

Speed Kills

Jeff Ferrell

Maybe you got a kid
maybe you got a pretty wife,
the only thing that I got's been botherin' me my whole life.
Mister state trooper please don't stop me.
(Bruce Springsteen, "State Trooper," 1982)

By all accounts Lloyd Aragon was a good highway patrolman, a sharp-eyed, tough-minded state trooper who knew his way up and down his highway. Working the wide-open stretches of Interstate 40 that wind through northern New Mexico, Aragon and his police dog Barry tracked down speeders and, in keeping with the United States drug wars of the last two decades, focused especially on intercepting the shipments of marijuana and methamphetamine that flowed out of the southwest along I-40. Patrolling those long open stretches, Aragon knew what other cops and criminologists know: When it comes to drug shipments and drug busts, I-40 is a mainline vein that's been opened up more than once in the past twenty years.

In the fall of 1999, Aragon opened it up again. Near Grants, New Mexico, Aragon pulled over Adrian Valdez-Rocha on suspicion of speeding, and wound up administering a field-sobriety test that Valdez-Rocha promptly failed. Meanwhile, Barry the police dog was letting Aragon know that Valdez-Rocha's car was failing a similar test, this one canine-administered. A search warrant and a careful car inspection later, and Aragon and other patrol officers found what Barry had sensed: a pound and a half of methamphetamine, neatly divided and plastic-wrapped into six bundles. Speeding, as it turned out, was the least of Valdez-Rocha's problems; there was also...well, the speed.

Nearly two years later--the first of August 2001--and Aragon was still on Valdez-Rocha's case, as Aragon and Officer William Cunningham rolled down that same stretch of Interstate 40, heading east toward Albuquerque to testify at Valdez-Rocha's federal drug-trafficking trial. Zacharia Craig was also heading east toward Albuquerque that summer morning, just a few miles behind Aragon and Cunningham, and closing fast. Blowing down the interstate in a stolen Toyota Tacoma pickup, Craig was trying to outrun a chase team made up of state troopers and local police. Craig, it seems, had started his day early, at the Grants' Wal-Mart, trying to shoplift Sudafed--the over-the-counter nasal decongestant used in cooking methamphetamine.

When Officers Aragon and Cunningham caught word of the chase on their police radio, they decided to put their participation in Valdez-Rocha's trial on hold for awhile, and to give their full attention to stopping Craig. Parking their cruiser in the highway median near the Los Lunas exit, they hurried to deploy a portable tire-flattening device, a "stop stick," in the interstate's eastbound lanes. They did their job well, and quickly; by the time Craig got there, the stop stick was in place.

Craig gunned the pickup for the highway median. Maybe he thought he could outmaneuver the stop stick, outflank the cops, and outrun the shoplifting charges. Or like Springsteen (1982) said, maybe he was running from something bigger than just the shoplifting, from something that'd been bothering him his whole life. Maybe it was the earlier charges against him for receiving and transferring a stolen vehicle. Maybe it was the SWAT team that had showed up the time he barricaded himself in his house or the tear gas they'd used to subdue him when he was wanted for stealing cable company vehicles. Maybe it was those charges back in May for possessing drug paraphernalia, for reckless

driving, or for resisting arrest--and the arrest warrant they took out on him after he skipped his court appearance. Who knows, maybe for a minute, he thought he was some invincible automotive action figure.

Whatever it was, whoever Zacharia Craig was at that moment, his high-speed maneuver into the median cost Lloyd Aragon his life. Craig ran Aragon down--and he did so, it seemed, with a sense of purpose. "It does not appear the vehicle was out of control," reported the state police; Craig would've "had plenty of room to escape" the stop sticks without hitting Aragon (Jones 2001, A1)

Later that year, early December 2001, I'm rolling down I-40 myself, heading west. But I'm not chasing shoplifting suspects; I'm chasing shrines. For several years now, in fact, I've been investigating the roadside shrines and crosses that friends and family members construct in memory of those killed in automobile accidents. Developing in many cases out of the Latina/Latino and Native American tradition of *descansos* (resting places) in the Southwestern United States, such shrines are increasingly found throughout the United States, and in various other forms throughout the world. My interest in the shrines is both cultural and criminological (Ferrell and Sanders 1995; Ferrell 1999). Each shrine creates a new sort of cultural space (Ferrell 1997, Ferrell 2001a), remaking the roadside as a memorial to a life lost, salvaging something of the sacred from the profanity of noise and litter. As friends and family members affix toys, photographs, key chains, compact discs, work tools, and other personal memorabilia, each shrine also takes shape as a public display, a symbolic life history of each individual victimized by automotive violence. And discovered day after day, mile after mile, these shrines have coalesced for me into something more: a roadmap of sorrow and loss, a vast graveyard splayed out along the

open road, a suggestion of something more insidious than individual tragedy.

Cruising along today as slowly as the fast I-40 traffic will allow, I spot yet another shrine, this one in the highway median. It's Lloyd Aragon's shrine, the one that friends and family have built for him in the months since Craig killed him. The cross is built from 4x4 lumber, set in cement; it suggests its own serious sense of purpose. It also suggests something about the layers of Aragon's identity. His name is written on the cross arm, his dates of birth and death below; but above, at the top of the cross: "NMSP"--New Mexico State Police. Two eagle heads and an angel rest at the cross's base. Little angel stickers decorate it. Plastic flowers and an American flag adorn the top.

A second, more intimate shrine sits just beside the cross, a circle of sorrow and remembrance carefully arranged on the median's rough ground. Here are more angels, doves, plastic flowers, and American flags--but also a little metal tubular cross with a single red rose, a Harley-Davidson doll, a Skoal chewing tobacco can, rosary beads, and feathers. Here are elaborations on Lloyd Aragon's NMSP identity: uniform patches that read, "Patrolman, Laguna Police, New Mexico," and "Seventy Fifth Anniversary InterAgency Law Enforcement Route 66." And here, sad and lonely, is Lloyd Aragon's family. Sealed inside a plastic bag, a little framed picture, "To Uncle Lloyd." Wrapped also in plastic, a photo of an older boy and a younger girl sitting in front of a freshly filled grave, "Lloyd Aragon" just visible on the new headstone in the photo. That would be his eleven year old son, Lloyd Jr., and his four year old daughter, Audrianna. I can almost hear Springsteen again: Maybe you got a kid. Maybe you got a pretty wife. Maybe you can only take so much.

It gets worse when I stand back up and remember where I am. In the median of this northern New Mexico interstate, amidst the beer cans and broken mirrors; there's no

refuge, no place to hide, only the sharp south wind whipping across the highway. And out here at Lloyd Aragon's shrine there's no heavenly choir, no towering gilded pipe organ echoing assurances against that wind. There's only the usual road shrine soundtrack: the blasting concussive roar of eighteen wheelers booming by on both sides of me. And so, if on this December day I find the sadness and the vulnerability too much, I wonder how immeasurably worse it must have been for Lloyd Aragon's wife, Monica, for his friends and family and kids, building the shrine out here in the middle of all this thundering noise and deadly speed. And how unthinkable worse for Lloyd Aragon himself, for a veteran of so many big highway trucks and bad highway accidents, seeing Zacharia Craig and that Toyota pickup bearing down.

Chasing Justice

But in fact, by this day in early December, much more than a roadside shrine had already been built out of the sadness of Aragon's death. To begin with, Valdez-Rocha's lawyers had built a plea bargain. Without Aragon to testify in court later that August day, prosecutors were forced to cut a deal--a five year prison term for Valdez-Rocha on "re-entry of a deported alien previously convicted of an aggravated felony," in exchange for the twenty years he would likely have received on the methamphetamine charges (Contreras 2001). A week later, Aragon's police dog Barry had already built a new drug case, and evened the score a bit. Out on patrol with a new officer, Barry helped bust two Michigan women driving down I-40--just about five miles east of the spot where Aragon was killed--on charges of hauling 165 pounds of marijuana in their luggage (Jones 2001a).

Even by the time of that dope bust, only a week or so after Aragon's death, some deeper after-effects were also beginning to build. Noting both Aragon's death and another

high-speed police chase through northern New Mexico on the same day, recalling also the death of a bystander in an earlier police chase, the *Albuquerque Journal* newspaper (2001) had editorialized that "police could do a much better job of balancing the potential risk of high-speed chases to police as well as innocent bystanders with the severity of the suspect's crime. Shoplifting, the crime that cost state police officer Lloyd Aragon his life Wednesday, does not merit such risk." A month later, a University of New Mexico professor and others had begun a campaign to change police policy regarding high-speed chases. Professor Ted Jojola, whose only son Manoa was killed by a vehicle fleeing a police chase, argued that such a chase "sets off a chain of events that is really irreversible," threatening public safety far more than protecting it. By that fall, New Mexico legislators were hearing testimony from Jojola and others, and were proposing legislation to regulate such chases more carefully (Linthicum 2001; Miles 2001).

For Jojola, Aragon, and others victimized by high-speed police pursuits, the life-and-death consequences of these pursuits make an obscenity of the usual police-chase image offered up for entertainment by television cop dramas, news programs, action movies, and reality television shows. For fathers like Jojola, for wives like Monica Aragon, the chases are heart-breakingly real--real death races co-produced by fleeing suspects and pursuing police officers, real roadside shrines in the making. In fact, hoping to jar the public from the mediated fantasy of police chases as choreographed action entertainment, Jojola talked directly of dispelling the mediated "folk hero" mythology of the pursuing police officer, and added, "We're thinking the only way to change this is for the victims to tell our stories and to show what can happen. The danger is to any of us" (Miles 2001, E3; Linthicum 2001, A1). Back out on I-40, Aragon's shrine does indeed continue to show what can happen, to tell its

own victim's story about a police chase gone bad, as it stands in that median day after day. Other shrines do also, and in their accumulation begin to document the degree to which "the danger is to any of us," if not from high speed police chases then from other high-speed dangers. Some ten miles west of Lloyd Aragon's shrine, out past Mesita, a still-functioning stretch of old Route 66 curves around a big hill as it parallels I-40. An even older, long-abandoned alignment of Route 66--the "Mother Road" of the U. S., the way west for 1930's Dust Bowl refugees and post-World War II auto tourists--angles off it into the red rocks above I-40. Along the southern edge of this lost alignment stands an old hand-made roadside cross that predates Aragon's by who knows how many decades, a shrine I've visited more than once over the years. Charred by brush fire, weathered by years of high country wind and sun, left to decay, it's lost the precision of personal remembrance that Lloyd Aragon's shrine embodies. But it stands as an equally sad story, an equally powerful reminder--a reminder that the danger was to any of us then as well as now, that there were worse things than kicks on Route 66, that not every Dust Bowl traveler or 1960s tourist made it to the promised land.¹ [FOOTNOTE: 1. A (mis)labeled photograph of this shrine can be found in Ferrell (2001a, 249); see also the shrine photograph on page 250, and the shrine photograph in Ferrell (2001, 102).]

More shrines are scattered and clustered all along this stretch of I-40. In fact, the day I discovered Lloyd Aragon's shrine I came upon another shrine, not 1000 yards away down that same highway median. Unremarkable in most ways--no identification attached to the shrine, just the usual bunches of plastic flowers--it was remarkable in its configuration. Welded to the primary white metal cross, suspended from the end of it, was a smaller blue metal cross, and attached to this cross a cherub, violin in hand, playing against the wind

and the big trucks. Kneeling to photograph this odd double cross, imagining that it signified a parent and child or some other tragic partnership, still thinking about Lloyd Aragon and his family, I noticed just beyond it a road mileage sign: "Grants 44, Gallup 104, Flagstaff 288." I wondered how many more shrines stood between me and Grants or Gallup or Flagstaff, how many life stories come and gone, how many crosses fallen to ruin, hidden away in the weeds along lost Route 66 alignments.

INSERT PHOTOGRAPH HERE (Caption as follows)

Roadside shrine, northern New Mexico, USA. Photograph by Jeff Ferrell

Shaken awake by Lloyd Aragon's death, Ted Jojola's testimony, *Albuquerque Journal* editorials, and other public pressures, the New Mexico legislature did in fact pass that proposed legislation to reign in high-speed police chases in early 2002--and so in its own way began to acknowledge the collective tragedy of these countless shrines strung out along the state's highways. As it turned out, New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson vetoed the legislature's "law enforcement safe pursuit act" in March 2002, citing its potentially negative "fiscal impact" on state budgets (Pawloski 2002, 1). But while Gary Johnson and the legislature may have missed connections on this one, they in other ways began to put into perspective the relative consequences of various public policies and public crimes.

By the end of his gubernatorial term in 2002, Johnson had emerged as one of the few public officials in the United States to challenge the last two decades' war on drugs, arguing that "the current war on drugs is draining the nation and state of vital resources that

could be spent more wisely and effectively," and proposing instead a "harm reduction" drug policy founded on "a medical model rather than a criminal justice model" ("New Mexico" 2002, 1; Johnson 2001, 1). In this light Johnson and his allies in the New Mexico legislature sponsored a variety of drug reform bills, including bills aimed at creating a Compassionate Use Medical Marijuana Act, decriminalizing possession of small amounts of marijuana, reforming civil asset forfeiture policies, and reinstating judges' discretion in sentencing.

As with the "law enforcement safe pursuit act," Johnson and the New Mexico legislature missed some connections on this package of drug reform bills during the legislative session, but still managed to push through some significant changes. While bills on medical marijuana, marijuana decriminalization, and drug treatment programs were voted down, the measures reforming asset forfeiture policies and reinstating judicial discretion were passed into law. These legislative wins and losses in New Mexico and elsewhere certainly constitute important early moments, perhaps historic moments, in what I hope will become a burgeoning national movement for a peaceful resolution to the war on drugs. Yet of equal importance, it seems to me, is another historic moment--a moment in which various New Mexico citizens and New Mexico legislators began to reconsider two fundamental understandings: the presumed safety and normalcy of the automobile, and the presumed danger and deviance of drugs. This momentary juxtaposition--in which automotive pursuits were re-imagined in terms of their inherent damage and violence while illegal drugs were being re-imagined in terms of decriminalization and non-violent medical treatment--offered New Mexicans, and all of us, something significant. It offered a crack in the social order, a breach of taken-for-granted assumptions. It suggested some new sense of balance and imbalance.

On Balance, Speed Kills

About this imbalance allow me to be blunt, morbid, and statistical. The interstate drug interdiction work of Lloyd Aragon and other New Mexico state troopers notwithstanding, Barry the police dog's big marijuana bust notwithstanding, police chases killed more people than did marijuana in the year Lloyd Aragon died--and police chases kill more people every year, in every state, by a magnitude of preposterous proportions. Despite Adrian Valdez-Rocha's meth case and thousands like it over the course of the war on drugs, automobiles cause the violent demise of more people than does methamphetamine--and in fact New Mexico road accidents generate more deaths, year after year, than all the state's illegal drugs combined. The war on drugs notwithstanding, the ongoing wartime construction of drugs as enemy and threat notwithstanding, there's a far more deadly adversary out there.

During 2000, for example, New Mexico recorded 435 traffic fatalities. That same year the Office of Medical Investigator reported 261 "drug caused deaths," including 228 in which narcotics were present, and 7 involving methamphetamine; other sources listed 167 illicit drug overdose deaths for the year (Division of Governmental Research 2001; ONDCP 2001; Smith 2002). The next year, the year Zacharia Craig killed Lloyd Aragon, New Mexico traffic fatalities were up to 478; but illicit drug overdose deaths, those from heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine combined, were down to 139 (Westphal 2002; Smith 2002). Even the numbers of automotive pedestrian deaths alone, of those run down like Lloyd Aragon, are revealing in contrast to drug deaths. In 2000, the year in which New Mexico recorded 7 methamphetamine deaths, the state recorded 48 pedestrian fatalities; by 2001 pedestrian deaths had jumped to 77 (Westphal 2002, p. 1).² [FOOTNOTE 2: 2.

The research of the Environmental Working Group (2002) actually produces even higher numbers: 85 pedestrians killed and 1,740 injured each year in New Mexico.] And all of these numbers must in turn be understood within a larger number, and a larger context: some forty thousand highway fatalities in the United States every year, 41,730 during 2001, 42,815 during 2002.

Like all published data, these numbers are of course more suggestive than definitive. To begin with, state and federal drug-fatality statistics generated during a high-profile and politically charged war on drugs may well tend toward intentional or unintentional inflation, and so in fact *underplay* the extent of the imbalance between car deaths and drug deaths (see Sanders and Lyon 1995, 35). On the other hand, it could be argued that such fatality numbers are not comparable, since not everyone uses illegal drugs, while almost everyone drives--but the fact that almost everyone drives is in large part the problem, and the foundation for the thousands of fatalities that follow. Further, cases of convergence between the two categories are certainly possible--for example, cases of automobile drivers killing others while under the influence of drugs. Yet other sorts of convergence, ironic and unintended, seem more likely. It seems likely that some significant portion of illicit drug overdose deaths are more products of the drugs' illegality--that is, of the historical and ongoing criminalization of drugs--than of the drugs themselves, given the dynamics of impurity and misinformation that necessarily accompany illegal drug distribution, use, and control (see Young 1971; Kappler, Blumberg and Potter 2000). More to the point, it seems likely that police chases of "dangerous" drug suspects--"dangerous" in part because they are defined as so by those commanding the war on drugs--cause more danger and death than do the drugs themselves. In medicine this is called iatrogenesis--doctor-induced

illness, a cure worse than the disease. In criminal justice, it should be called bad policy and bad politics.

All of which raises some other troubling questions of statistics, and politics, and imbalance, among them: How is it that a social problem that kills 40,000 people a year, at a cost of \$140 billion (Burns 1998, 9), remains largely excluded from public discussion in the United States? How is it that the pervasively violent consequences of some social arrangements are ignored while the depravity and violence of others are so readily imagined? How is it that stories about crack babies and crack attacks, about eight year old heroin addicts and superhuman meth junkies (Reinarman and Levine 1997; Reinarman and Duskin 1999; Jenkins 1999) are so readily believed, yet the stories written by countless roadside shrines so seldom read? Regarding the imbalance between deaths from speeding and deaths from speed, who are the real pushers, and who's pushing what?

Most readers know the first part of the answer: The war on drugs has from the first been fought not just against meth mules running open stretches of I-40, but more so against the possibilities of open debate and open minds; it has been a war waged primarily in the realms of image and ideology. As in earlier wars on one drug or another (Becker 1963, 135), political and media machines have operated in tandem to construct self-confirming moral panics around particular drugs and drug communities, to push the agendas of the powerful in the guise of public awareness, and "thereby...to forge a public prepared to swallow the next junkie stereotype and to enlist in the next drug war" (Reinarman and Duskin 1999, 85).

The answer's second part parallels the first, and reverses it: An ongoing automotive war on people and the environment has for decades been masked by the same

machineries of media and politics that promote the contemporary war on drugs; carefully constructed universes of image and ideology minimize the dangers of the automobile in the same way they inflate the dangers of drugs. Governmental transportation policy not only underwrites the economics of the automotive industry, offering up the infrastructure on which it continues to ride, but intertwines with an endless campaign of car commercials and automotive sponsorship that infiltrates everyday life to a degree war-on-drugs campaigners can only envy. In this world, 40,000 deaths a year somehow serve not to create moral panic, but to deflate it. Inside the culture of the car--inside the world of cigarette-sponsored Sunday afternoon automotive racing, "Carmageddon" video games, and car customizing magazines from *Car and Driver* to *Custom Rodder* and *Lowrider*--elevated social status and reclaimed individual autonomy seem to accompany every ride.³

[FOOTNOTE 3: Unsurprisingly, the culture of the car even spills out into the intersections of necrophilia and auto-erotica; see for example Ballard (2001) and Rupp (2001).]

This second part of the answer in turn suggests one more set of questions, perhaps the most troubling: Why have critical criminologists, so adept at seeing through conventional ideologies of crime and justice, at exposing the arrangements of power that hide some crimes while inventing others, devoted so little time to exposing the everyday crimes of the automobile? Why have critical criminologists who have so courageously confronted the traditional (and political) exclusion of certain social harms from the domains of crime and justice--domestic violence, political criminality, hate crime--so seldom noticed this pervasive social harm? Why does the day-to-day criminology of the automobile remain an all but abandoned outpost in the already lonely "Siberia of corporate criminology" (Mokhiber and Weissman 1999, 25)? In more personal terms, in Springsteen's terms: Why

have all sorts of social injustice been botherin' me my whole life, but until recently, not this sort?

The injustice of the automobile is certainly rooted in the history and economy of the United States. Arguing that the peripatetic movement of workers around a factory constituted "wasted motion and misspent energy"--or more bluntly, that "walking is not a remunerative activity"--Henry Ford (in Braverman 1974, 310n; in Robbins 1999, 19) first introduced the fixed-station, endless-conveyer assembly line into the cultural economy of the United States workplace. With it, he ushered in a dynamic that has now a century later become the model for making hamburgers, managing *maquiladoras* and creating "the electronic sweatshop" as well (Garson 1988). This innovation served to promote both the mass production and the mass consumption of the automobile; but soon enough an even larger mass market was needed. And so, beginning in 1932, the U.S. auto industry and its allies worked to insure that if walking was not a remunerative activity, neither was operating or riding an electric mass transit system. Partnering with Standard Oil, Firestone Tires, and Mack Truck, General Motors bought out and destroyed electric rail systems in New York, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles--eventually eliminating more than 100 such systems in some 45 U.S. cities.

The immediate result of this coordinated campaign was the conviction of General Motors, Standard Oil of California, and Firestone in 1949 on charges of criminal conspiracy--though no individual ever served prison time for the crime (Mokhiber 1988, Kay 1998). The long-term consequences of such activities, on the other hand, have locked us all in a prison of profound ecological destruction and social harm. In Paris, Rome, Bogota, Tehran, and other world cities, residents wear air masks as they move about in suffocating automotive

pollution, and officials institute car-free days in an attempt to reduce it. Meanwhile, the ongoing, frenetic construction of roads and freeways continues, cutting urban neighborhoods down the middle, carving the city into atomized isolation, and “colonizing ever more spaces that were once devoted to human exchange and transforming them into systems of parking lots connected by highways” (Korton 1995, 283). Such spaces isolate people from each other and create lost ecologies left “inaccessible to everyday experience” (Brissette 1999); they in addition underwrite the city's sprawl into a countryside itself caught in a tightening web of roads and highways. Of course, even where no road runs, the ruinous effects of endless oil exploration, of snaking oil pipelines and leaking oil tankers, of global warming, add to the car's awful consequences.⁴[FOOTNOTE 4: Schlosser (2001) in addition links the cultural and structural dominance of the automobile to the modern degradation of food sources and diet.]

And if all this is not enough, cases of egregious corporate malfeasance regularly punctuate this ongoing historical pattern of environmental degradation, community dissolution, and social atomization. When General Motors introduced its new Corvair model to the United States in 1959, for example, engineers and executives at GM already knew of the deadly defects inherent in the car's rear-engine, swing-axle suspension design. The company's response to the injuries, deaths, and lawsuits that followed was to buy up evidence and to settle the lawsuits surreptitiously. When Ford Motor Company rolled out its Pinto in 1971, the Pinto likewise sported a gas tank that the company's own safety tests had shown to be dangerously defective. But rather than fitting the Pinto with a safer fuel tank--at a cost of just under ten dollars per car--Ford quite literally calculated that burn deaths and injuries from fuel tank explosions would cost the company less in the long run

than the safer fuel tanks, and so released the car as originally designed. When the combined design and manufacturing defects of Firestone tires and Ford Explorer SUVs orchestrated yet another rolling tragedy at century's end, the 271 deaths recalled not only Firestone's role in ripping up electric rail systems, but Firestone's premeditated marketing of defective steel-belted radial tires in the mid-1970s (Nadar 1965; Mokhiber 1988; Cullen, Maakestad and Cavender 1987; Skrzycki 2000, 2003).

To this can be added the paroxysms of state criminality and state-sponsored terrorism that have long defined the role of the United States and other Western countries in the oil politics of the Middle East--and all of this now fueling an emerging global economy and sustaining the existence of automotive and energy corporations that rank among the most ruthless and powerful in the world.⁵ [FOOTNOTE 5: As Clinard (1990,39) makes clear, "No U.S. corporate industry has abused the American public more or had as bad a record of unethical and illegal behavior for a longer period of time than the oil industry."] Yet for all this, criminology's blind spot seems to be not so much the scandal of automotive industry misbehavior or the politics of oil imperialism, but the everyday criminality of the automobile--the daily automotive degradation of community life, the daily victimization of passengers, pedestrians, and bicyclists by the thousands. After all, as day-to-day collective behavior--that is, as the dominant form of human transport in the United States, as a "vast spontaneous conspiracy" (Ballard 1973, 19) saturating the situations of everyday life--even cars with safe fuel tanks and sound tires still kill quite efficiently; even automobiles offering better fuel economy still exhaust and pollute earth and community alike; and even the most honest of auto executives still manufactures fast-moving machineries of death (Burns 1998).

Since the day in December 2001 that I visited Lloyd Aragon's shrine, I've visited many more around the western United States, continuing to record and photograph their tragic beauty, trying to understand the communities of life and death they commemorate. I've discovered that it's here at these small sacred places amidst the expanse of weeds and roadside debris that I'm best able to think through the dynamics of this blind spot. Sometimes, lost within the process of framing and focusing a photograph, I find myself back-pedaling to the very edge of the highway just as an SUV or eighteen-wheeler thunders past, the concussion of its air displacement knocking me off balance, the danger of its passing speed sending me scurrying back off the shoulder. At these moments, with the visceral proximity of automotive death still fresh in my gut, I think that perhaps the amount of time we spend inside the insulated comfort of our automobiles renders us unable to appreciate fully the discomforts, not to mention the dangers, faced by all those who confront automobiles from the outside (Ferrell 1997A).

Other times, overwhelmed by a shrine of especially heartbreaking tragedy--like Lloyd Aragon's with the photo of his kids posing in front of his headstone, or the shrine along a lonely stretch of New Mexico's Highway 6, where the children have put up crosses for "Mom" and "Dad" and written "we-love-you-forever" on the blades of a little pinwheel--I think about the notion of hegemony, of domination so thoroughgoing as to become taken-for-granted. I wonder if maybe the culture of the car is so interwoven with contemporary life in the United States--so tightly intertwined with patterns of housing, work, pleasure, and consumption--that critiques have been rendered unimaginable and alternatives unthinkable, even for those accustomed to critique, even in the face of 40,000 fluttering pinwheels a year.

Mostly, though, I've found in Lloyd Aragon's shrine and all the others the beauty of hand-made human remembrance, and with it the possibilities of new perspective. In their loving commemoration of so many lives lost, the shrines challenge us to confront the circumstances of this ongoing collective tragedy. They push us to look past the lies--past the ideological alchemy of war-on-drugs advertising campaigns, the slick unreality of television police chases, the commodified self-aggrandizement of corporate car commercials--and to notice instead the absurd imbalance of contemporary arrangements. Encoding the life-and-death consequences of such arrangements in the texture of the human landscape, they help us understand that today, and every day, the greatest danger to human life comes not from the traffic in marijuana and methamphetamine, but from the steady flow of high-speed automotive traffic, the rolling big rig truck parade, and the cops in hot pursuit.

After all, what's true for the occasional methamphetamine overdose is true for the everyday dose of highway death.

Speed kills.

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