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Interview with UT AMS Alumnus Dr. Robert Matej Bednar, Author of "Road Scars"

Dr. Robert Matej Bednar, an alumnus of UT American Studies' Ph.D. Program, is an Associate Professor and the Chair of Communication Studies at Southwestern University. Dr. Bednar's newest book, Road Scars: Place, Automobility, and Road Trauma, was published by Rowman & Littlefield in July. Current UT AMS Ph.D. student Hartlyn Haynes sat down (virtually, of course) with Dr. Bednar to chat about the book and his work as a scholar-photographer, how he engages with questions of cultural trauma, his commitment to public scholarship and how it influences his pedagogy, and future projects. Check out Dr. Bednar's website, which features more of his work and an archive of student work throughout the years, here.

Q: First of all, congratulations on the publication of your new book, *Road Scars: Place, Automobility, and Road Trauma*! Can you tell us a bit more about this project and what brought you to it?

A: In *Road Scars: Place, Automobility, and Road Trauma*, I argue that roadside car crash shrines give embodied form to an unresolved cultural trauma embedded within American car culture. The book is based on nearly two decades of fieldwork in Texas and the American Southwest and features 172 original color photographs. Given the fact that I am both a photographer and a scholar, it was very important to me that the book work like that, with a balance of written analysis and pictures. In the book, I use both words and pictures to show how it matters that these shrines, created by private individuals to memorialize other private individuals, are located on the roadside, where they anchor road trauma to a place, magnetize objects within the site, change over time in performative ways, and ultimately create a loose but palpable public of drivers who know that there is a massive but disavowed cultural trauma at the center of the American commitment to cars and car culture.

As for what brought me to it, I really kind of stumbled on the project. My previous big project, carried over from my days in the AMS PhD program at UT, was a field analysis of how tourists take pictures at scenic overlooks in the image-saturated National Parks of the American West. When I started the shrine project, I thought it was an extension of that work in the sense that both projects are about how people use public resources for both common and divergent ends, and both are field-based projects that involve both written analysis and original photography. I started with a single American Studies Association presentation in

October 2003 that I saw playing out as a chapter in a larger book called *Making Space* about how people make space for themselves in public landscapes, but the emotional response I had to the sites stopped me in my tracks.

From there, it took me years spending time on the road photographing shrines to figure out how they work on that dual level for both intimates who know the people being celebrated in the shrines and the rest of us driving by, and just as many years figuring out how to write the thing and find a publisher. But the longer I spent on it, I realized that the time I was spending was actually enriching the work, particularly as it allowed me to document how roadside shrines change over time, which is one of the central contributions of the book. There are some shrines I have photographed multiple times for eighteen years, and watching them change over time has shown me that shrines are more about negotiating trauma than they are about memory.

Q: How do you see your work fitting into larger conversations in the academy and contemporary society?

A: The most important way that I am engaged with larger conversations in the academy and in American society today is in my work on the visuality, materiality, and spatiality of dispersed cultural traumas. I recently gave a talk based on my book (linked off my website) that brought my work into conversation with the visual/material/spatial culture of Black Lives Matter and Me Too and explores how these different cultural traumas get anchored and magnetized in pictures, objects, and places. The cultural politics are different in these different realms, but I see myself as part of a group of scholars trying to figure out how to understand how ordinary people use objects and places to address other ordinary people to make things happen in the world, particularly around individual and collective trauma.

In addition to connecting to current work on cultural traumas, my work since I was in grad school in AMS at UT has been focused on understanding the apparently self-generating normative cultural practices people perform when they produce and encounter pictures, material objects, assemblages, and landscapes. The kinds of things I have studied most—snapshot photography practices at National Park scenic overlook structures and my ongoing project on roadside car crash shines—are fundamentally about things that people do without ever being explicitly trained to do them, and yet everyone knows what to do, in their body. These to me are the most fundamental cultural processes to try to understand, because they function under the radar of personal and cultural consciousness, at the level of what Bourdieu calls *habitus*. Within that, I focus mostly on the way these cultural practices make things

happen in the world, such as maintaining, extending, and/or contesting particular visualities, materialities, epistemologies, spatialities, and temporalities. And finally, I am interested in the ways people use the same public resources for divergent purposes and, as they do, end up mapping those different purposes back onto places and visual objects in ways that leave traces for all of us to see and sense.

Q: How does your scholarship inform your teaching? Your website features a trove of student work, so I am especially curious if, and how, you imagine public scholarship as part of your pedagogy.

A: My teaching and scholarship are inseparable. Part of that I attribute to the fact that I teach at Southwestern, a national liberal arts college with a teacher-scholar model, where we work to balance our commitments to teaching, scholarship, and university governance in very different ways than faculty are expected to do at a R1 institution like UT. Of course, the reason I thrive in this kind of higher education environment is that I already lived those values when I was a grad student, when I was working on my project on snapshot photography in the National Parks of the American West while I was teaching an AMS 315 course called “Contemporary American West.” But I would attribute my commitment to public scholarship to two other sources as well: the influence of my background and ongoing engagement with American Studies, with its long tradition of creating public intellectuals, and the fact that since for the last 24 years I have taught in Communication Studies, which has a similar commitment. Because both fields take as their object the critical study of everyday cultural practices, they produce scholarship that is both interesting and accessible to general readers as well as scholars.

The work I produce is like that, and the work my students produce is as well. I train students to think of themselves as scholars working for the public good. Whatever they do, I want them to be able to mobilize the critical analytical and writing skills I teach them to help people understand how culture, power, and identity work. Thinking of our work that way helps keep us from just sitting around feeling smart together about our ability to analyze normative cultural practices. Instead, I focus on propelling students out into the world to bring their skills to bear on problems of equity, inclusion, and belonging. I sometimes talk about it as being a kind of player-coach instead of a sideline coach or a sports commentator: you provide critique from within the game to make sure that we can all understand how to be more self-reflexive about how we do culture. That is the main reason I have given my students a platform for their work alongside my own on my website. I encourage people to check it out and remember that all of the work you are seeing is by undergraduates. Southwestern is an entirely undergraduate institution, so all of my attention as a teacher-scholar goes to them, and they step up to the challenge.

Q: What projects are you excited about working on in the future?

A: Right now, as I cool off from a project that took way longer than I projected, I am focused on a set of smaller-scale articles about shrines and automobility instead of a book. My wife Danielle is a therapist who works with clients undergoing trauma every day, and we are talking about doing a book together where I photograph shrine sites and we work together to interview the people who make the shrines, which is something I bracketed off for this project as I focused on their visuality, materiality, and spatiality. I may also still write that book called *Making Space* I started writing in 2003 when I got sidetracked on this book.

Q: And, finally, the burning question: if you had to describe American Studies in one sentence, what would you say?

A: Oh, my. I remember asking this question a lot when I was in grad school. Here's my answer: American Studies is a transdisciplinary endeavor focused on analyzing the extraordinarily complex and contested set of peoples, objects, places, practices and relations that make up our common research object: "American culture."

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