Ghost Bikes in Tucson: Transportation as Commemoration

According to folklorist Jack Santino, “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....that one was there, albeit anonymously.”¹ When tragedy strikes, commemoration often follows close behind.

The city of Tucson takes pride in being an accessible community for bicyclists, with an extensive array of bicycle lanes, specialized paths, and community support for cycling. The infrastructure for bicyclists, however, is not enough to ensure total safety for bicyclists; in 2013, 258 cyclists were injured in Pima County, and five of those injuries were fatal.² Most of the time, the bicyclists died after being struck by moving vehicles, whose drivers frequently fled the scene and were later arrested. Many drivers were not charged with a crime, though more recent culprits have been booked on stronger charges; crimes like alcohol intoxication and leaving the scene of an accident are both a common, and unfortunate part, of bicyclist fatalities.

The sites of these fatalities, in several places, have been maintained as memorial sites, complete with “ghost bikes”–bicycles that have been painted white and decorated as a shrine to the deceased. Ghost bikes are unique among roadside shrines in that a vehicle itself is used as the base of a shrine; the size and relatively low weight of a bicycle make it more feasible to incorporate one into a memorial. They first emerged in Tucson in 2008, when local businessman and bike commuter Ari Shapiro put up the first ghost bike in memory of 14-year-old Jose Rincon, Jr. who died that year after being hit from behind by a drunken driver.

Shapiro, who did not know the victim, anonymously constructed the ghost bike, only for it to be stolen a few days later. When news of its theft reached the media, Shapiro revealed his identity to the Rincon family. Most of the ghost bikes initially constructed in Tucson were created by members of the bicycle community as a memorial to fellow cyclists. Local artist Janet Miller, along with former Tucson resident and bicycle lawyer Erik Ryberg and local resident Dan Fleury, were among those who built ghost bikes for fellow cyclists. According to Miller, there were few direct social connections to those who were fatally injured. Like Shapiro, she and others involved wanted to memorialize fellow bicyclists, as well as raise drivers’ awareness of bicyclists on the road.

With help from Tucson-based BICAS (Bicycle Inter-Community Art & Salvage), as well as her husband Paulus Musters (the sculpture lab manager at the University of Arizona School of Art), Miller and the others obtained “beater bikes”–bicycles that

are worn down and not as functional—for the memorials. They removed several parts of the bicycle, including the tires, and painted the frame white. For permanence, the bicycles were planted into cement blocks that prevented them from being easily stolen. The ghost bike in honor of 19-year old Andria Ligas, a University of Arizona student and Flinn Scholar who was killed in December 2002 by a driver who fled the scene, is an example of one of the early ghost bikes in town. It is simple, unadorned, and contains a sign that says “andria Ligas/12-24-2002/watch for bikes.” Its display is simple; its message is far-reaching.

The ghost bike of Andria Ligas, near the intersection of Euclid Avenue and Adams Street. Photo by Nic Hartmann.

While decoration and adornment of ghost bikes vary with the individual, ghost bikes in recent years feature more decoration. For example, the ghost bike in honor of 49-year old Fransisco “David” Galvez, who was struck by an unmarked police vehicle near the intersection of Fort Lowell Road and First Avenue in November of 2014, was decorated by Galvez's family. His ghost bike is highly decorated; it features a locked shadow box, votive candles, flowers, and memory ribbons tied around the wheels. At the same time, the bike in honor of Kory Laos, a 14-year old boy who was killed on Speedway Avenue near the University of Arizona, lacks adornment, with the exception of a printed sign with pictures of Laos and the phrase “In Loving Memory of Kory Laos: 5/6/92-5/4/07.” Most of the victims were highlighted as avid
bicyclists; many of them did not own cars, but instead traveled everywhere by bicycle.

The ghost bike of Francisco “David” Galvez, near 1st Avenue and Fort Lowell Road.
Photo by Nic Hartmann.
In helping to create ghost bikes within the city, both Ari and Janet expressed concern, as bicycle commuters, for the safety of others (in my interview with Janet, she even gave me tips for my commute!) within the community. There is a great sense of concern for all bicyclists, yet there has been a shift in the construction of ghost bikes within the city. Once done anonymously, many bikes—such as those of Fransisco Galvez—were constructed by people who were more closely connected to the victims. Galvez’s brother, Alex, who operates a local ornamental art business, built the bike at his business; in an interview with local news station KGUN, Alex said that ghost bikes “turned into somewhat of a tradition in Tucson... an unnecessary tradition but we feel it is important that people see where these
accidents have happened.” The building tradition, having shifted in many cases from a group of anonymous bicyclists to more of a family/friend-based tradition, helps to carry the tradition further. Regardless of who builds them, the memorials remain an important part of the Tucson landscape.

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