

## Spontaneous Materiality: An Informal Survey of the January 8, 2011 Vernacular Shrines at University Medical Center

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On the morning of January 8, 2011, Tucson, Arizona joined the leagues of American cities to experience the mass shooting. This shooting targeted U.S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords; six were killed and 15 were injured, including the shooter. At the time it occurred, I was just a few miles away from the event having breakfast. I was close enough to hear the sirens going by when someone turned on the local news to hear the breaking story. The experience was jarring and quite sad. Though I did not know any of the victims on a personal level, the events felt too close to home in a number of ways. At the time, I was also living blocks away from the University Medical Center (UMC), where the injured were transferred to receive emergency care. Over the ensuing days and weeks,



**Figure 15:** *The spontaneous shrine in front of the University Medical Center.*

I watched as people from the Tucson community started to bring an array of things and place them somewhat ceremoniously on the front lawn of the hospital. I walked over to the hospital almost every day to watch the droves of people come to place objects on the lawn; I watched people tour the objects, and then as they began to organize the objects into ordered pathways to permit a structured tours of the growing shrine. I watched as objects were curated and preserved during inclement weather. Finally, I watched as nearly a month later, a then informal group that would become the January 8 Memorial Foundation carefully packed the objects up and took them away to be stored, and ultimately cataloged online. Afterwards, there was no trace of the whole momentous production but trampled grass that soon grew back.

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Recently, it seems that the event of the mass shooting has become a trope of the American experience. In a recent string of speeches, President Obama repeatedly voiced the sentiment that the United States was exceptional in its experience of mass shooting events (Ye Hee Lee 2016). Using the standardized definition of a mass shooting—an event in which four or more people die by gunfire—the United States experienced more than one such event per day in 2015, reflecting a continual rise over the last several years (BBC News 2016; 2015 Mass Shootings, 2016; Ye Hee Lee 2016)<sup>1</sup>. The repeated themes of shots fired, sudden violent death, of anger, grief, of politics as usual with platitudes and no substantive change, along with communal sorrow are all too common motifs. It would be a macabre undertaking, but you as well as I could easily picture the ensuing news coverage, as well as the word choices by pundits and politicians alike. This piece is not about my feelings on gun control, or even mass shootings, but about a specific type of populist reaction catalyzed by such forms of traumatic rupture as a community deals with their shock

<sup>1</sup> Though the United States does not in fact lead the world in mass shootings per year or mass shooting deaths per capita, it does have one of the highest rates of deaths by gun violence per capita (CPRC 2015).

and grief. This piece is a case study for how communities surrounding these shooting events respond materially, with the creation of “spontaneous shrines.” Though such shrines are not created exclusively in relation to mass shootings, I see the two events as having become closely correlated in a culture where mass shootings have become relatively commonplace.

Spontaneous shrines occur in the aftermath of an unexpected death(s) and evoke a sense of community. They are defined as large numbers of people depositing various things—usually flowers, get well cards, and votive candles—at a site relevant to that trauma (Doss 2008; Santino 2006). I posit that these ephemeral acts of collective conjoining *vis a vis* the bringing and depositing of an array of materials to an emotionally laden site holds a number of implications for archaeological interpretation. As an archaeologist, I do not want to objectify tragedy as a point of analysis, but I do want to take this opportunity to meditate on what can be learned from the association between material culture, community, unexpected trauma, and grief.

Archaeologists write about the meaning of memorial sites and shrines in the past, of funerary objects in burials, and of traces of ritual surrounding burials within given cultures and communities. They study monuments as they indicate communal outposts of prescribed memory (Mills and Walker 2008). They write about the materials of people’s everyday lives and how the meaning associated with common objects can be transformed ritually when left in a grave, or arranged at a ceremonially abandoned room or site (Gillespie 2008; Joyce 2008; Mills 2008). Meanwhile, a growing branch of archaeology deals with the material culture of “supermodernity” (*sensu* Auge 2009), focusing on the large-scale, global capacity for destruction of industrialized materiality in an era starting with World War I and continuing through the present day (Gonzalez-Ruibal 2008; Harrison and Schofield 2010; Saunders 2003). These archaeologists argue that this era is particularly material, and completely unprecedented in relation to anything that came before it. Within supermodernity, they focus on humanity repressed by an industrial world, but also adapt-

ing to it: subjects of study are the casualties of modernity, but also engaged in processes of carving out space for agency and survival within the supermodern world order (Ferrardiz 2006; Gonzalez-Ruibal 2014; Ludlow Collective 2001; Saunders 2009, 2010). At this point, we see the continuity between past and present as common objects—otherwise simple “stuff” of the everyday (Miller 2010)—transformed by circumstance into beacons of historical events, memory, and catharsis.

Jack Santino (2006) is credited with being the first scholar to coin the term “spontaneous shrines.” Santino echoes this sense of continuity within this present era of supermodernity. “It seems as if people are reacting to the mass industrialization of death and the alienation of contemporary society with new folk traditions, rituals, and celebrations” (Santino 2006: 13). Santino has since revised the term “spontaneous shrines,” to “performative commemorative.” He posits that as such shrines become more common, they are no longer explicitly spontaneous. They are becoming ritualistically scripted, and participation in building these shrines has become performative. I acknowledge this point, but I continue to use the term “spontaneous shrine” as a recognizable descriptor. The alternative term for this phenomenon is representative of this new trend, but it simply feels too cumbersome and is not nearly as recognizable. By Santino’s (2006) definition, spontaneous shrines are a new form of folk ritual used to cope with random mass violent death, violence that can be uniquely inflicted by single individuals in the supermodern era given the rise and widening public availability of industrialized weaponry.

After spending a lifetime studying rituals of taboo and risk behavior in so-called primitive cultures, one of Mary Douglas’ (1994) final works deals with a comparison of taboo rituals and risk behavior in the present. She describes the hubris of modernity in which individuals living within (more or less) scientifically astute cultures of the Western world, particularly in the United States, believe they have the capacity to assess “true” (versus supernatural) risk through science. Part and parcel to these cultural beliefs is that there is no comparison between past, or non-industrialized cul-

tures, or both that perceive witchcraft or supernatural forces at work in the unexpected.

There is much to be said here about the flawed logic and hubris of “modernity” that pervades the social consciousness of the Western world, though limited space prevents me from discussing this in depth. Relevant here is that the much critiqued definition of modernity (“we have never been modern,” Latour (1991) chides in his eponymously titled book) involves cultures of the present who see themselves as so scientifically advanced that they no longer perceive themselves as beholden to natural forces, or involved in any fundamental relationship with their natural and physical environments. In this mindset, things are superficial and not fundamentally related to or capable of defining so-called deep emotions or bearing relevance to metaphysical questions of being, life, and death. “Modernity” is fundamentally related to notions of social evolution, in which high culture represents advanced science and large-scale industry, in direct contrast to so-called primitivism based on supernatural beliefs and a close relationship to the natural world (Dawdy 2015; Latour 1991; Miller 2010; Olsen 2013).

But ultimately, even rigorously derived probabilities of risk continue to exist on an abstract level (i.e., you have a 1 in 1.2 million chance of being struck by lightning (NWS 2016), just as you have a 1 in 200,000 chance of dying on an amusement park ride (NSC 2015)<sup>2</sup>, and a 31 in 1 million chance of death by gun violence in the United States (Quealy and Sanger-Katz 2015)) and do not really affect the daily behavior of most. Thus, unexpected death is always still just that. Perhaps in places like the United States, the unexpected is even more traumatic because of high modernist sensibilities, accompanied by the pervasive sense that various social controls mitigate most risks (Douglas 1994). Even Malinowski (1935), one of the preeminent ethnographers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, acknowledged this.

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<sup>2</sup> The National Safety Council produces risk statistics annually. Their website home page advertises that you can look up the probability of your dying from a range of inflictions, from cancer to hornet stings!

Knowledge gives man the possibility of planning ahead, of embracing vast spaces of time and distance...But however much knowledge and science help man in allowing him to obtain what he wants, they are unable completely to control change, to eliminate accidents, to foresee the unexpected turn of natural events...In this field, much more practical, definite and circumscribed than that of religion, there develops a special type of ritual activities which anthropology labels collectively as magic.

But modern magic survives not only in forms of minor superstitions or within the body of religious systems. Wherever there is danger, uncertainty, great incidence of chance and accident, even in entirely modern forms of enterprise, magic crops up...Motoring and modern sailing demand mascots and develop superstition. Around every sensational sea tragedy there has formed a myth showing some mysterious magical indications or giving magical reasons for the catastrophe. Aviation is developing its superstitions.... (Malinowski 1935: 39, 40).

Douglas (1994) and Malinowski (1935) both point out that ritual behaviors are everywhere based on recognized patterns of danger then codified into appropriate responses. Mass shootings are always unexpected, but their patterned occurrence has begun to result in a form of equally patterned response at the popular level. Further, the continual political insistence that mentally unstable people are the problem in mass shootings, not guns, confuse the location of the risk. Should we be wary of guns or should we be afraid of our neighbors? Should we change our behavior in the every day? Similarly, though eventual death is an inescapable reality, to a large extent the notion of what happens spiritually after death remains on the frontiers of our understanding and will thus continue to be an occurrence accompanied by complex symbolic expression (Auge 2009; Doss 2008; Edkins 2003; Hallam and Hockey 2001).

As rituals, the act of shrine building also seems an invocation to the liminal, creating a period when what would not otherwise be allowed becomes permissible (Turner 1995). In considering “spontaneous” shrine building as ritualized behavior, one can understand this act as a remaking and coopting public and otherwise regulated spaces (Doss 2008; Senie 2006). It is the rupture of the mass shooting that creates a liminal, ritual-like, opening for this behavior as in the moment, societal controls are violently usurped. Anthropology often focuses on the dialectic and tension between the creation and maintenance of social structures and the agency of people living within such structures (Doss and Randeria 2015; Farmer 2004; Knauft 2007; Ong *et al.* 1996, to name a very few). So, it is interesting that in the case of spontaneous shrines, the state often permits and later appropriates the meaning of populist shrines for its own self-reinforcement. This is where spontaneous shrines become the impetus for building of official stone memorials, or are at the very least curated on some official level (Durbin 2003; Edkins 2003; Grider 2001). The sense of community embodied in the shrines then becomes politicized. It seems shrine sites are ideal places to reflect on the openings presented by trauma, and through it the dialectic between objects, individuals, and the state (Edkins 2003; Miller 2010; Tilley 2006).

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Here, I present my observations from the spontaneous shrine built in the aftermath of the mass shooting in my hometown, Tucson, Arizona. I decided to take photos to informally document these events. I did not have plans to use these photos at the time, but knew I was witnessing something special that would not last. So, here I reflect not on any formal fieldwork, but on the informal participant observation and photographic record I created in January 2011. I think this special issue of the *Arizona Anthropologist* represents a fitting opportunity to share these photos and some of my brief reflections on the shrine event as they serve as relevant fuel for thought, with some larger archaeological and theoretical implications. I pair

these reflections with photos I took of the UMC shrine over the month of January 2011.

I play with the ways in which the theory surrounding shrines melded with my participant observation and photographs of the event. In so doing, I attempt to draw out the underlying meaning of what I witnessed.

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What first comes to mind is that people would never be able to bring random stuff to the well-cultivated lawn in front of the hospital in any ordinary circumstances. Under normal circumstances, books, flowers, candles, toys, letters, etcetera left on the UMC lawn would be cleared fairly quickly. In the wake of a trauma, hundreds of people leaving such things was permitted. The communal nature of this trauma along with the collective levels of material deposition both seemed to act in concert to open the doorway for a small bending and breaking of ordinary rules. It was somewhat chaotic, but the transgression was marked by an atmosphere of respect and quiet.



**Figure 16:** A person stretches over other shrine offerings to upright a fallen sign.

The site of the UMC lawn is owned by the state of Arizona. So, the memorial site was effectively a collective occupation of state space, with the state's ensuing surrender of control over that space. But with the shooting, the state had already lost momentary control. There is a disordering effect here, a topsy-turviness predicated on a temporary rupture of control, and embodied at the shrine site where normal state control was momentarily abdicated and reversed on a small scale. Control here is a laden term, referring both to the monopoly on violence (Graeber 2012; Neocleous 2000; Weber 2004) that a state normally maintains to prevent unauthorized violence and control over meaning, and the means of articulating otherwise ineffable grief. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, the state had not officially claimed control over the narrative of the event.



**Figure 17:** Shrine offerings pile up.

After one week, someone started to curate the materials and organize them into neat paths. There was such a high volume of materials that at a certain point, one could not bring more without stepping on someone else's offer-

ing. While on some level the spontaneous shrine marked a small-scale uprising, the atmosphere of respect meant people avoided destroying or tampering with other people's materials. More than once, I witnessed people propping up the fallen toys, candles, and signs brought by others. People even brought wooden stakes, tape and paper for people to erect small signs on the lawn. Once the trails were in place, most people followed them.



**Figure 18:** Organized trails at the spontaneous shrine.

At the shrine site, I did not feel a strong sense of anger, nor did I witness much overt grief. What was clear is that people felt a need to be there. Presence and material placeholders for presence were key. This brings forth an important point about the objects of the shrine. Materials at the shrine site were mostly things one would buy in a hospital gift shop: get well cards, balloons, teddy bears, and flowers. There were also many religious objects such as votive candles and rosaries. Later people began bringing banners and posters representing organizations such as schools, local charities, and civic groups. Many objects seemed more random: books and toys, a Star Wars candy dispenser. People inscribed their names on most of the materials they brought. I am not sure the original intended function of the given objects brought to the shrine really mattered as much as the bringing of some *thing* marking their presence and participation. And really, nothing was too small or too cheap or within certain bounds, too arbitrary. In other words, context and circumstance transformed these

things into...what? Stand-ins for community support of the victims? Totems of healing? A means of materially linking oneself to history? A means of participating in community? It was probably a bit of everything.

In an essay on objectification, Charles Tilley (2006) writes about the inexorable relationship between culture and things, with the latter being the medium through which culture becomes tangibly communicated and enacted.



**Figures 19 and 20:** An array of materials present at the shrine.

Culture and material culture are the two sides of the same coin. They are related dialectically, in a con-

stant process of being and becoming...Ideas, values and social relations do not exist prior to culture forms which then become merely passive reflections of them, but are themselves actively created through the processes in which these forms themselves come into being. Thus, material forms do not simply mirror pre-existing social distinctions, sets of ideas or symbolic systems. They are instead the very medium through which these values, ideas and social distinctions are constantly reproduced and legitimized, or transformed (Tilley 2006: 61).



**Figure 21:**  
*One shrine offering is an astronaut collage, dedicated to Giffords husband, astronaut Mark Kelly.*

In this case, things are the medium through which values are expressed; they are the medium through which social grief is both objectified and dealt with (see also Kidron 2012; Par-kin 1999; Turkle 2007). This process is multi-faceted, and the struggle for meaning in culture is not uncontested, though neither is this struggle necessarily oppressive. The spontaneous shrine was almost immediately drawn upon by news media as a sign of the strength of the Tucson community. In the aftermath, an official foundation was formed to curate the materials and organize the building of a permanent memorial to symbolize “democracy in action,” exemplified by the shrine site (January 8 Memorial Foundation 2015).

Students of the social sciences know all too well that the recording of history is always incomplete, that it can be biased, and that narrative put forth can impact both historical memory and future actions based on that understanding.



**Figure 22:** Media lighting stations and equipment on the peripheries of the UMC lawn. Crowds surround the shrine are visible in the background

We also know that history has been manipulated and revised for political purposes. Katherine Verdery (1999) writes particularly about how basing historical memory on tangible and evocative objects can be manipulated to create a “truth effect.” Verdery (1999) focuses on the political lives of dead bodies (usually state leaders of those who could be considered heroic martyrs) as tangible and relatable forms to invoke for their fundamental tangible relatability (because all living beings eventually die); at the same time, “corpses are effective symbols because they are protean while being concrete” (Verdery 1999: 113). Because of this, for a state’s efforts to formally memorialize the political implications of those people’s lives and/or the politically provocative manner of their deaths

is meant to make these figures into political compasses for citizens. This is why regime change is often marked by the removal of memorials built by former leaders, such is their significance as beacons of political ideologies (Verdery 1999).

The array of objects and personalities participating in spontaneous shrines—dedicated as it were, to the dead and dying—makes these sites somewhat complicated. There is no one reason people do this, but their rationales run parallel. Shrine sites are then also evocative, relatable, and ultimately protean spaces, full of pathos. This specific spontaneous memorial is now being turned into a formal monument. Spontaneous shrines related to other mass shootings in other cities have also been turned into formal shrines. The goals of these formal monuments are ultimately to promote an idealized version of democracy.

In an online statement by the January 8 Memorial Foundation (organized by a number of local community leaders and stakeholders), the stated goal of the formal shrine site invoked the political leadership of former congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, she being the most prominent casualty of the day and the stated target of the shooter. The shooting took place at an event called “Congress on Your Corner,” held to make Giffords available to her constituents for questions and discussion.

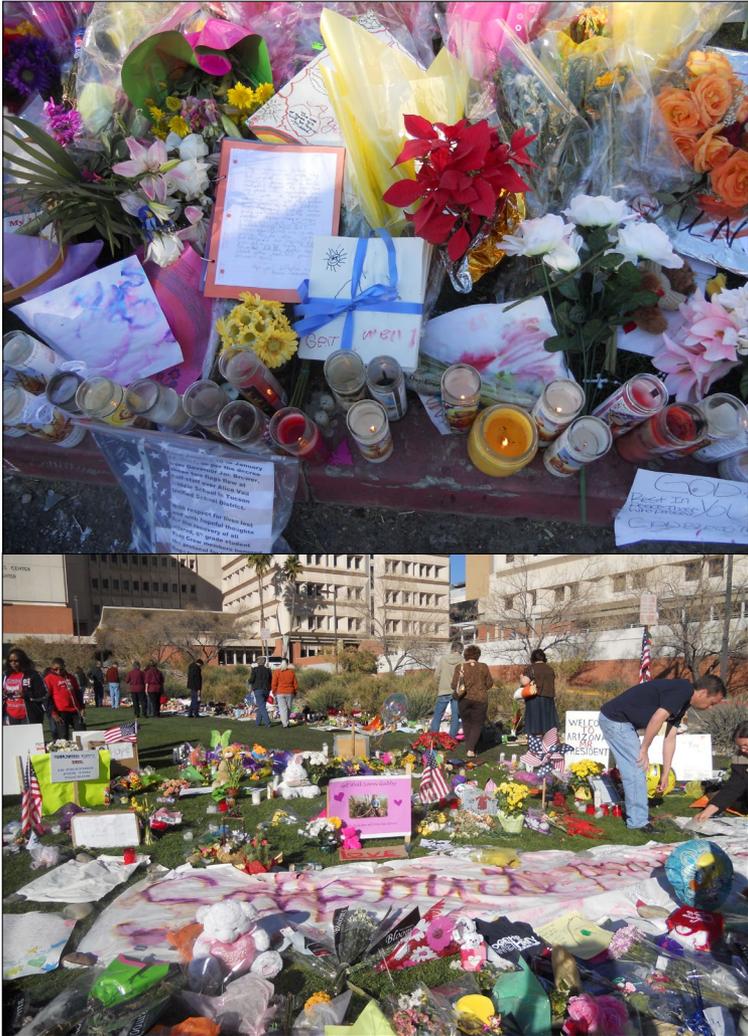
While reflecting on the importance of [building a formal] memorial, the board has continually returned to the core principles that inspired our neighbors to attend the “Congress on Your Corner” event that day. The important bedrock principles of a representative democracy require that citizens actively participate in their governance. Likewise, for our own government to function properly, our elected representatives must be accessible and willing to listen to the concerns of their constituents.

When people connect with their government, when agents of our government create opportunities for their constituents’ voices to be heard, this is democracy in action at its best.

Therefore, the Tucson January 8 Permanent Memorial will be a place where citizens gather to reflect and remember; a place where citizens engage and exercise their most basic fundamental rights; and a place where we honor those that their lives in pursuit of a better democracy (January 8 Memorial Foundation 2015).

The purpose of this piece is not a value judgment on the building of the formal shrine. My goal here is to bring forward the dynamic interrelationship between a traumatic rupture in the everyday, followed by a populist response and a distinct formal response. Some argue that when/if an ephemeral shrine provokes the building of a permanent memorial, this may be taken as a sign of collective power to influence formal processes. As they were, the spontaneous shrine materials were not designed to stand the test of time, so the permanent memorial endows the original shrine with longevity (Durbin 2003). Then again, Senie (2006) poses questions for the designers of permanent memorials based on spontaneous shrines. She asks, "How can memorial designers tap into the profound personal response and civic commentary evidenced by the practice of spontaneous memorials?... Can we create permanent memorials that actively engage a society so clearly in need of them?" (51).

The creation of an inoffensive and universal memorial site—the accepted shrine design for the Tucson community's January 8 Memorial (not yet built) is fairly abstract, and loosely modeled on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial—channels the potential for disordering present in a traumatic event into a narrative of control and stability that promotes the democratic project. One must also be aware of the potential silencing that comes out of this. The formal shrine is to be built in Tucson's Presidio Plaza, adjacent to the old courthouse building downtown. Presidio Plaza is a place named for Tucson's Hispanic heritage, though the name itself is the only trace of that heritage in the plaza. Further, drawing on an earlier point, the original spontaneous shrine held a plethora of meaning



**Figures 23 and 24:** *Fading, water damage, and wearing of the shrine objects took place in a relatively short period.*

and sentiment not quite consistent with a permanent shrine claiming concrete (literally) meaning for the events conforming neatly with democratic principles and strength. “By insisting that its memory was as fixed as its place in the landscape, the monument seems to ignore the essential mutability in all

cultural artifacts...Stone gives a false sense of continuity and a deceptive assurance of life" (Young 1994: 4).

By contrast, the creation of spontaneous shrines involves the conscious deposition of ephemeral objects outside, left to the elements. There is a correspondence in the leaving behind of such objects and the short-term disruption (at least in the lives of community members not directly effected by the shooting) that marks the trauma.

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Five years later—a relatively short archaeological period—there is nothing left of the spontaneous shrine on the UMC lawn, but construction will soon start downtown on the permanent memorial. I wonder whether the lawn site should still be considered a meaningful place if the memory if its importance is only loosely held (*sensu* Bowser and Zedeño 2009)? The same sort of spontaneous memorials were also erected at Gabrielle Giffords' former Tucson office, and at the location of the shooting. These too are gone. At the same time, the materials are being curated and slowly digitized (<http://azmemory.azlibrary.gov/cdm/landingpage/collection/eight>) by the January 8 Memorial Foundation, so some context remains (AMP 2015).

As Bjørnar Olsen (2013) and others have pointed out, memory is contingent and shaped by a modernist ontology that divides humans from the inanimate world (Dawdy 2010, 2015; Miller 2010). Still, a clear connection between humans and objects exists, acknowledged or not, evidenced by this case study. Important then is a collective acknowledgement of human nature as inextricably bound to and defined by our things. Within this understanding must then come the acknowledgement of the mediating power of things create meaning and for catharsis.

It is said that the most important aspect of understanding history is to help avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. But, historical narratives are also protean, and dialectically shaped by human-object interactions. Fundamentally involved in the historical project, I think archaeologists have

a unique opportunity to seize upon object-based stories that represent alternative or popular narratives that would not otherwise be enumerated in the history books or commemorated in monuments. We have the power to use the discipline to analyze how a sudden accumulation of objects brought to a site of communal grief promote a strong, if ephemeral, sense of what it means to survive the perils of supermodernity together. It has the power to help us understand a world in which industrialized objects of war have mass killing power, yet that power is met and mitigated by industrially produced quotidian objects that collectively evoke and recall our valiant humanity, tempered by communal bonds.

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