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Performative Commemoratives, the Personal, and the Public: Spontaneous Shrines, Emergent Ritual, and the Field of Folklore

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(AFS Presidential Plenary Address, 2003)

IN THIS PRESIDENTIAL PLENARY ADDRESS, I discuss the concept of “spontaneous shrines,” along with other examples of public memorializations of death. These phenomena combine the personal with the public, or, following the work of linguist J. L. Austin, the performative with the commemorative (1962). I discuss the social dynamics and political repercussions of spontaneous shrines and suggest that, by combining the personal with the public, they can be seen as a metaphor for folklore itself. In keeping with the theme of the 2003 AFS meetings, I examine the concept of “the public” throughout.

I recently attended a ceremony at Bowling Green State University called “Operation Transformation,” held in memory of victims of domestic violence. The event was sponsored by the BGSU Women’s Center and was held inside a Christian chapel on campus. In front of the prominent cross were twenty-two votive candles in purple glasses—purple being the designated color of mourning; twenty-two victims were being remembered.

This was the opening event of a month-long public display of twenty-two two-dimensional silhouettes, each shrouded in black cloth. October 1, 2003, was the unveiling. As each effigy was unveiled, an individual woman read the stories of the deceased in the first person and the present tense: “My name is _____. I am __ years old and have _ children. On _____ I was shot to death in front of my children by my estranged husband. My name is _____; remember my name.” Audience members included family members of the victims and BGSU students. Overcome with emotion, some of the women reading the brief biographies had trouble maintaining their composure. The victims and the audience members were young and old, black, white, and Latino. All were from the surrounding area.

This ritualistic event, the unveiling, simultaneously memorialized deceased individuals and drew attention and tried to mobilize action toward a social problem, that is, domestic violence. Both aspects—the personal identity of the victims and the social malignancy that led to their deaths—were emphatically manifest in the present.

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tation. The readers called attention to the life stories and personal relationships of the victims, and the entire event was presented in the context of domestic violence as a gendered crime. Moreover, the ceremony borrowed heavily from traditional Christian ritual.

This kind of public memorialization of death toward a social end seems to be a growing phenomenon. The AIDS quilt is an example, as are the demonstrations of the Madres de la Plaza—calling attention to the disappeared in Argentina and Chile, the Bloody Sunday commemorations in Northern Ireland, gang memorial walls, roadside crosses, and all the other “spontaneous shrines” (as I term them) that we see. Central to all of these phenomena is the conjunction of the performative memorializing of personal deaths in the framework of the social conditions that caused those deaths with the commemorative or celebratory. (To commemorate is, in a sense, to celebrate something or someone. I use the terms equivalently, but not interchangeably.) In a sense, death has always been publicly memorialized. Think of the funeral procession of hearse and cars down the street; the rituals held in houses of worship and in cemeteries. In these and other cases, though, participation in the ritual activities is restricted to a particular group—family and friends, for instance. I refer to the tendency to commemorate a deceased individual in front of an undifferentiated public that can then become participatory if it so chooses. First, then, I explore the concept of the public, beginning with rituals generally found in public, and not just rituals concerned with death and mourning.

Rituals in Public

Historian Samuel Kinser cites the slaughtering of “steers and other animals before the Pope and other Roman notables after a parade through the city,” as reported in a document circa A.D. 1140, as the earliest report of festive customs held prior to Lent, that is, Mardi Gras or carnival (Kinser 1990:3). This is clearly an expressive public event in that it is a festive or ritual act carried out in a public place. Public places can be either indoors or outdoors—a church or a plaza, for instance. In many ritual events, audiences are present but are restricted to, for example, only women or men, or friends and relatives. In a sense, all rituals are public, in that an audience of some kind is necessary to witness and validate the changes wrought by the ritual—or, at least, proclaimed by it. Here we think of ritual as dramatic social enactments that are thought by the participants to have some transformational or confirmatory agency and that they derive this power from an overarching parahuman authority, such as a deity, the state, or an institution such as a university—rather than ritual in the sense of custom or even more broadly, routine. The movement in scholarship (e.g., performance studies) toward ritual as public display—that is, applying theories derived from the study of ritual to contemporary public display events—parallels the social development of performative actions intended to produce change that will be seen by a broad and undifferentiated public. Most official rituals do not have general audiences—you have to be invited to attend or be a member of the group involved. In events such as the Operation Transformation project, however, we see public ritualistic events that invite participation from a broad audience.

The concept of public display clearly is a broad one. Roger Abrahams suggests it with reference to events such as “the parade, the pageant, or the ball game . . . expositions and meets, games and carnivals and auctions” (1981:303–4), using the term to refer to “planned-for public occasions” in which “accumulated feelings may be channeled into contest, drama, or some other form of display” and that also includes “actions and objects [that] are invested with meaning and values [that] are put on display” (303). Don Handelman suggests that we deal with the problem of imprecise terminologies such as “ritual,” “festival,” “spectacle,” “rite,” and so forth, by developing taxonomies and analytical methodologies based on the events’ designs—that is, according to what the particular event is intended to accomplish socially (1990). Ronald L. Grimes presents the term “public ritual” as an inclusive category “capable of including most examples of civil and secular ritual” (1982). In a study of a series of “living celebrations” that I curated for the Smithsonian Institution in the early 1980s, I called the staged presentations of traditional cultures, designed in part by the participants who were themselves members of the community whose traditions were being represented, “rites of public presentation” (Santino 1988), a concept related both to the ideas of public display and also to Barbara Myerhoff’s concept of “definitional ceremonies” (1978:185–6). I made the point that, although the nature of celebratory and ritualistic events was necessarily transformed when staged in a museum setting for an audience that would not otherwise participate in them or be familiar with them in their own lives, the events in question became ritualistic in a different way—not simply because they were theatrical, but because, although they were presented to the public as a kind of entertainment (however edifying), in practice, they turned out to be something else, a hybrid form where audiences actually participated in rites that were foreign to them. The role of the audience members was transformed from passive observer, as at the theatre, to active participant, as at a ritual. Cristina Sánchez Carretero has examined this phenomenon of public (and private) events being transformed by institutional presentation for the edification of a broad audience of people outside the tradition (2003). One important aspect of public display is the domain in which groups choose certain events from their own culture through which to publicly present themselves as a group to outsiders: at a museum, university, festival, and so on.

Problematizing the “Public”

I have referred above to at least three senses of the term “public”: (1) done before an audience; (2) performed in institutionalized contexts such as universities or museums for people unfamiliar with the tradition; and (3) set out before a spectatorship whose make-up is fluid and unpredictable. Nevertheless, the concept of “public” needs to be further problematized. For instance, on June 2, 1995, I visited a rag well, that is, a holy well with healing properties, in Dungiven, County Derry, Northern Ireland. This one is surrounded—indeed, almost obscured—by trees and bushes on which were tied rags, strings, ropes, and other pieces of cloth left by previous visitors as votive offerings. The well is located close to the ruins of the medieval priory of St. Mary, overlooking a spectacular view of the valley below, but is easily missed as one walks

onto the grounds. Once seen, however, it is unforgettable. The outer branches are unadorned. Only inside the copse, the thicket, or the “scrubbery” as they say in Ulster, surrounding the well itself, are the thick, twisted, gnarled, and dense branches covered by rags of all sorts and colors of materials. It is both a wall made of rags and branches and an environment, a space into which one must enter to get to the small rock basin with its holy water. Most of the rags are faded and in various stages of disintegration (Figure 1). Perhaps people leave these in the belief that, as the rags disintegrate, the illness to which they correspond will also fade. To see it, however, people have to know where it is. My friend and I each left a token of our presence—I tore my handkerchief in two, and we tied them to branches. Broadly speaking, as tokens of our having visited, the rags are at least in part, memorials.

It is clear that the motivations leading to such public acts of memorialization are many and complex, having to do with sickness, belief, personal devotion, attempts to influence that which is beyond human control, and also a need to demonstrate to an audience one does not know that one participated, that one contributed to this monument, and that one was there, albeit anonymously. Ironically, this rag well is strikingly visual, yet one cannot see it under usual circumstances. Memorialization or commemoration is one aspect of the display of cloth here. Performativity—the intent to effect a cure, to make something happen—is another. Both aspects may be present simultaneously in the actions of any one individual who leaves such a token at this place. J. L. Austin assigned the term “performative utterances” to those statements that accomplish a social change, statements such as “I do,” “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” or “I christen this ship” (1962). These statements, often found in rites of passage, cause the effect they pronounce. Here I extend the term from utterances to events that attempt to cause social change.



Figure 1. The rag well within the bushes, Dungiven, County Derry, Northern Ireland.

Public decorating for and ritual marking of special times and places is, of course, a well-known phenomenon internationally. Beyond the obvious examples of domestic and institutional decoration for important religious and calendrical occasions should be added the tendencies to ritualize present absences, such as the use of yellow ribbons to denote concern for hostages or green willows to denote awareness of absent lovers. Likewise, the deceased have been ritualized in most societies for which we have evidence. When death is sudden, untimely, or unexpected, as in automobile accidents, for instance, some cultures have found it appropriate to mark the place where the death occurred (for a general discussion of commemorations, see Gillis [1994]). Roadside crosses are found extensively throughout the American Southwest and Latin America for instance, as well as in many European countries. In the last decades of the twentieth century, this custom has been adapted internationally. No longer a regional tradition, the marking of the place of a shocking death with a spontaneous shrine consisting of flowers and personal memorabilia has become part of the global expressive repertoire, seen most dramatically at the site of the Oklahoma City bombing, in London and Paris after the death of Princess Diana, and in New York after September 11, 2001. In all these examples, the ribbons, flowers, and personal items reference a person or a group in a remarkable or significant condition of absence: hostage, distant lover, soldier sent to war, dead celebrity, or martyred leader. Just as important, they express an attitude toward that condition and the larger contexts in which they exist: support for the soldiers' cause, faithfulness toward a lover, or condemnation of violence. The attitudes expressed are also intended to be shared by those who view the artifacts—to convince or to have an effect on the aggregate spectatorship. Thus, these displays can be said to be performative and are frequently done in conjunction with public events, such as silent witness gatherings. It is their performative aspects that necessitate they be displayed in public. With most deaths, private mourning and flowers at the grave are sufficient. When the site of an untimely death, or its metaphorical analogue, is so adorned, the element of performativity is being exercised through these spontaneous shrines. We can see a duality in the yellow ribbon displays and the rag wells, but in spontaneous shrines the duality is expressly that they both commemorate deceased individuals and simultaneously suggest an attitude toward a related public issue.

The examples of such "performative commemoratives" are legion in the contemporary world, as I have indicated already. From the Mourning Wall in Oklahoma City, created in response to the bombing of a federal building, to memorial walls commemorating the deaths of gang members or the school shootings in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999, spontaneous shrines and the public marking of the places where death occurred have become a primary response. They are no longer emergent. They have clearly become a contemporary mourning ritual or tradition under certain circumstances—that of untimely death. Concomitantly, newspapers and other media frequently (ritualistically?) feature these shrines as part of their coverage of these events. Here, the media helps spread the tradition, much as David Waldstreicher, following Benedict Anderson (1983), argues that Independence Day customs were nationalized and standardized by print journalism (1997). Moreover, televised "watches" of the life cycle events and funerals of public figures such as Princess Diana or John F.

Kennedy, Jr., have become part of the rituals themselves (Dayan and Katz 1992). How these traditions have coalesced and spread at this point in history is an important question (see Santino 1992b, 1999), but we should also remember that the actual instances of ritual commemoration are specific to particular times, places, cultures, societies, and people. Here we can see personal, popular actions—the laying of flowers and wreaths—melded with international media coverage in an interesting conjunction of the intensely personal with the global.

On the other hand, actions such as leaving a piece of rag at a holy well, although it may imply the presence of a deity or a supernatural being as a witness, may simply be thought of as a direct (magical) act in which the rag corresponds to the affliction. The presence of the rag implies a potential audience of future visitors to the well. This points to the fact that ritual in the stricter sense of the term is instrumental: it is believed to be able to effect change. Healing rituals may or may not be successful, but they are thought to be potentially efficacious, regardless of the outcome. Rites of passage are generally accepted among scholars as a social mechanism of status change, although we probably all have had the experience of undergoing some life cycle event—a birthday, maybe, or a confirmation—that we felt meant nothing to us. I would suggest that what we analytically call rituals are emically efficacious. Thus, they appear to outsiders as largely, even primarily, metaphorical, symbolic, and expressive, regardless of how functional they are thought to be among participants. For devout Roman Catholics, for instance, the bread and wine of the mass is truly, literally, transformed into the body and blood of Christ. For Pentecostals, the Holy Spirit is genuinely present during their services. The problem arises precisely in the kinds of literature to which we have been referring, in which other cultural performances are generally categorized along with ritual, or as ritual itself. Analytically they share symbolic ceremonialism, cultural patterning, and framing, but for the participants a ritual is a conscious means to a desired end and less a doing for its own sake (Schieffelin 1998). Further, as was mentioned in the case of the rag well, there are multiple intentions involved.

The rag well described above is a prime example of a custom that involves public display, although the well itself is hidden and hard to find. One must either know where it is or deliberately seek it out. Thus, the clientele for this healing well are self-selected. On the other hand, a parade in a city or town will be witnessed by many people who do not set out to watch it. Similarly, a display of festive decoration on the facade of a building, a yellow ribbon, or a spontaneous shrine will be seen by an indiscriminate audience of passers-by. The term “public” here has to do with spectatorship, witness, participation, and social transformation, as well as a Habermasian sense of shared civic interest (Habermas 1992). Performative commemoratives—spontaneous shrines—invite participation, unlike the funeral procession one happens to run across. They also invite interpretation. Once set out before an undifferentiated public, the polysemy inherent in these assemblages allows for a broad range of readings and associations by passers-by, regardless of the initial intentions of the originators.

I have long been interested in issues of public display and public display events. I developed the term “folk assemblage,” or simply “assemblage,” to help theorize my

early considerations of holiday decorations, particularly for Halloween, as well as the display of yellow ribbons (Santino 1986, 1992b). I attempted to put a lot of the ideas together in my more recent study of Northern Ireland, titled *Signs of War and Peace: Social Conflict and the Public Uses of Symbols* (2001). A great deal of public display activities, such as parades, and materials, such as murals, are found in Northern Ireland, and I found it to be an ideal place to study its various usages.

It was in Northern Ireland in 1992, while studying Halloween there, that I first became personally and professionally involved in spontaneous shrines. My colleague at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Michael McCaughan, had seen a large display of flowers and notes at the site of a recent paramilitary killing. After discussing it, we went to the site together. McCaughan, a photographer, took some pictures. Later, he was asked to develop an exhibition of his photographs.

When McCaughan asked me to contribute an essay to the exhibition catalogue, I purposely set out to develop an appropriate term and vocabulary for the phenomenon. I decided on “spontaneous shrines” for several reasons (Santino 1992a). At that time, to my knowledge, the press had not yet begun to use the condescending and inaccurate term “makeshift memorials.” I use the word “spontaneous” to indicate the unofficial nature of these shrines. For example, a fourteen-year-old girl may decide to place a note and a rose at the site of her father’s unexpected murder by a paramilitary gunman in Belfast. No one told her to. These are not instigated by church or state. They are truly “popular,” that is, of the people, or in that sense, “folk.” And I use the word “shrine” because these are more than memorials. They are places of communion between the dead and the living (thus, the notes left there). They are sites of pilgrimage, as Sylvia Grider has noted (2001). They commemorate and memorialize, but they do far more than that. They invite participation even from strangers. They are “open to the public.”

This moves us to another point—the political nature of spontaneous shrines. I suggest that the shrines personalize public and political issues and, in personalizing them, are political themselves, even in the absence of overt political sloganeering, as in Northern Ireland. Spontaneous shrines are silent witnesses. Further, they reflect and comment on public and social issues. The Malice Green site in Detroit, where an African American man was killed while in police custody, is a comment on police brutality. Roadside crosses reflect road conditions and drunk driving issues. September 11 shrines reflect on terrorism or political violence. In Northern Ireland, they reflect and implicitly comment on paramilitary violence by forcing recognition of the havoc it wreaks on ordinary people. The question of intentionality versus spectator interpretation is germane here, because observers’ readings and associations will vary from those of the creators. Moreover, the relative degree of performativity versus commemoration varies from assemblage to assemblage, as well as among different types of public memorializations. The intent of a roadside cross may be primarily commemorative, though it might be viewed as a warning by passing motorists; the performances of the Bloody Sunday protesters in Northern Ireland or the Mothers of the Plaza in South America are intentionally political, but involve the commemoration of the lives of specific, victimized individuals. All of these examples involve both performativity and commemoration to a greater or lesser degree. One can view these

dimensions as two ends of a continuum, along which any particular instance of public memorialization of death and spontaneous shrine might be placed, according to its emphasis.

It is said that, in war, a combatant is trained to depersonalize the enemy, to demonize the enemy in order to be able to kill with little or no remorse. Spontaneous shrines act in the opposite way, performing the opposite task. They insist on the personal nature of the individuals involved in these issues and the ramifications of the actions of those addressed by the shrines. You don't think drunk driving is a problem? My daughter was killed—here, at this spot—because of it. Teenage drinking? Responsible for the deaths of a carload of kids—right here. The county doesn't want to spend money on road improvement? Look at all the crosses along this stretch of road. You are carrying out a holy war? You killed my father. Paramilitaries are killing people in the name of freedom? The IRA killed my wife. That's not a Taig or a Prod—that's my husband, my father, my brother. You are conducting wars against terrorism? You killed my mother, my sister, my daughter.

Now: defend your actions, your politics, in light of that. We, who build shrines and construct public altars or parade with photographs of the deceased, will not allow you to write off victims as mere regrettable statistics. We insist; the shrines insist—by their disruption of the mundane environment, their calling attention to themselves—that we acknowledge the real people, the real lives lost, and the devastation to the commonwealth that these politics hold. By translating social issues and political actions into personal terms, the shrines are themselves political statements. Much of their communicative power is derived from their personalization of the public (i.e., performativity) just as a great deal is drawn from the language of mortuary ritual, of death and dying (i.e., of commemoration). They are, I believe, the voice of the people.

The shrines insert and insist upon the presence of the absent people. They display death in the heart of social life. These are not graves awaiting occasional visitors and sanctioned decoration. Instead of a family visiting a grave, the "grave" comes to the "family"—that is, the public, all of us. We are all family, mutually connected, interdependent. Spontaneous shrines both construct the relationship between the deceased and those who leave notes and memorabilia, and present that relationship to visitors. This is manifested in the notes and in the nature of the gifts that are brought, left, and publicly displayed: a high school jacket, dog tag, or old report card indicate fellow student, comrade soldier, or bereaved parent. The gifts have personal meaning, and this is indicative—that is, they index the nature of the relationship, real or (as with Princess Diana and other celebrities) imagined. Imagined, but no less felt.

Spontaneous shrines place deceased individuals back into the fabric of society, into the middle of areas of commerce and travel, and into everyday life as it is being lived. Traditional societies have always done this, as in the Latino Day of the Dead rituals and celebrations, at traditional Irish wakes, at New Orleans jazz funerals, or at rural and regional homecomings and Decoration Day traditions. 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.

There is much more to be investigated, of course, beyond the scope of this presentation. Family members and friends usually create these spontaneous shrines. Road-

side shrines appear to be largely Christian in that they frequently feature a cross as the dominant symbol (though not always). Is shrine too narrow a word? Does it exclude non-Christians? Do members of other faiths, or no religion at all, create these as well? They certainly did in New York after September 11th. Would “spontaneous sacralization” be more accurate? It is more unwieldy, and “performative commemoratives” is a larger conceptual categorization.

What about race and gender? How and when do they factor in? Spontaneous shrines seem to be created by women and men of various races and backgrounds. Still, these are questions that need to be examined. Here, I have focused on the dynamics of spontaneous shrines that combine memorialization of deceased individuals with their topicality regarding social issues, and that use funerary tradition to address larger, causative, social problems.

Now, moving from spontaneous shrines specifically and considerations of the concept of “public,” I want to talk briefly about the field of folklore. Spontaneous shrines combine the personal with the public. Folklore itself can be seen as the intersection of the personal and the public: personal expression by means of public, conventional, and traditional forms. The genres are available, as are the forms and the items. The choices, the styles, and the innovations are personal. This approach provides an umbrella under which we see each other as working within the same paradigm, but in different ways. Community aesthetics are seen here as a kind of public domain, personally engaged in, always realized by the communally inflected efforts of creative individuals.

A final point. The American Folklore Society seems to be in great shape. It exhibits great vitality and energy. The success of recent meetings, our efforts toward internationalization with World Intellectual Property Organization, and the success of the folklore and education and public sector initiatives as manifested in their programs this year all indicate a vigorous society. We need to keep it going. Right now the task is to reapply ourselves to expanding the job market by protecting, expanding, and creating folklore programs in the academy, as well as in the public sector. We need to become missionaries. We need to remind ourselves that we deal with what is *most* important in peoples’ lives. We deal with artistic communication, communally shaped and communally shared (Ben-Amos 1972). The specific term “folklore” and its analogues may be denigrated, and people may have been taught that their lives are not as important as those of celebrities or politicians, but we have no need to be ashamed. We need always to be humble, but we have every reason to be proud of our work and our efforts. Let’s remind ourselves of the value and the validity of our work and turn that energy to the continued renewal of the field.

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