Decoding the 'new' culture of roadside memorialisation in South Africa by Michael Eric Hagemann

Abstract

Roadside memorials are such a common sight on this country's roads that they barely warrant a second glance from passers-by, yet there was a time in recent memory when this was not the case. The increasing occurrence of these humble shrines indicates the entrenchment and expansion of a relatively "new" cultural practice that invites critical attention. In this paper, I intend to demonstrate that the emergence of this phenomenon in South Africa is a local adaptation of similar memorial traditions found elsewhere. By unpacking the forms and functions of these memorials as markers of private grief in public spaces, I will suggest that they reflect a secularising trend that in itself mirrors the demographics of our post-

Figure 1 "Joe Whitehurst"	*Figure 2 "Marco Dos Santos"*
	
Figure 3 "Preston"	*Figure 4 "JFGR"*
	

apartheid society.

Roadside memorials are now a common sight on South Africa's urban and rural road networks. These silent markers of private grief in public space appear soon after the detritus from a fatal road incident is cleared away. The trauma associated with the erection of these shrines is contained within the physical structures themselves such that they seem to be absorbed by the landscape, becoming a part of it. Indeed, this transition is so seamless that most road users do not consciously register the deeper import of the passing flash of colour and the angular dimensions of the small structures. The existence of these informal memorials is well documented elsewhere and explored by scholars in disciplines as diverse as cultural geography and trauma studies. In South Africa, the practice is less well researched and there was a time in recent memory when roadside memorials were not a part of South Africa's cultural landscapes. My purpose is to examine the origin of these phenomena, analyse their characteristics and speculate on their significance both as objects of trauma reconfiguring vernacular memorialisation and as evidence of an evolving cultural performance that reflects something of the socio-demographics of this nation and a change in the trajectories of expressive grief.

The origins of roadside memorials are intriguing. They are reported to be common in the Anglophone and European nations with a Christian civil religion heritage and an established public road network (MacConville 34). Collins and Rhine suggest that roadside memorialisation is fundamentally a cultural cross-pollination that has its roots in the considerably older *descansos* tradition – a Catholic funerary rite common in Latin America and long practised in those states that border Mexico (222). They further submit that this vernacular memorialisation, so infused with articulating private grief, has been adopted in recent times as a cultural practice by the general population of the United States (225). The direct linkage of the practice with road deaths logically suggests that it quickly spread throughout the USA thanks to an extensive road network and an

annual traffic death toll exceeding 35 000[1]. Quite how it crossed the oceans is open to speculation, though Bolton and Olsson argue a good case that the spread of American popular culture "took place, and still takes place—both inside and outside the U.S.—through the propagation of U.S. media and consumer products" (18). This cultural transmission, energised by modern media and entertainment forms, has eased the way for a once localised tradition to rapidly find resonance globally. South Africa, particularly in the post-apartheid digital era has not been immune to adopting multiple cultural traditions from the United States. We see, for example, the rapid uptake of the "trick or treat" celebrations associated with Halloween, the restyling of school dances as "proms" and the influence of American music genres such as rap, hip-hop and rhythm and blues on the local music scene. It is young people as first adopters of new media technologies who initiate cultural change and embrace these imports and the same is true of roadside memorialisation.

As we look carefully at South African roadside memorials, it becomes apparent that they closely mirror trends already described elsewhere. Hartig and Dunn determined that these shrines are predominantly erected in memory of young adults, the majority of whom seem to be male, so opening "contradictory discourses condemning and condoning youth machismo" (5). That certainly seems to be the case with the limited field work I have conducted, where of the five memorials close to my home, four are dedicated to male victims. The death of any youth, however, has a particular destabilising effect on traditional trajectories of grief. A young person's sudden, traumatic end is perceived almost universally as cruelly untimely and, by extension, a deeply tragic waste of a life brimming with potential. The epitaph on

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[1] In 2016, 37 5461 fatalities were recorded on US roads. By way of perspective, the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC contains the names of 55 000 American casualties from the 12 year long war. Source: https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/812451

"Preston's" memorial poignantly reflects this: "Our son, loved with a love beyond all feelings, missed with a grief beyond all tears". The psychic void created in tragedies like this is so grief laden that it begs for assuagement and the erection of a roadside memorial is one way that the grief stricken attempt to describe and somehow contain their sense of loss. However simply constructed the memorial might be, complex and highly nuanced grief performance rituals accrete around the structure.

Scholars point out that roadside memorials tend to take two forms. The first are the spontaneous memorials that arise at the scene of a fatal incident usually within hours of the event occurring. Typically, these memorials take the form of floral tributes symbolising as Erika Doss suggests "beauty and the brevity of life" (299). Bouquets are normally placed by the friends of the deceased as an "active sacred engagement with the dead" (Doss 304). These tributes are sort-lived and are habitually abandoned where they wither and decay. Shortly thereafter, the immediate family erect a permanent marker at or as close as possible to the scene of their loved one's death (Klaassens and Huigen 191). Characteristically, these memorials tend to be wooden or metal versions of the Latin cross and are inscribed with the victim's name and date of death. It is common, too, for votive offerings such as items of clothing, favourite possessions, photographs, poems and letters or indeed anything closely associated with the deceased to be left within the now private and informally consecrated space of the memorial (Collins and Rhine 230). The simple wooden cross erected in memory of "Joe Whitehurst" for example, contains his name, dates of birth and death and two empty beer bottles are embedded in the ground at the foot of the cross. In this case it appears that the bottles are not roadside litter. Instead, their deliberate placement suggests that libations were poured here. The context and individual significance of this performative act is, however, cordoned off from passers-by who may approach this space, but cannot access its hidden significance. A powerful dynamic is at work here.

The erection of a roadside memorial, whatever its size or form, is effectively an unsanctioned expropriation of public space by private mourners. The "expropriation" I refer to may also be read as an attempt by the mourning families to wrest control of the trauma

narrative from the cruel hands of fate. As Hartig and Dunn suggest, roadside memorials instantly become sovereign spots of sacred ground "because they commemorate death and *command reverence*. Unsanctioned behaviour in or around such a landscape is considered sacrilegious" (10, emphasis added). The act of "expropriation" of public space to claim a site for the expression of private grief is heavily nuanced. Spaces so deeply symbolic and invested in acts of memorialisation thus ironically may also become sites of potential conflict.

Whilst these shrines are of deep significance to the families, their reception by others is often mixed. Motorists passing by a memorial may barely register its existence, but for some, their presence may be an annoyance. The roadside shrine erected in Edgemead in memory of "JFGR" for example, drew the ire of a neighbour who objected to a visible Christian symbol. Similar concerns are noted in other countries, but most "complaints" are directed at the eyesore quality and the apparent proliferation of these shrines. Collins and Rhine (230) note that memorials tend to be visited by families on significant anniversaries such as "birthdays, the anniversary of the fatal event, Christmas and Valentine's Day" which would seem to mirror the previous customs of visiting gravesites. In between these times, the memorials are not maintained and suffer weathering, accidental damage, vandalism and even theft. Thus one can see how people might well perceive them as blots on the landscape. The attitude of road maintenance agencies is also a tricky one to navigate. In this country, the South African

National Roads Agency is opposed to the erection of roadside memorials and as journalist Vusumuzi Ka Nzapheza discovered in 2008, SANRAL would prefer the practice to be outlawed. This has not occurred to date, suggesting that the emotional power invested in them is sufficient to halt the hand of potential legislation drafters. Local authorities in South Africa seem to adopt a more relaxed attitude to roadside memorials, removing them only if they pose a danger to the public or seriously impede routine road maintenance.

The obvious sanctity of these private memorials is something that intrigues. It is beyond the scope of this present work to fully investigate the issue, but it is worth noting the online work of Keith Suter who suggests a link to the emergence of war grave curation, a

phenomena he suggests arose during the Great War with the work of Fabian Ware[2] who pioneered the "recording of the graves of fallen soldiers ... and took photographs of the sites for the next of kin". Ware's purpose was to commemorate, dignify and try to make some sense out of the untimely and astronomical loss of so many young lives. The same motivation, so Suter suggests, easily segued into contemporary society where road accidents and not war are now the main reasons why young people die traumatically. But while war casualties are today accorded formal recognition and appropriate memorialisation in specially consecrated spaces, the fact remains that road accident victims are seen in a different light. Although many more people in this country (and elsewhere) perish on the roads annually than have died in times of war, road deaths are seen as mere public statistics[3]. Accident victims become tallied numbers, the stock of those grim accountants whose job it is to record the carnage on our roads. The erection of roadside memorials is partly explainable, therefore, as an attempt by the bereaved to counter this depersonalisation and declare the humanity of the victim. Yet even as we narrow our focus on roadside memorialisation, a troubling issue arises. Roadside memorialisation appears to reflect our nation's demographic profiles too.

I am acutely aware that any deference to arbitrary classifications based on racial grounds is hugely problematic. This is especially so given this country's oppressive past and the ongoing battle to forge a

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[2] Ware eventually became Vice Chairman of the Imperial War Graves Commission. The mandate of the Commission is to "mark and maintain the graves… build memorials to those who have no known grave ... and to keep records and registers, including of the civilian war dead." Source: Suter, Keith. "Roadside memorials: sacred places in a secular era." *The Free Library* 22 March 2010.

[3] In South Africa, over 135 000 people died in road accidents between 2008 and 2017. Source: https://www.wheels24.co.za/News/Guides_and_Lists/sa-road-deaths-a-national-crisis-134-000-killed-over-10-years-aa-20180424

non-racial, postcolonial society. Yet bearing this in mind, Willem Schoeman's analysis of South Africa's religious demography based on the 2001 census and the 2013 Household Data Survey has applications germane to our discussion. Regarding reported religious adherence, he notes "[t]he 2001 results for the white and coloured population groups indicate a decline but the percentages of Christian in the black and Asian population groups were still growing" (2). Schoeman's research, coupled with anecdotal evidence that roadside memorialisation is unknown in South Africa's black population suggests then that the practice is specifically confined to the secularising sections of our society. There are interesting dynamics at work here.

As people move out of the orbit of Christian denominational adherence, they break with the practices traditionally associated with a Christian funeral. Formalised mourning rituals and church services conducted by professional clergy that culminate in burial are giving way to non-denominational or unscripted secular "life celebrations" all followed by private cremation. Whilst the latter practices may serve the function of giving mourners relative freedom of expression in their initial throes of grief, the tendency towards cremation means that the vital connection to a grave site in a formally consecrated place that serves as the final resting place for the loved one, has been eliminated as the apex of the grief trajectory. This creates a disruptive lacuna that stalls the trauma narrative and impedes grief recovery. Put simply, after the disposal of the mortal remains, the family have nowhere to go to in those deeply private moments when they wish to reconnect with their loved one. A plaque in a dedicated wall of remembrance (itself often regulated in terms of form, size and inscriptions) is so impersonal and so physically small that it cannot contain the memory spectrum attached to the deceased. These practises, divorced from traditional religious funeral customs, have so few tangible links with the loved one that families feel the need to make that connection with the precise spot where their loved one was last alive. The place of death ironically becomes the place where they sense the enduring presence of their loved one most acutely.

While roadside memorials may seem macabre to some casual observers, they are spaces of deep, if sometimes contradictory significance to the families. Collins and Opie (110) acknowledge this

dilemma, noting "if agency is given over to the site, how does the individual gain control?" Their resolution of this is salient. They posit that roadside shrines can be regarded as examples of Foucauldian heterotopias in that they open up a parallel space that somehow limits the initial trauma's psychic hold (110-111). Accessing the shrine thus becomes a conscious performative act: it involves a journey or pilgrimage and culminates in stepping into the memorial's sacred space to re-engage with the deceased and the circumstances of his or her death. Strangers passing by have no knowledge of the victim and are excluded from the knowing implicit in this space and cannot navigate the complex psychic web of trauma recall that settles over the memorial. For many families, the shrine becomes the epicentre of their trauma narratives; a place invested with healing agency.

The roadside memorial becomes, therefore, more than just a collection of material objects. In its sacred space, families are able to marshal their thoughts and may, with time, reconstruct a memory framework that reconciles them with the trauma they have suffered. The observable fact that some roadside memorials are ultimately abandoned and left to merge into the landscape suggests that for some, at least, a life-affirming readjustment is attainable. For others, the recovery from the initial impact of the incident and its trauma is tied to an enduring connection to the shrine. Life may go on, but they continue to derive some comfort from having a revered place to return to – a site where they can connect with and remember their loved one. It is a small consolation, but the shrine's existence in effect partially negates the absence occasioned by sudden death, and ritualised site visits become agency appropriating acts that form an ineffable part of an ongoing trauma narrative.

In closing, roadside memorials are now a permanent feature of South Africa's public landscapes. They may be augmented by other non-traditional "new" modes of mourning, such as online memoriali-

sation[4], but their proliferation suggests the emergence of a secularised, post-Biblical culture in South Africa; a culture imported from the "North" and readily adopted with minimal local adaption. It is highly unlikely that road authorities will ever be able to proscribe the practise because of the sense of sanctity invested in the sites and potential pushback from an increasingly emboldened public. This "new" culture of memorialisation is rewriting mourning rituals as people search for alternative ways of navigating the grief and trauma of sudden death. The essence of roadside memorials remains. These objects are rooted in that deepest of human needs and emotional reach: the necessity to pause and remember, an act so poignantly captured in the closing lines from Shakespeare's Sonnet 55:

"So, till the judgment that yourself arise, You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes."

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[4] Personal Facebook pages, for example, are often maintained as memory albums by families for some time after the owners have passed away.

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