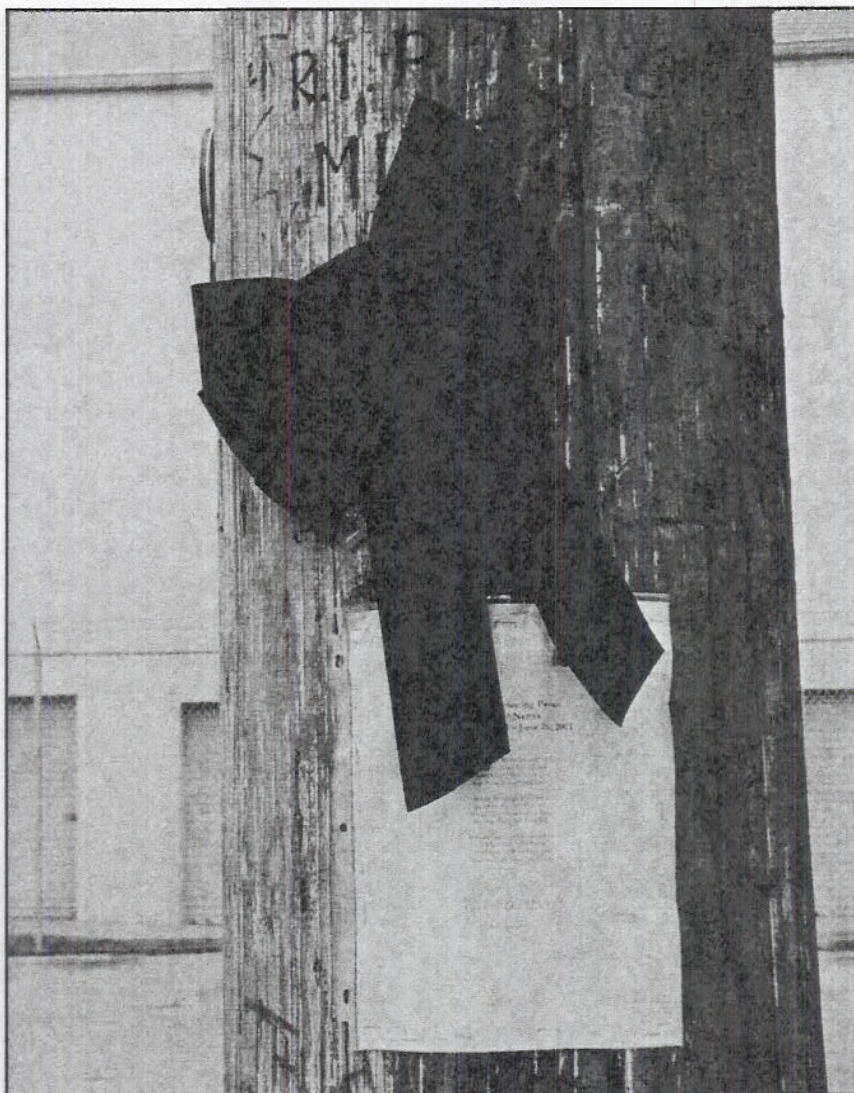


Fig. 6. Roadside Shrine, Los Angeles. Roadside shrines are often very temporary, but this simple memorial to a young man has lasted over three years, and has been carefully tended even though it is on the rough-hewn wood of a telephone pole. (Photograph, 2003, Author)

photographs, and phone numbers. After hope diminished that the lost would be found, the handbills became the sites of spontaneous shrines. Shrines appeared in front of fire houses, police stations, and other sites of official remembrance, but also along suburban streets and on urban street corners. Union Square (fig. 7) became a focus for many mourners unwilling to wait for the ritual to unfold, for the public memory to be sanctioned.

Outside New York City, far from the immediacy of the tragedy, the power of the spontaneous memorials was also evident. In my neighborhood in Los Angeles, people placed candles along the roadside in silent homage to the dead.

Residents would stop for a moment at the candles, then move back into their lives. Others placed flags on their lawns and in their windows. Flags became almost ubiquitous throughout the neighborhood and the nation for weeks after the event. One group of women wrapped red ribbon around each of the trees on their block, while others placed yellow ribbons on their houses and fences. Eventually, the flags faded, the candles died out, and the ribbons became tattered, but the need to express the pain and suffering at that moment was remarkable.

The flag was a prominent symbol in many of the memorials that sprang up around the nation. Grief was mixed

with patriotism. Christopher Hitchens eventually termed the phenomenon “flagification,” and for him it was a sentimental trap that obscured our need to focus on the present and future. As the nation recovered from the shock and pain, the perceived excesses of sentiment and jingoism have influenced commentaries about the possible memorial at the World Trade Center (WTC) as well as a general sense that perhaps Americans were becoming too fixated on the past and memory.³¹

Today, the spontaneity of the early memorials continues along the fence across the street from the World Trade Center

site. This dynamic memorial is constantly being recreated with each additional layer added to the memorial. Tourists bend to write their names, leave a flower, touch a garment, and shed a tear. Just as an earlier generation of visitors transformed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial from a sleek granite wall into a beloved sacred space, this wall reminds us that the site across the street is a place of tragic memories, personal losses, and national remembrance. Here, though, the remembrance awaits an official memorial where such emotion may or may not be acceptable.



Fig. 7. Shrine, Union Square, New York City. In the immediate aftermath of the World Trade Center tragedy, many people erected shrines to the dead and missing at Union Square in lower Manhattan. Henry Kirke Brown's statue of George Washington (1856) became a focal point of many of these shrines. (Photograph, Kenneth Wall, 2001)

CHANGE IN THE CONVENTIONAL CEMETERY

The simple crosses along a Texas highway and elaborate shrines across from the WTC site are new expressions of mourning and memory that discomfort many Americans and ill fit society's "regulations" around death. The new sentimentality is reminiscent of a Victorian society mesmerized by death. Driven by rising death rates in crowded and unsanitary cities and by Romantic sentimentality, death was celebrated in a myriad of ways. Families sewed quilts, treasured braids of hair, and wore elaborate mourning costumes. The "rural cemeteries," naturalistic confections located on large, often picturesque sites on the outskirts of built-up cities, were established partly due to the desire to ensure a safe and inviting place where individual lives, family generations, and community histories could be celebrated.³²

The natural environments contrasted with the increasingly elaborate family monuments that gradually filled the sections. Well-known American sculptors sometimes started their careers by obtaining memorial commissions. A floral language was carved into stones and statuary erected atop monumental pedestals. Visitors toured the grounds seeking the famous, the bizarre, and the tragic. For example, Charlotte Canda was a New York City woman killed in a carriage accident on her seventeenth birthday in 1845.³³ The monument she was sketching for her aunt's grave was raised to her and quickly became a popular stop along the well-publicized route of sights in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery (fig. 8). A true Victorian confection, the monument as carved by John Frazee and Robert Launitz combined Gothic arches, fleurs-de-lis, a Grecian urn, carved books of music, with a statue of Canda, flanked by two guardian angels, ascending to heaven.

Eventually, modernism conquered the cemetery as it had the traditional war memorial. The same rejection of sentiment that found Mumford repudiating the idea of a modern monument shaped society's attitudes toward the role and place of the cemetery. The Victorian cultural practices that had shaped two generations of burial places starting in the 1830s were quite rapidly set aside. New internal regulations limited individual expression within the grounds, and professionalization distanced the burial place from social life. The campaign was intended to clean up the excesses of the past and institute a new, modern approach, but it stripped the burial place of the type of individual expression that has recently been embodied in the roadside shrines.

Late nineteenth-century critics decried the "stoneyards" that developed as the wooded sections were filled with more and more memorials. New stone carving machines reduced the costs of carving names and other simple information or symbols in memorials late in that century. Family monuments increasingly came from a set of standard designs. Often, a stone would be pre-cut with its carving complete save for the names and dates of birth and death before it was shipped from Vermont or another source of granite and marble. Cemetery landscapes were filled with large monuments that all too often were imitations of each other, creating a cluttered and unoriginal space.

In response, reformers transformed the twentieth-century cemetery by creating memorial parks, a concept pioneered outside Los Angeles at Forest Lawn Memorial Park. At Forest Lawn, and its legions of imitations around the nation, the landscape of the burial place was simplified and carefully regulated.³⁴ Memorials were shorn of epitaphs, stripped of Victorian symbolic language, and restricted to the routine information of name, dates of birth and death, and perhaps a standard institutional symbol (a cross, Mason's sign, or veteran's designation). Unlike the lengthy epitaphs of earlier centuries, twentieth-century Americans were limited to pithy phrases such as "loving husband" and "faithful wife." In the memorial parks, the family monument largely disappeared, replaced by the level-to-the-ground bronze plaque. The flat marker combined with the simplified symbolic language, along with tight restrictions on plantings and offerings, created an orderly and depersonalized landscape that was not very emotionally engaging.

Families subverted these restrictions, sometimes forcing management to bend their rules, especially during the holidays. Barbara Rubin and her co-authors photographed Santa Claus, candy canes, and snowmen appearing ephemerally in the holiday landscape even in the rigidly controlled space of Forest Lawn Memorial Park.³⁵ Holiday decorations have become standard practice in many memorial parks, as the accompanying illustration from Los Angeles's Holy Cross Cemetery documents (fig. 9).

However, the moments of expression were fleeting in the regulated environment. Everett found in Austin, Texas, that families she was interviewing about roadside crosses noted one reason they wanted one was the restrictions placed on decorating gravesites in cemeteries. One mother whose daughter

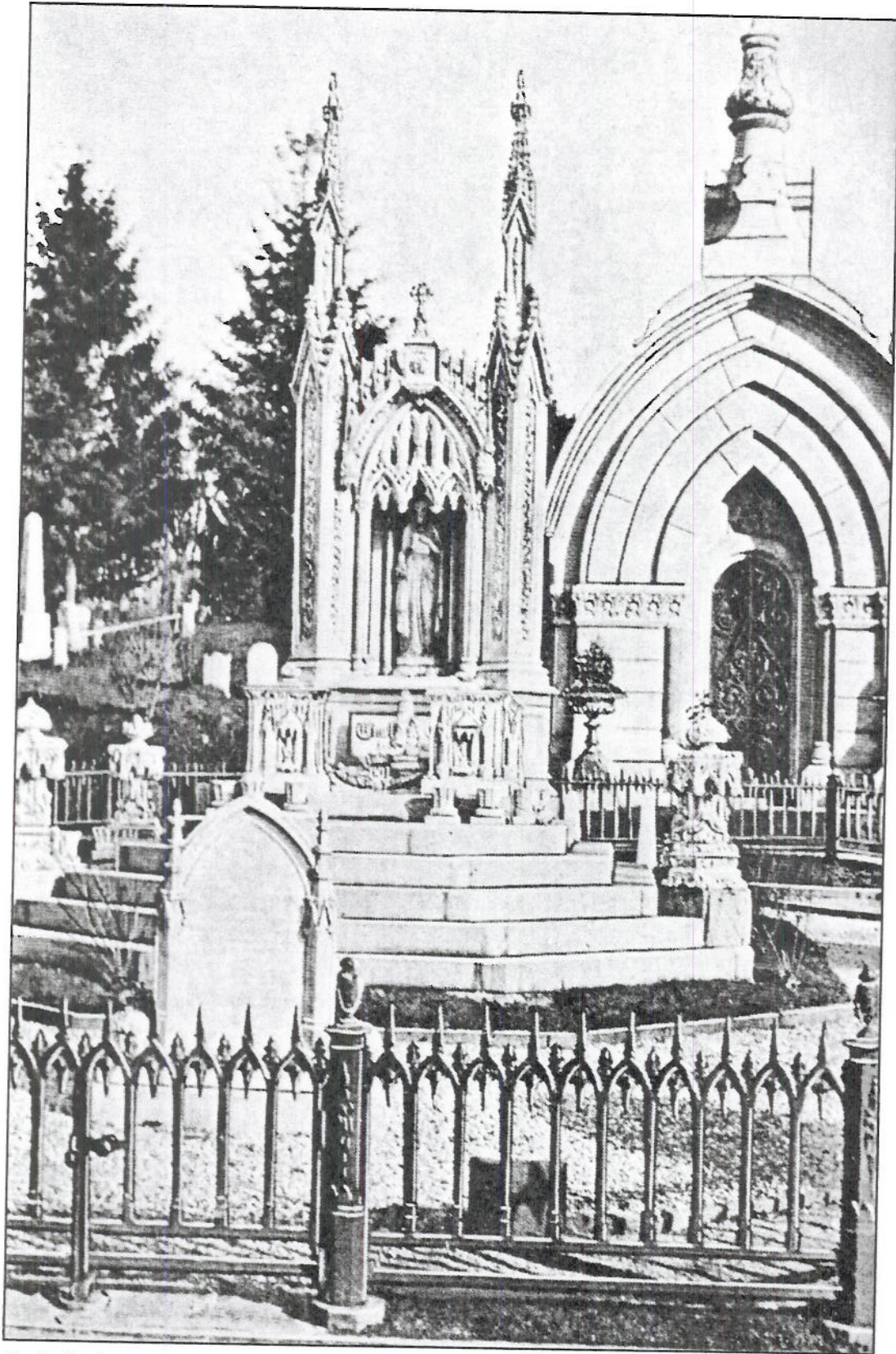


Fig. 8. Charlotte Canda Monument, Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, N.Y., ca. 1848. Canda's self-designed monument was symbolic of the grandiose Victorian family monuments that dotted the naturalistic landscapes of nineteenth century cemeteries. (From Green-Wood Illustrated, 1891)



Fig. 9. Holy Cross Cemetery, Culver City, California; Holiday Decorations. Immigrants have often brought new vitality to America's culture of remembrance. A recent example is the practice of decorating the grave on significant holidays. (Photograph, 2003, Author)

collected snow domes tried to leave one on her grave, only to find it gone a week later. She found herself commemorating her daughter at the roadside shrine, where she and her family “really do more . . . than we do at the cemetery.”³⁶ Whether from the desire to celebrate a daughter’s love of snow domes or simply as an alternative to the rigid system that ruled an increasing number of burial places, roadside shrines reject the centralized, standardized, and institutionalized memorial landscape.

Even in traditional cemeteries that did not adopt the severe restrictions of the memorial parks, the range of possible designs was limited. In many immigrant burial places, photographs remained a popular component of the individual headstone. The busts of the nineteenth-century church and cemetery morphed into the ceramic photographs of the early twentieth-century. Later, images were painted on the stones or etched by craftsmen. Photographs were small and special enough to be allowable in the newly regulated memorial landscape. Along with machine-carved rosettes and other

simplified images, the photographs represented a continuation of memorial decoration.

Eventually, the cemetery itself could not withstand the shift from the modernist desire to simplify and rationalize the burial place to the postmodernist need to express sentiment. Everett notes that some families simply ignored the cemetery’s rules, hoping that if “[we] maintain it good ourselves,” management would leave it alone.³⁷ One family had left a concrete-cast cat, an angel, and flowers. The keepers of this burial site allow families more leeway to express sentiments through items typically found outside in the roadside shrines.

Eventually, some families began treating the family monument as a painter’s easel, allowing expert stone carvers to laboriously depict more realistic scenes. In Oakwood-Morningside Cemetery, Syracuse, New York, a ca. 1975 monument depicts a golfer taking a swing along a fairway. Two greens are depicted, with a few trees and shrubs lining the fairway. The carver used a few cuts to convey a sense of topography. The presence of a sports scene on a cemetery monument

surprises the casual passer-by. It brings into this sacred space an element of ephemeral leisure not normal for an eternal setting (fig. 10).

The golfer, though, was only an early example of a renewed emotion and more casual aesthetic that would appear over the next twenty years. In the 1980s, innovative computer-aided design (CAD) programs and laser technology offered new possibilities in memorial design. The history of one firm, Cochran's Inc., suggests the rapid influence the new technology had on the monument industry.³³ Founded in 1976, the company began selling a CAD program for monumental drafting and stencil cutting in 1987. According to the company, they then introduced laser etching to the monument industry in 1995. As they assert, "Laser-etchings are as detailed and exquisite as hand-etchings, but can be produced faster and more efficiently." The new technology is not only faster, but it also permits families to provide the monument dealer with a photograph or drawing that can be exactly duplicated on the granite monument. This technology has the same potential to revolutionize cemetery art as the use of marble statuary did in the mid-nineteenth century.

As Americans became more aware of the new technology, they created a new commemorative language, although

one often reminiscent of that of the nineteenth-century (fig. 11). In a small country cemetery in Etna, New Hampshire, a monument portrays a country home tucked in among the trees.³⁹ The New England-style house with its central porch is center stage. Below it is the pond, in which the house is mirrored. A gazebo sits adjacent to the pond, and a dock for swimming or boating juts out into it. A single tall birch towers over the family garage and is distinct from the shrubs or smaller trees that provide a backdrop to the scene. A cluster of spruces is forefront left, setting the stage much as similar natural features created the scale of mid-nineteenth-century picturesque landscape paintings. The rough granite of the original stone creates a dark sky, while a deeply cut section just above the tree line suggests the sunset. The name is prominently displayed, while a family address, in much smaller type, provides a caption to the portrait.

Such portraits depend on the symbolic language of the Victorians while updating the imagery. Homes, landscapes, and other elements of an ideal American domestic life are commonly pictured. They reflect the continuing American fascination with domestic life and the centrality of the home in the myth of the American dream. The family and homestead are inseparable even in death. Most stones do

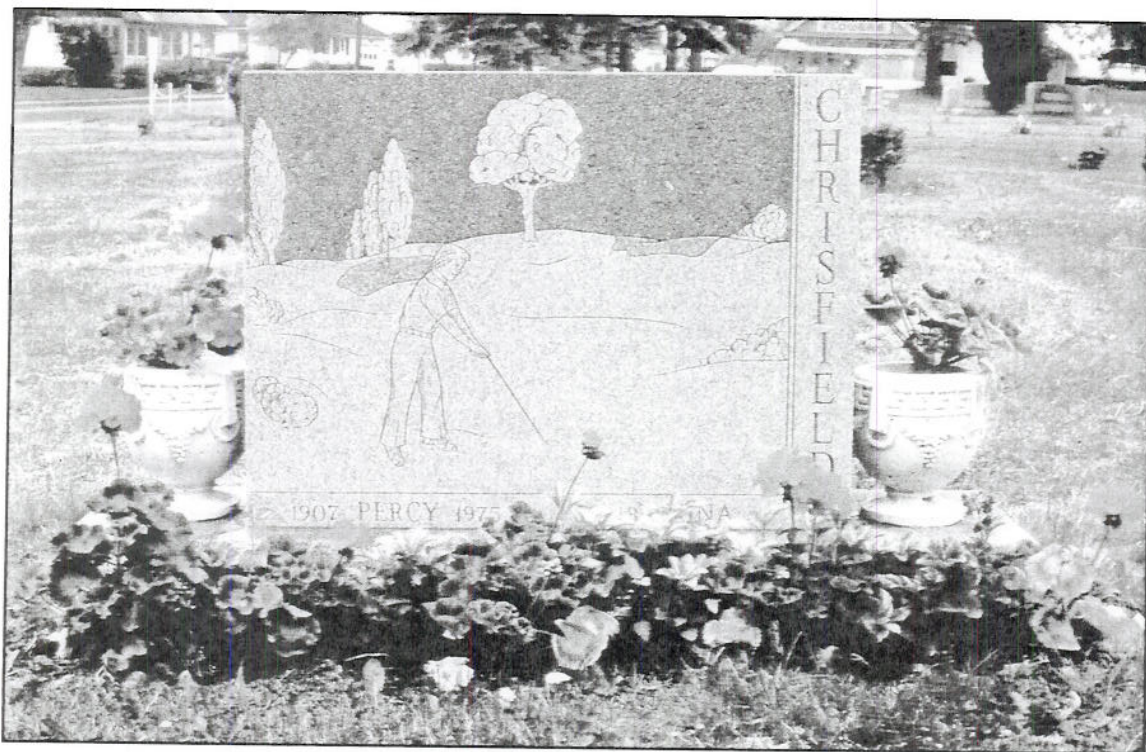


Fig. 10. Golf Monument, Oakwood Cemetery, Syracuse, N.Y., ca. 1975. Highlighting the relationship of leisure to life, this monument signaled a new informality in cemetery decoration that presaged current practice. (Photograph, 2004, Author)

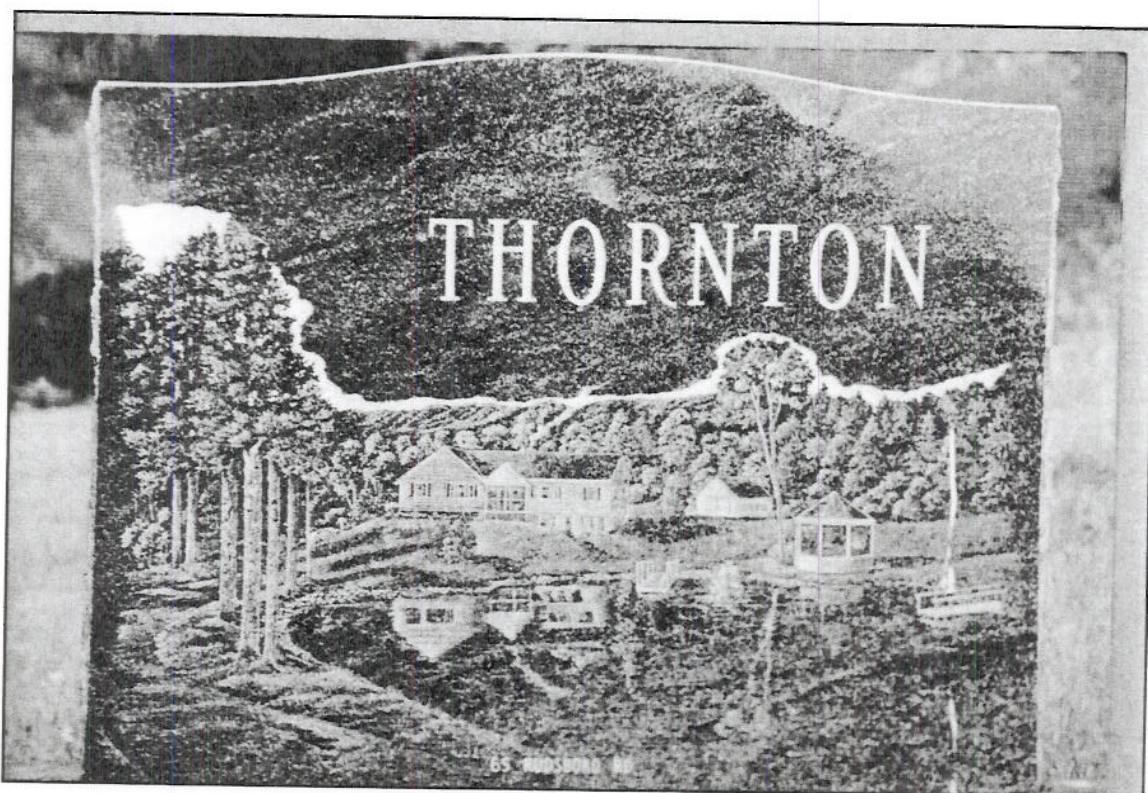


Fig. 11. Etched Monument, Etna, New Hampshire. A new technology provides the tool to express evocative portraits on cemetery monuments. (Photograph, 2001, Author)

not include an address or the specifics of the stone described above, suggesting that perhaps the image is more important than the reality.

Many stones grate on modern sensibilities by including images that do not reflect older traditions but instead embrace what some would view as crude taste. In their photographic book on Sunbelt gravestones, *Scoring in Heaven*, Bunnan and Smith found a dancing beagle celebrating “summer again,” a teepee and fire standing before a mountain range, and a ten-wheeler “gorilla” speeding across a monument.⁴⁰ Who would etch a truck or other routine activity of modern life onto a gravestone? The images, sometimes paired with photographs of the deceased, establish an identity that standard symbols cannot. They commemorate memories through specific information and deny the standardization and loss of identity so often associated with modern urban life.

A NEW AGE OF COMMEMORATION

The new generation of roadside shrines, public monuments, and private memorials represents Americans’ struggle with state and social institutions for control over memory.

People are engaged in creating memorials, shaping their meaning and their place within the culture, even in the most formal of remembrances for American presidents (fig. 12). Using items from daily life—photographs, flowers, and candles—that also represent symbolic relationships, Americans are claiming a role in the culture’s landscape of memory. Their statements are more public, even when they occur in a private cemetery. Their role is more individual, even when played out on a public monument. The brashness of the new private monuments calls out for examination, as do the roadside shrines and the fluttering ribbons against the black of the Wall and the grill of the chain-link fence at the WTC. The people’s memorials contest the state’s right to mandate a vision of the past, the visual emptiness of the roadside, and the standardization of the institutional cemetery landscape. They represent a contentious and creative force in American culture.

ENDNOTES

¹Michael Kimmelman, “Ideas and Trends: Turning Memory Into Travesty,” *The New York Times* (March 4, 2001): WK5.

²Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), 438.



Fig. 12. Spontaneous Memorial to Ronald Reagan, Santa Monica. The mainstream acceptance of roadside memorials was evident in the immediate response to Reagan's death. Flowers, flags, and mementos began appearing outside the funeral home as soon as people heard that his body would lie there. (Photograph, 2004, Author)

³For instance, see Christopher Knight, "A Memorial to Forget," *Los Angeles Times* (May 23, 2004), E27, E36-7. Knight suggests that the memorial is a presentist celebration of the "American imperium," while I would argue that it reflects how we perceive World War II, not how we would memorialize a contemporary war.

⁴Andrew M. Shanken, "Planning Memory: Living Memorials in the United States During World War II," *The Art Bulletin* 84/1 (March 2002): 130-47.

⁵See also, Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall, *Iwo Jima: Monuments, Memories, and the American Hero* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁶Shanken, "Planning Memory."

⁷For a description, see Douglas Brinkley, *The World War II Memorial: A Grateful Nation Remembers* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2004) and the website of the memorial, <http://www.wwiimemorial.com/default.asp?page=home.asp>.

⁸John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 9.

⁹Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

1998) and Laura Palmer, *Shrapnel in the Heart: Letters and Remembrances from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York: Random House, 1987).

¹⁰Quoted in Carole Gold Calo, "Memorializing the Unspeakable: Public Monuments and Collective Grieving," *Art New England* 19/6 (Oct./Nov. 1998): 8-9.

¹¹However, during a recent visit to the US Marine Memorial, I observed that someone had stepped past the formal wreaths to place a simple bouquet at the statue's foot.

¹²During August 2004, I spent two days moving from the new World War II memorial to the Wall for over ten hours. Each site had personal offerings, but the volume was quite startling, particularly given that the WWII memorial had just opened. A total of fifteen offerings were in place at the WWII memorial (and the personal items disappeared overnight), while almost thirty lined the Wall. And while photographs and letters graced the area below the pavilions, most of the WWII offerings were conventional wreaths and flowers, while the Wall offerings included a beret, medals, dogtags, a ceramic figurine, and poems.

¹³Bettina Ling, *Maya Lin* (Austin, Tex.: Raintree Steck-Vaughn, 1997); see also Edward Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing:*

Oklahoma City in American Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Lawrence Halprin, *The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial / Memorial Designer* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1997); Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

¹⁴Cleve Jones with Jeff Dawson, *Stitching a Revolution: The Making of an Activist* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2000), 103-109. See comments about the quilt in, Calo, "Memorializing the Unspeakable."

¹⁵See G. Monger and J. Chandler, "Pilgrimage to Kensington Palace," *Folklore* (England) 109 (1998): 104-8, for an explanation of the use of "offering." Also see, CNN Reports, "World Watches as Britain Bids Farewell to Diana," (August 1997), <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9708/diana/mourns/funeral/>.

¹⁶Photographs of these spontaneous memorials appeared in Jane Gross, "Seeking Solace with Final Gestures," *New York Times* (July 25, 1999): WK3. This article also quotes Joshua Meyrowitz regarding "media friends."

¹⁷Michael and Alex Smith were young children killed in 1994 by their mother, who attempted to hide the crime by blaming it on a young black carjacker. A series of spontaneous memorials appeared at the lakeside where she allowed her car to roll into the water with the children strapped in their car seats. In August 1995, local authorities decided to construct a permanent memorial and asked that all the spontaneous memorials at the lake be removed; Gary Henderson, "Memorial to Michael and Alex Smith to be Installed at Lake," *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* (August 5, 1995).

¹⁸A contemporary discussion of Greek shrines is available at <http://gogreece.about.com/library/weekly/aa011501a.htm>.

¹⁹Joseph Sciorra, "Yard Shrines and Sidewalk Altars of New York's Italian-Americans," in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture III*, eds. Tom Carter and Bernard Herman (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1989): 185-198 and Eric Ramos, "Mexican-American Yard Art in Kingsville," in, *Hecho en Tejas: Texas-Mexican Folk Arts and Crafts*, ed. Joe S. Graham (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1991): 250-262. On Quebec shrines, see examples in Jean Simard and Jocelyne Milot, *Les Croix de Chemin du Quebec: Inventaire Selectif et Tresor* (Quebec: Publication of the Government, 1994). I thank Peter Gossage and Annmarie Adams for bringing the Quebec inventory to my attention.

²⁰Cynthia L. Vidaurri, "Texas-Mexican Religious Folk Art in Robstown, Texas," and John O. West, "Grutas in the Spanish Southwest," in *Hecho en Tejas*: 222-249 and 263-277, respectively.

²¹Alberto Barrera, "Mexican-American Crosses in Starr County," in *Hecho en Tejas*: 278-292; Holly Everett, *Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2002), 38-80.

²²Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscape of Violence and Tragedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997): 170.

²³Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 171. See also, "No Roadside Markers in Virginia," Transportation Notes, <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/esnr/not022803.htm>. Larry Stroklund, the current White Cross chairman in Montana reports that over 2000 of the crosses have been erected since the program's inception; see his comments on the program at <http://visitmt.com/whatsnew/features/cross.htm>. Stroklund states that a federal ruling prohibited the crosses from the federal interstate highway system.

²⁴Dean Olsen, "Roadside Memorials Gain Popularity," *The Peoria Journal Star* (September 10, 1998). Everett, *Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture* has an excellent overview of the current state of the literature on the phenomenon, 1-37.

²⁵Jennifer Mena, "Store Opens Doors to Grief," *Los Angeles Times* (July 2, 2003): B6, photograph on B1; Alessandra Stanley, "In Slain Girl's Hometown, an Invisible Fear Lurks," *New York Times* (July 19, 2002): A1, A14; Dan Barry and Paul von Zielbauer, "Day of Public Grieving and Private Inquiry in Deadly Nightclub Fire," *New York Times* (February 24, 2003): A14; and Diane Puchin, "Too Many are Unaware, Too Many Don't Care," *Los Angeles Times* (February 20, 2003): D1.

²⁶Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 280. The estimate is from Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1963), 87.

²⁷Holly Everett, "Roadside Crosses and Memorial Complexes in Texas," *Folklore* 111/1 (April 2000): 91-103.

²⁸Christine Hanley and Greg Krikorian, "FBI Says Slain Girl's Abductor Sent Message: 'Come Find Me,'" *Los Angeles Times* (July 18, 2002): 1, 26 with photographs of the shrine table by Mark Boster.

²⁹A photograph by Rick T. Wilking of Reuters of three young women writing notes on the casket appears on Page 1 in the *New York Times* of April 25, 1999. Martha Cooper and Joseph Sciorra, *R.I.P.: Memorial Wall Art* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), 43 (PJ), 93 (candles), and 89 (candles in front of a portrait of a candle).

³⁰Michael Judge, "How They Erased the Writing on the Wall," *Wall Street Journal* (September 5, 2003), with photograph of person writing, by Gregory Bull of AP.

³¹Christopher Hitchens, "Don't Commemorate Sept. 11: Fewer Flags, and More Grit," *Slate* (September 8, 2003), <http://slate.msn.com/id/2088025/>. Hitchens' essay is a call to stop wallowing in the past and face forward. See also Julie V. Iovine, "Memorials Proliferate in Crowded Downtown," *New York Times* (March 13, 2003), B1, B3.

³²David Charles Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

³³*Ibid.*, 77-78. The cemetery included the monument in its historic preservation program, "Saved in Time," see <http://www.green-wood.com>.

³⁴David Charles Sloane, "Selling Eternity in 1920s Los Angeles," *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s*, eds. W. Deverell and T. Sitton (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

³⁵Barbara Rubin, Robert Carlton, and Arnold Rubin, *Forest Lawn* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Westside Publications, 1979).

³⁶Everett, "Roadside Crosses in Texas," 99.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 96.

³⁸As far as I can ascertain, no scholar has yet written about Americans commemorating their families through laser etching; the Cochran's Inc. material comes from their website, <http://www.cochrans-monuments.com/pages/history.html>.

³⁹Examples of laser etched monuments can be found in Lucinda Bunnell and Virginia Warren Smith, *Scoring in Heaven: Gravestones and Cemetery Art of the American Sunbelt States* (New York: Aperture, 1991). One can gauge the popularity of the technique through a quick survey of online sites for purchasing cemetery monuments, such as <http://www.nvo.com/finalplans/dmartscenes/>.

⁴⁰Bunnell and Smith, *Scoring in Heaven*. The book is not paginated.