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Introduction

“WHAT GOOD IS OUR EDUCATION NOW?”

In December 2011, I attended the commencement ceremony at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), where I had just completed my first semester as a new faculty member. I wore the same black puffy velvet tam and red doctoral robe—embellished with gray velvet and long, bell-shaped sleeves—I wore the year before when I completed my PhD and attended my own commencement at The Ohio State University. Before the ceremony began, I stood in line with other faculty members dressed in similar robes, though in different colors depending on where they earned their degrees, and when the music began, we started the multicolored faculty procession into the large arena where the ceremony was taking place. Proceeding through the center of the arena while thousands of people in the audience looked on, we eventually sat down in the first few rows next to the stage. The procession of graduating students soon followed, along with the loud applause that erupted as friends and families of the graduates began to cheer for their loved ones. The doctoral candidates came first and sat in the rows directly behind the faculty, dressed in the same style of robes the faculty wore, though theirs were gray with red embellishment to signify the school colors of UNLV. Later on, during a special hooding ceremony on the stage, each individual's dress ensemble would grow to include a doctoral hood, which would be placed around their neck by their academic advisor, a visual and embodied marker of their change in status from student to holder of a doctoral degree. After the doctoral candidates came the master's degree candidates, who wore a master's hood around their neck, along with a simpler black robe with shorter pointed sleeves, and a flat, four-sided cap on their heads. The final group to join the procession were the graduates earning their undergraduate degrees, wearing the same style of cap and gown as the master's degree candidates but in red.

The ceremony that followed included the presentation of colors by the UNLV Air Force and Army ROTC Honor Guards, a student's performance of the national anthem, a performance of the UNLV Alma Mater by the UNLV Choral Ensemble, the recognition of outstanding graduates, and speeches by the university president and two preselected student speakers. It culminated in the conferral of degrees. At this point in the ceremony, from my vantage point sitting toward the front of the arena, I watched excited graduates file past me so that they could walk across the stage, wave to family and friends in the audience, and shake hands with a representative of the university to ritually mark the completion of their degree. I also quickly began to notice that many of these graduates had decorated the flat, four-sided caps—or mortarboards—that sat atop their heads.

I delighted in the creative, sometimes silly, often poignant messages and modes of artistic display I observed through these material sites of expression. At the same time, I was struck by how prevalent the practice has become. Up until this point, I was not wholly unfamiliar with embellished mortarboards. For example, during my own undergraduate commencement in 2003 at University of California, Berkeley, I remember that some graduates did decorate their caps, but it was certainly not the norm.¹ Sitting in that arena at UNLV in 2011, I found that while not all the graduates had embellished their mortarboards, those who did were no longer the outliers. Indeed, decorating one's graduation cap had become a well-established and widespread practice.

Social media platforms such as Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook have undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of the practice at institutions of higher education across the country, not just at UNLV, as students no longer need to attend commencement ceremonies in person or know graduates personally to see examples of decorated mortarboards. Indeed, in my conversations with college graduates while working on this book, most have identified these social media platforms as the sites where they learned about the practice of decorating mortarboards in the first place. The mortarboards themselves, in the words of one graduate I talked to, are very "Instagrammable," meaning that they are visually appealing, easy to photograph, and easy to share. They also fit well with the goals of social media platforms like Instagram, a social networking application typically used for curating one's digital self through the sharing of photos representing personal perspectives and experiences with friends and followers. As more and more people have posted photos of their decorated mortarboards online, and as these photos have been shared by others, individual decorated mortarboards have found much larger audiences than they have had in the past, which in turn has inspired others to decorate their own.

Universities are also becoming more amenable to students' adaptations of the ritual dress of commencement. Educational institutions have not always been receptive to graduates' modifications of the traditional academic dress and even today some educational institutions (particularly at the high school level) actively prohibit them. Others embrace them. Some universities launch contests where students can vote for which graduate has the best mortarboard display or host events on campus for students to decorate their mortarboards, providing free food and art supplies. During graduation seasons, university webpages and alumni magazines often feature images of caps proclaiming messages of celebration and school spirit, highlighting individual messages that align with institutional branding. Against this backdrop, each year all over the country, as graduating seniors obtain their caps, gowns, and honor cords in preparation for the pomp and circumstance of commencement ceremonies, many choose to participate in the practice of decorating their mortarboards. Approaching their caps as blank canvases, graduates seize this opportunity to make visible individual personality traits, personal experiences, strongly held beliefs, and aesthetic preferences, as well as to display sentiments of appreciation, pride, optimism, relief, uncertainty, or frustration.

While attending another commencement ceremony for UNLV in the spring of 2017, I noticed the decorated mortarboard of a young man sitting in the section of graduates from the College of Liberal Arts. It featured a large image of the face of Donald Trump, who had just taken office as president of the United States a few months before. It also posed the question in big, bold text: "What does my political science degree mean now?" (see figure 1.1). I did not have the opportunity to talk to this graduate about his mortarboard and why he decorated it the way he did, but my initial thoughts were that he was calling attention to the limits of the tools and methods of the discipline of political science to predict the results of the 2016 presidential election. I also speculated that he was lamenting the ways in which this president was, in the words of folklorist Bill Ivey, "ignor[ing] and demean[ing] both democratic customs and their behavioral equivalent: long-established *norms* that establish acceptable, traditional practice in politics and government" (Ivey 2018, 2). In light of this reconfiguration of established norms and traditional practices in the political realm, I understood this graduate to be using his cap to identify a political scene that his college education—one presumably grounded in the scholarly analysis of political activity and behavior—had not equipped him to navigate.

A few months later, I interviewed Christa,² another graduate who participated in that same commencement ceremony, and she offered a different

interpretation. When I asked her if any of the decorated caps she saw stood out to her, she answered:

Yes, I think about this one all the time, and it's so funny that you asked me that question. So, there's one that had a picture of Donald Trump, and it said like, "What good is my political science degree now?" or something to that effect. And that killed me because first of all, it was so funny. And second of all, it's accurate, you know? If you have someone who is totally unqualified and is completely stupid, and they're able to just lead the country, no doubt, what good is our education now?

This graduate linked the message of the cap not only to what she perceived as the diminished value of education, but the active valorization and empowerment of explicitly anti-intellectual standpoints embodied by the president at the time.

I cannot be certain what the graduate wearing this decorated mortarboard wanted to communicate by embellishing the cap the way he did, or what audience(s) he was envisioning as he placed it atop his head. I do know, however, that the interpretations this cap inspired, both for me and for his fellow graduate, clearly resonated with broader discourses circulating around higher education in the United States.

Kathleen Manning reminded us over two decades ago that "higher education embraces some suspect purposes within democratic, ostensibly nonelitist American society. These include difficult to visualize, debatable ideals as pursuit of the life of the mind and intellectualism. What does an educated person look like? What is actually gained with a higher education degree? Why should the multiple, often conflicting, purposes of higher education be sanctioned? Why should the public good be invested in this selective system?" (Manning 2000, 46). As a faculty member teaching in the Interdisciplinary Studies program at UNLV, I seek to create space in my classroom for undergraduate students who have chosen a nontraditional major both to reflect on and question how knowledge is structured (or disciplined) in academia, as well as the value and limitations of these structures.³ And every semester I pay close attention to how students in my classes, many of them first-generation college students, express their views on the purpose and value of pursuing higher education. Conversations with students, both during in-class discussions and outside of class during office hours, have made clear to me that the promises and critiques of higher education—in terms of what it offers, the extent to which it validates or invalidates one's credibility in the workplace and in public discourse—are already part of the discursive landscape of students' everyday lives and therefore are already



Figure 1.1. Decorated mortarboards such as the one on the left are both informed by and responsive to broader discourses about the value of higher education in the United States. Photo credit: Sheila Bock.

informing how students position themselves in relation to their instructors, what they are being taught, and the university as an institution.

Over the course of my research for this book, I have found that decorated mortarboards similarly offer insight into students' thoughtful engagement with the promises and critiques of higher education. In asking the question "What does my political science degree mean now?" on his cap, the graduate pictured above situated himself as someone who had been guided by a belief in the value of the knowledge he gained through a college education only to have it thwarted as he crossed the finish line, a sentiment similarly expressed by Christa's question: "What good is our education now?" Of course, these are not the only frustrations students carry. At a very practical level, many students must take on burdensome amounts of debt to even gain access to what higher education has to offer. Some students enter the college classroom perceiving the university as always already a bastion of left-wing propaganda, positioning their professors from the beginning as antagonists seeking to indoctrinate them.⁴ Many others see the university as an institution that was not meant to include them—students of color, students with disabilities, and older students, among others. Discourses of value converge with discourses of belonging, and students see whose voices are (and are not) represented on the syllabus, at the front of the classroom, in the administration of the university—and position themselves accordingly.

University commencement ceremonies function both as rites of passage that mark the transition from student to graduate with an optimistic look toward the future and rites of intensification that affirm the value of higher education. Occupying a “betwixt and between” status in this culturally significant event, many graduates use this symbolically heightened moment to take some control over the meaning of the event (and the accomplishment it represents, the future it envisions) by publicly positioning themselves on their own terms. In the words of one graduate,⁵ decorating your cap is “a way to kind of get the final word when you graduate.” The widespread practice of decorating mortarboards, one highly visible material genre of reflexive and often ludic expression found in this ritual space, is the subject of this book.

METHODS

After informally observing these caps for several years, both online and during the semiannual UNLV commencement ceremonies that took place each May and December, I began to document the tradition more formally in 2016, photographing decorated caps during commencement ceremonies, interviewing graduates, and putting out calls through social media and via colleagues at different universities for graduates to complete a survey and share images of their decorated mortarboards with me.

While college graduates are not the only ones who decorate their mortarboards—I have seen people participate in the practice at other levels as well, including high school graduations and even graduation-like events marking children’s transitions from preschool to kindergarten, or from one elementary-school grade level to another—I have chosen to focus on this population primarily because I am interested in seeing how graduates’ participation in this tradition is both informed by and speaking back to prevalent ideas about *higher education* in the United States. A K–12 education is compulsory, but pursuing a college degree is not, though many understand it to be a necessary step to legitimacy and economic security. The college degree is now commonly referred to as “the new high school diploma” as more and more employers are requiring a bachelor’s degree at a minimum, though having a bachelor’s degree certainly does not guarantee getting one of those jobs. Further, while a person is legally considered an adult at the age of eighteen, popular discourses surrounding the college years often frame it as an important time of transition between adolescence and adulthood, a time of discovering oneself and preparing to embark on the so-called real world. I was interested in exploring the extent to which more

widely circulating attitudes about a college education and its value—broadly construed—informed the forms and meanings of the decorated mortarboards worn by college graduates.

From its inception, this project has been informed by folkloristic studies that take performance-centered approaches to material culture (cf. Berlinger 2017; Christensen 2011, 2016, 2017; Shukla 2015). Foregrounding the motivations and interpretations of the individuals who make and use material objects opens up possibilities for understanding the complex, multifaceted beliefs informing people's participation in the practice of wearing embellished graduation caps and the social relationships and broader discursive forces influencing their choices. To these ends, I sought to collect not only examples of decorated mortarboards, but also the interpretations of individuals participating in this tradition through 528 interviews with graduates at UNLV's semiannual commencement ceremonies from 2016 to 2021,⁶ forty more-in-depth interviews with graduates from UNLV and other universities; and ninety-six responses to an online survey.⁷ Some additional graduates, hearing about my research from others, emailed me individually with written explanations of how and why they decorated their caps the way they did. I conducted the in-depth audio-recorded interviews myself in person or by phone. During UNLV's commencement ceremonies, I worked with student research assistants to interview graduates while they gathered and lined up during the hour before the ceremony began. Most of these interviews were audio-recorded. In cases where they were not, we wrote up field notes about our conversations at the events themselves. The broader call for participation in this research, circulated online via snowball sampling and including the link to the online survey, was crafted to be as inclusive as possible, inviting any college graduate over the age of eighteen who decorated their graduation cap, no matter when they graduated, to take part in the research.

This multipronged approach to documenting individuals' perspectives and motivations yielded responses from individuals graduating between 1991 and 2021, though the majority graduated between 2016 and 2019. Participants ranged in age from twenty-one to seventy-three at the time of their graduation, earning degrees including associate's degrees (AA), bachelor's degrees (BA and BS), and master's degrees (MA, MS, and MSW). They included individuals who identified as women, men, and nonbinary, though the majority identified as women. Self-identified racial and ethnic identities included Arab American, Asian, Asian American, Black, Latina/o/x, Native American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and white. Responses came from people who had graduated from different

types of institutions of higher education (community colleges, small liberal arts colleges, large universities, religious universities, minority serving institutions, and primarily white institutions) in different regions in the United States. Specific institutions of higher education represented in this study include (in alphabetical order) Boston University; Bowling Green State University; California State University, Northridge; California State University, Sacramento; Central Michigan University; College of Southern Nevada; College of Wooster; Ferris State University; High Point University; Miami University; Michigan State University; Millikin University; Ohio Dominican College; The Ohio State University; Otterbein University; Pittsburgh State University; San Francisco State University; Texas A&M University–Kingsville; Texas Women’s University; University of California, Berkeley; University of Denver; University of Houston–Downtown; University of Illinois at Urbana–Champagne; University of Nevada, Las Vegas; University of Nevada, Reno; University of Michigan; Utah State University; and Virginia Tech.

The primary moment of display for these caps during commencement ceremonies is short-lived, but the heightened significance of this ritual event situates the creation, display, and reception of decorated mortarboards within broader social, cultural, and political discourses surrounding higher education in the United States. While seeking out individuals’ personal perspectives and motivations for participating in this practice, I also paid close attention to more public framings of this tradition, including how images of mortarboards have grounded online enactments of community through hashtags such as *#LetTheFeathersFly* and *#LatinxGradCaps*, as well as what rhetorical framings are employed in news coverage and legal documents in cases where the value of the practice was both called into question and justified.

This project is decidedly qualitative in approach. While I sought to engage with the folk art and perspectives of graduates representing different geographical regions, dates of graduation, and types of institutions, as well as people of different genders, ages, racial and ethnic identities, and areas of study, my primary goal was not to collect representative samples that would allow me to draw conclusions about, for example, which demographics are most likely to include political messages on their caps, how one’s group affiliation or geographic location affects the likelihood of decorating one’s cap in the first place, or how the key themes visible in the content of these mortarboard displays differ across time, space, and group affiliations. Indeed, the body of materials I collected could not yield adequate answers to these types of questions.⁸

It is also important to highlight here that the materials I collected do not offer a truly comprehensive overview of decorated mortarboards. Not all types of educational institutions are represented, and some demographics are more well-represented than others. Given that I had the opportunity to attend and document this tradition during several ceremonies at my home institution, the majority of people I interviewed graduated with undergraduate degrees from UNLV, a metropolitan research university and primarily commuter campus with roughly thirty thousand students, 30 percent of which are first-generation college students. Ranked among the most diverse undergraduate campuses in the nation by *US News & World Report*, UNLV has been designated a minority-serving institution, Hispanic-serving institution, and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institution.

At the same time, though many of the examples introduced throughout this book come from individuals who have graduated from UNLV, these examples have been selected to represent experiences and approaches to decorating mortarboards that are by no means unique to graduates of this specific institution. My approach to data collection and analysis has sought to be inclusive of diverse communities—in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, and class-based categories, among others. Through this approach, my aim is to highlight the diverse forms this tradition can take; the multifaceted meanings these crafted objects can carry; and the performative strategies employed as graduates use this creative expressive form to mediate the personal and larger-than-personal, as well as vernacular and institutional perspectives on what higher education has to offer.

PERSONAL ADORNMENT IN A RITUAL CONTEXT

Undoubtedly, dress plays a key role in marking ritual contexts in general and rites of passage in particular. From baptisms to coming-of-age rituals such as first communions and quinceañeras to weddings and funerals, “the individuals who are the focus of these ceremonies tend to dress in a particular way and their attire distinguishes them from the rest of the community” (San Emeterio 2016, 60). Within the ritual space of the commencement ceremony, dress takes on special symbolic meanings as participants don academic dress that has its roots in medieval Europe. Notably, while distinguishing members of the academic community from the rest of the community, this ritual dress marks the differences in status *within* the institutional setting, creating a “hierarchy of robe design” (Bronner 2012, 390). For example, graduates earning a PhD wear a soft velvet tam and a robe

with a velvet face running down its front and three velvet stripes on the bell-shaped sleeves. Undergraduates, on the other hand, wear unadorned robes with pointed sleeves and flat, four-sided mortarboards. Dress, then, makes visible the distinctions *between* the educational accomplishments celebrated in the ceremony. The color of graduation robes can also mark distinctions between graduates of different institutions.

While marking these distinctions, the cap and gown typically worn by undergraduates also works to diminish the differences between individuals in a graduating class. In other words, the ritual function of dress during commencement foregrounds what graduates have in common—their transitional status and their role within the university—over what makes them unique. Often, universities will provide graduates with honor cords to mark their field of study or academic achievements. While these colorful cords do visually mark distinctions between graduates, they still work to align graduates with group affiliations and values sanctioned by the university as a whole.

The practice of decorating mortarboards is one manifestation of a broader practice of adapting the ritual dress of the commencement ceremony, one that is certainly not new. In her book *Clothing Concepts*, Mary Lou Rosencranz describes how,

during the period of student unrest and student strikes in the spring of 1970, some graduation exercises were performed under unusual circumstances and in unusual costume. Academic robes were changed by the addition of new symbols. Tradition was shattered by placing peace signs on mortarboards; peace doves, clenched fists, or flags on the backs of robes; the wearing of hippie jewelry over the robes, white armbands on the arms, and the forswearing of caps and gowns altogether at some institutions. (Rosencranz 1972, 300)

In their study of the personalization of graduation attire at a large Western university during 1982 and 1983, psychologists identified a range of examples, including instances of political forms of adornment, specifically green ribbons distributed by peace activists, and nonpolitical forms of adornment, including buttons, balloons, flowers, flags, signs, masks, and automobile license plates (Harrison et al. 1986).

The adaptation of ritual dress can take different forms, including opting *not* to wear the cap and gown at all, often replacing this symbolic dress with adornment the graduate finds to be more personally meaningful. A friend and colleague of mine, for example, explained how in 1994, she and a fellow women's studies major chose not to wear graduation gowns, donning

instead “regular” clothes and sashes bearing statistics about contemporary women’s issues in order to bring attention to the problems of domestic violence and unequal pay.

In 2015, one Native Hawaiian graduate of the University of Hawai‘i Hawai‘inuiākea donned his malo, a traditional Hawaiian loincloth, to participate in a traditional chant, or oli, at the beginning of the ceremony with a group of fellow students. He put his graduation gown on over his malo after the oli was complete, expecting to wear the gown for the duration of the ceremony, though he later changed his mind and decided he wanted to show his cultural pride by standing on the stage and receiving his diploma while wearing only the malo. He later explained: “Whether you are Hawaiian, Maori, Samoan, Tongan, or whatever culture you claim . . . know your roots, represent, and perpetuate. Not just for yourself, but for your family, your ancestors, and the future generations of your culture” (Wang 2015).

The practice of wearing kente stoles, brightly colored scarves made from red, green, blue, and gold kente cloth, became a common part of commencement ceremonies at historically black institutions in the mid-1980s, and it began to increase in visibility in primarily white institutions in the early 1990s. According to a 1995 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Students say the stoles, decorated with patterns once favored by African royalty, show solidarity among black classmates and honor their heritage” (Gose 1995). Other historically marginalized groups have adopted similar traditions, such as Latina/o/x graduates donning serape scarves.

In Hawaii, the traditional practice of giving leis infuses the visual landscape of the ceremony. The graduation tradition of wearing leis of different materials (including flowers, money, and candy) is visible in many commencement ceremonies all over the country, practiced by both transplanted Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians—though for many it is intertwined with broader cultural belief systems. In a 1999 *New York Times* article, celebrated lei maker Barbara Meheula explained how “parents will hike in a storm to gather maile [a culturally significant native plant] for their child’s graduation, because it signifies that the child will continue to grow and have life. . . . Maile represents life and growth” (Fujii 1999). Indigenous people who live in other parts of the United States similarly integrate cultural beliefs and practices into the ritual space of commencement ceremonies, for example by attaching an eagle feather to their mortarboard or by embellishing their cap with traditional beading.

To be clear, self-consciously adapting the official regalia (or opting not to wear it) is not the only way graduates use their dress on commencement day as

a mode of self-expression. The conventional cap and gown are, after all, only part of the graduates' creative assemblage of bodily adornment.⁹ Dress is a rich communicative resource individuals use to position themselves in relation to different social categories, including gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, nationality, region, and religion. The bodily adornment that is visible during the ceremony (hair, makeup, jewelry, nail art, tattoos, shoes, material of pants or skirts that fall under the knee) cue to others this social positioning, and even the bodily adornment that is *not* visible under the gown is selected with intention, and thus carries meaning. The various choices made at the level of dress, independently of the ritual dress of the cap and gown, is shaped by "the individual's personality, style history, social identifications, finances, interpersonal relationships, and sense of place" (Hertz 2013, 381).

AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF THE PERSONAL AND THE TRADITIONAL

This book is grounded in my training in folklore studies, a field attentive to vernacular beliefs and practices, the dynamics of tradition, and the aesthetic modes people use to create and communicate meaning in their lives. Viewing decorated mortarboards through this lens, I was drawn from the beginning to the artistry and creativity of many of these material displays. I recognized how each mortarboard display claimed the blank space of the mortarboard, reconfiguring the ritual dress into traditional performances of the personal. Building on this recognition, I wanted to understand how the (textual, visual, material) messages on the caps both aligned with and diverged from the institutional messaging structuring the commencement event as a whole.

In addition to noting practical considerations such as wanting to be visible to friends and family members in the audience, many of the people I interviewed for this project referenced the desire for *personal* expression in the space of the commencement ceremony as a key motivation for participating. For example:

"I wanted to express myself as I am."

"I wanted to pick something that represented me."

"[Decorating your cap] gives you a chance to be unique and show your personality. It's a way to express yourself."

"The cap is a way to put yourself into the graduation since it is *your* personal achievement. It's a way to give it your personal touch."

Popular understandings of the practice of decorating mortarboards similarly focus on how they function as sites of personal expression. A 2019 feature on decorated mortarboards in the *New York Times*, for example, was titled “Wearing Their Hearts on Their Graduation Caps.” Adapting the popular saying “wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve,” which is used in situations where someone makes their personal feelings and sentiments visible to others, this headline situates the practice as one where the personal is put on display for public audiences.

In addition to being sites of personal expression, decorated mortarboards are undoubtedly traditional. As noted by Alan Dundes and Carl Pagter, the label “traditional” can be applied to expressive forms when “they manifest multiple existence in space and time, and they exist in variant forms” (Dundes and Pagter [1978] 1992, xvii). The practice of decorating mortarboards clearly illustrates these key characteristics of multiple existence and variation, not only in the act of decorating (which is both widespread geographically in the United States and recurring year after year) but also in the content of the displays. To take just one example, consider the prevalence of one classic message found on these caps—“Thanks Mom and Dad”—and the adaptations that emerge such as “thank you Starbucks and Dad’s Gold Card,” “thanks Mom and Uncle Sam,” and “thank you Google.” The established nature of decorating mortarboards as a traditional form of folk expression is further evidenced by the metafolkloric nature of some designs, which offer folk commentary on the nature of the genre as a whole (Dundes 1966). One graduate, for example, wore a cap adorned with the words, “[insert inspirational quote HERE],” making a reference to a common feature of many decorated caps (see figure 1.2).

The content of many caps includes other genres of traditional folk speech, including proverbs (e.g., “a smooth sea never made a skillful sailor,” “out of the frying pan and into the fire,” “never trust a skinny chef”) and wordplay. The cap of one math major I interviewed, for example, included the phrase “life just got real,” creating an inside joke for people who understood the reference to real numbers in mathematics. Another graduate, a computer science major, put “C++ get degrees” on his cap, transforming the popular folk saying “C’s get degrees” with a reference to the programming language C++. The mortarboard of Amber, a chemistry major, included the words “keep calm and Curie on,” an adaptation of the phrase “keep calm and carry on” found on posters created by the British government during World War II. During our 2016 interview, Amber explained: “I grew up learning about Marie Curie. She was a huge influence on my



Figure 1.2. Decorated mortarboards have become such an established expressive genre that common generic features are playfully referenced in the designs themselves. Photo credit: Sheila Bock.

decision to pursue a chemistry degree. I loved the history of the discovery and isolation of certain radioactive elements and just wanted to pay tribute to her.” She also saw this phrase as a reference to the research she did on radioactive elements while pursuing her degree, as well as the pride she felt from being a woman in science.

Other caps reference particular genres of folk expression, such as one first-generation college student who wrote “no blonde joke” on the top of her cap in 1992. “Blonde jokes were popular at the time,” she explained in her survey response, “and this was a statement about being taken seriously as a blonde female. People liked to tell me blonde jokes because my hair was very blonde. I usually thought they were funny and appreciated the humor. My mortarboard was a way of responding back that I wasn’t the stereotypical dumb blonde girl from the jokes. I graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa so I had the ‘creds’ to back it up.”

Many caps also share themes with other documented forms of humor surrounding graduation in general, including “satirical readings of collegiate initialism” (Bronner 2012, 403) through phrases such as “finally done with this B.S.” (playing on the double meaning of BS as standing for “bachelor of science” and “bullshit”). Others draw on humor mocking particular occupation groups, such as one cap worn by an engineering graduate mocking

the anti-intellectualism of engineers also found in Xeroxlore documented by Dundes and Pagter (1987, 212–214). It reads: “I’m an ENGINEER ENGINEER ENGINEER I’m good at math.”

While initially the notion of the “traditional” might seem at odds with the “personal,” folkloristic scholarship has shown how expressive acts that are marked or understood as personal are in fact always larger than personal. That is, expressions of the personal are always social and relational. The genre of personal experience narratives has received the most attention in this regard. In her groundbreaking work on this genre, for example, Sandra Stahl (Dolby) (1977, 1989) showed that while on the surface stories within this genre appear idiosyncratic, they are informed by and reflective of culturally shared values and attitudes that are, in fact, traditional. Kate Parker Horigan (2018) further considers the larger-than-personal dynamics at play when narrative recountings of personal experience meet public audiences that are not familiar with the narrator, especially in light of the inherently social nature of the creation, transmission, and function of personal narratives.

Performing the personal in public can be a risky endeavor, as performers can lose control over how the story should be interpreted once it is out in the world and open to recontextualization (Shuman 2005). Scholars such as Horigan (2018) and Willsey (2015) have recognized how performers of personal narratives have a heightened awareness of shifting modes of evaluation due to larger political discourses, culturally informed narrative conventions, and social expectations. In light of these shifting contexts of evaluation, narrators often craft their stories in ways that allow them to retain some control over the interpretation of their experiences. Engaging with similar issues in her study of scrapbooks, a material culture genre that, like the genre of mortarboard displays, is simultaneously marked as personal and meant for display, Danille Christensen (2016) identifies material and other performative strategies of negotiation embedded in the objects themselves and how their creators choose to present them to others.

Recognizing that such genres of expressive culture become sites where the relationships between the personal and the public are mediated, this book explicitly considers how decorated mortarboards occupy the different categories of “personal” and “larger than personal.” In the process, it shows how these performances of the personal take shape in relation to broader, ongoing conversations about higher education in the United States, conversations grounded in discourses of belonging, citizenship, and the promises of the American dream.

DIALOGIC ACTS OF POSITIONING AND PERFORMING SOCIAL SELVES

In approaching mortarboard displays as traditional performances of the personal, I also understand them as dialogic acts of positioning. By *dialogic*, I am drawing on the work on Mikhail Bakhtin, specifically the idea that the meanings of creative expressions—indeed, all acts of expression—are both carried over from the past and emergent in the present. Recognizing the dialogic nature of all expressive acts, we understand that references to previous discourses are not just referential, they can be generative and transformational.

A cap worn by Ari, a graduate who had transitioned from female to male during his time as a university student, included text that read “college made me a man” against the background of the trans flag.¹⁰ As he explained in our 2019 interview, “you kind of associate ‘made me a man’ with hyper-masculinity . . . like ‘I went to the military and it really made me a man,’ or coming of age, but also the toughening of it. And I sort of felt like I was subverting that and connecting it directly with my queerness.” Through the design of this cap, the commonly used meaning of the phrase transformed to adapt to the graduate’s life experiences, enacting alternate visions of what it means to be made a man.

Discursive references do not have to be textual—they can be material and visual as well. One graduate, using the hashtag #LatinxGradCaps, posted an image of a cap online that incorporated fabric from a piece of clothing that belonged to her grandmother. The accompanying caption read:

As I wrapped my grandmother’s work dress around my cap I could not help but feel overwhelmed with tears as I channeled her strength to be where I am today. I could not have done it without her, my mother or my daughters. “Here’s to strong women, may we know them. May we be them. May we raise them.”¹¹

This material reference integrated clothing associated with physical labor into the ritual dress associated with academic success. In the process, it marked her grandmother’s story as part of her own, situating the accomplishment of attaining a college degree as not just an *individual* accomplishment but as part of an ongoing *family* story characterized by hard work and strength.

Other mortarboards feature the gesture of a raised fist (sometimes holding up a diploma), indexing meanings of resistance and solidarity, particularly in contexts of racial oppression (see figures 1.3 and 1.4).



Figure 1.3. Through their language and imagery, caps can be transformed into overt sites of political expression. Photo credit: Sheila Bock.



Figure 1.4. Decorated mortarboards can work to position the graduate in relation to broader identity categories. Photo credit: Nicole Cristina Espinosa.

Accompanied by phrases such as “By Any Means Necessary” (a slogan popularized by Black civil rights activist Malcolm X in 1964), “beware bad hombre with degree” (referencing presidential candidate Donald Trump’s characterization of Mexican men crossing the southern US-Mexican border

as “bad hombres”), and “you cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore!” (a quote from Mexican American labor organizer and civil rights activist Cesar Chavez), these gestural references transform these moments of individual celebration into overt acts of political expression, framing the very act of completing the college degree as an act of resistance.

In approaching mortarboard displays as acts of *positioning*, I am drawing on multiple strands of scholarship. Folklorist Pravina Shukla (2005) has shown how personal adornment choices serve as modes of social positioning that mark, among other things, social standings, relationships, and affiliations. As she explains, “One of the main functions fulfilled by dress is to mark the multiple identities of individuals, and therefore, to position them within their social networks” (2005).¹² Analyzing different types of material, specifically the interactional contexts of storytelling, narrative scholars have similarly looked at the ways individuals position themselves and how positions are “locally occasioned and designed, they are temporally and situationally flexible, and they are multifaceted—that is, different facets of identity are relevant in different contexts” (Deppermann 2015, 370). Narrative scholars have used the concept of positioning to consider how individuals situate themselves not only in relation to social contexts but also in relation to master narratives (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008) and identity categories (Slocum-Bradley 2009). Bringing the insights of these different strands of scholarship together to frame my analysis of mortarboard displays helps illuminate the ways in which they work to situate the individuals who wear them in relation to broader contexts that ground the individual as a social actor, contexts that influence how individuals choose to craft these material acts of self-expression.

For example, one recurring pattern I have observed in many caps is the way individuals use them to perform relational or social selves; that is, to position themselves in term of their relationships and affiliations with others (see figure 1.5). Sometimes these relationships can be marked when two or more people coordinate their plans for adorning their caps. A group of six friends and classmates, for example, made a spontaneous decision while attending a college reception before the larger university commencement to take the red balloons adorning the reception hall and to affix them to their caps. In another instance, a couple coordinated their caps so that both featured imagery from the Pixar movie *Finding Nemo*. Twin sisters also coordinated their caps with imagery from *Finding Nemo*. “Do you have your exit buddy?” one read. “Yes, I have my exit buddy,” said the other. As one of this pair explained, “I wanted to make graduation specifically with my sister more memorable.”



Figure 1.5. Individuals often decorate mortarboards in ways that visibly mark important relationships in their lives. Photo credit: Sheila Bock.

Coordinated caps are not just used to mark human relationships. During one commencement ceremony at The Ohio State University, a graduate gave his service dog a small mortarboard to wear (see figure 1.6). “OH,” the dog’s cap proclaimed in bold, red letters, while the graduate’s cap read, “IO.” Together, these caps referenced the cheer commonly used by Ohio State football fans, a cheer set up as a type of call and response. One or more people will shout “O-H!” (at a football game or even out in the city of Columbus), and the response will come: “I-O!” As a cheer, it marks the people who participate in it as part of a clear Ohio State community, even if they do not know each other. Recontextualized into the visual space of these caps at a commencement ceremony, this chant not only positions both the graduate and his dog as part of the larger Ohio State community, it also marks the service dog as a significant part of the graduate’s college experience.¹³

Relationships can also be marked in the *process* of decorating one’s mortarboard. I have interviewed several graduates who chose to decorate their cap in the first place because a friend or a classmate organized a gathering for that purpose, so that sociability motivates their participation in the tradition. These events typically take place immediately following final exams, so they very often function as a kind of “stress break,” in the words of one of my interviewees, a way to relax and take a break from responsibilities. They also function as moments of reflection. Graduate Briceida explained:

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Figure 1.6. Decorated mortarboards can mark meaningful human–animal relationships. Photo credit: Cassie Rosita Patterson for the Folklore Archives for the Center for Folklore Studies at The Ohio State University [GCT(OSU)20171217CP83].

Decorating [my cap] with friends was a way I could reminisce about our journeys into and through college, while also celebrating our accomplishments together. In fact, I actually created an event where I and fellow graduating Latinx students could get together over food to decorate our caps in preparation for the upcoming Latinx graduation celebration. . . . I cherished the time spent with friends being silly and working on my cap. I think during these stressful moments in one’s life, when you’re thinking of the future, it’s nice to have time for fun, creativity, and community.

For many, the process of decorating the mortarboard is a collaborative one. One year, for example, when UNLV’s commencement was the day before Mother’s Day, a graduate worked with his younger sister to craft his cap so that it said “Happy Mother’s Day Mom UNLV 2017.” When asked why he selected this message, he explained that his mom was one of the most important people in his life, and he thought it would make a

good Mother's Day gift for her—one both he and his sister made together.¹⁴ Another graduate that same year, a woman from Germany who came to the United States to play collegiate volleyball, had a cap that proclaimed “herzliche glückwünsche Elli,” which translates from German to “Congratulations Elli.” The cap was adorned by gold wrappers from chocolates brought by her family from Germany that were craftily repurposed into the shape of flowers. During an interview, she explained that even though this is not a tradition in her home country of Germany, her mother and grandmother decorated the cap after flying from Germany to Las Vegas to attend UNLV's commencement. While she had the basic idea for the design, her family members executed it. The content of the display, both textually and materially, indexed the graduate's German origins and her familial relationships. Yet another UNLV graduate integrated a haku lei into her cap, explaining that she is from Hawaii, and she wanted something to commemorate her home state. Her cousin had provided the materials by bringing the haku lei from Hawaii.

Some of the graduates I interviewed about their caps explained how they did not participate at all in the process of decorating their mortarboards. In some cases, others took charge of the process upon hearing that the graduate was not sufficiently motivated or inspired to decorate it themselves.¹⁵ In other cases, loved ones surprised them with decorated mortarboards, presenting them as gifts.¹⁶ One graduate, for example, was surprised by her mom and aunt, who decorated her cap when they realized she would not have time to do it herself. Knowing that that she loved the music of J. Cole, a rapper that she listened to while she studied, they put one of his lyrics on her mortarboard: “life is your professor, know that bitch is gonna test ya.”

The content of these mortarboard displays was often imbued with the significance of family relationships, even when family members did not participate in the decorating process, as in the case of one graduate whose cap featured images of bumblebees in reference to the nickname her parents gave her when she was a small child. Another graduate's cap featured the text, “I have done a smart thing.” When I asked her why she put those words on her cap, she replied, “Growing up my parents always had their respective sayings they would send us off to school with, and my dad's was ‘Do smart things.’ And so I took that and I turned it around as a kind of honor to him to say ‘I have done a smart thing.’” Another graduate's cap featured a fake lau lau (a traditional Hawaiian dish) made of cotton balls and ribbon and the words “graduating Summa Cum Lau-Lau.” Honoring her great-aunt, who played a large role in her family moving to America from the Philippines (as well as her love of Hawaiian food), the way she

decorated her cap also referenced a joke her mom cracked about graduation that she found hilarious. As she explained in her survey response, “It’s nice to bring something tied to my family with me as I walk onto that stage.” Yet another graduate decorated her cap with large, glittery letters that read “Live your story. Faith, hope, glory,” referencing the theme song to the 1988 children’s movie *The Land Before Time* sung by Diana Ross, called “If We Hold on Together.” Her mom, she said, has an old home movie of the graduate and her sister when they were children. In the home movie, she is singing that song to her mother, so the song has always been important to the three of them. Her cap also included an old black-and-white photograph of her grandparents, who had passed away the year before.

I observed many caps that similarly served as memorials for important people in graduates’ lives who had passed away. One graduate whose cap featured a photograph of her grandmother, who was very supportive of her in school, explained: “That way she is walking with me.” She decorated the cap with her mom, making the process, in her words, “kind of a Mother’s Day thing.” Another cap included a photo of the graduate as a child with her dad. She explained that her dad passed away four years earlier after being in a coma for several years due to a car accident. She wanted to honor him because he was always a great proponent of education, even though he never finished high school himself. Many of the mortarboard displays I documented also positioned graduates in terms of religious beliefs and affiliations, for example through references to Bible verses and Gospel lyrics.

While it is common for graduates to highlight affiliations with the university, their major, and student organizations, it is equally common in my observations for graduates to highlight relationships that extend beyond the university community. In many cases, I observed mortarboard displays that highlighted both. In one example, a graduate, Claudia, decorated their cap with a vibrant, glittery background and the presentation of two phrases, “viaja aprende sirve” and “K byeee.” The first phrase referenced Alternative Breaks, an organization on campus that played a big part in their college experience:

“Their tagline is “Learn, Travel, Serve” because we travel to nearby cities, and do service work *with* the local community, while also learning about the social justice issues involved. I’ve learned so much about the world, myself, and leadership through this. I’ve led trips to San Diego focused on immigration, and Carson City focused on indigenous issues, and both trips had a huge impact on me.

Being a native speaker of Spanish, this was also something Claudia wished to highlight on their cap: “I wrote ‘Learn, Travel, Serve’ in Spanish because it was one way to communicate that the language is mine, and these identities go together.” The second phrase, “K byeee!” is a catchphrase from *My Favorite Murder*, a popular, funny true-crime podcast. Including it in their cap not only served as a way to bid farewell to being an undergraduate student, it marked them as a “murderino,” an active participant in this larger (non-academic) fandom community.¹⁷

The diverse range of group affiliations and relationships indexed in both the mortarboard displays and the processes by which they are decorated should not be surprising, especially if we consider cultural anthropologist Rebekah Nathan’s assertion that “there is little that is automatically shared among people by virtue of attending the same university” (Nathan 2006, 39). Thus, students’ experiences of “community” while pursuing a degree form just as much (if not more) around personal networks and everyday experiences as institutional affiliations. Graduates, then, often use the process of decorating their caps to reflect on—and in many cases bring attention to—the importance of these communities and relationships not otherwise visible within the more formal structures of the commencement ritual.

The role of “student” is just one aspect of people’s identities as they make their way through higher education, even for those who reach the institutionally recognized benchmarks of academic success, such as high GPAs. For the most part, other aspects of identity and one’s sense of self—such as family roles and responsibilities or even sense of humor—are not inherently valued in the academic arena, and often are seen as standing in the way of student success in the classroom. Furthermore, bigger universities have become notorious for frustrating bureaucracies that fail to take into account the needs and desires of individuals. As one professor at a large state school quipped, “At [name of university], some students think they are just a number, but that’s not true. Here, you are not even a number. You are a barcode.” Situating his own study of decorated graduation caps, specifically among graduates of color, within a context of neoliberal restructuring in higher education, sociologist Esa Syeed considers how “these caps may serve as a way to reclaim their personhood in alienating spaces” (Syeed 2020, 366).

The formalized structure of the commencement ceremony diminishes personal differences, ritually dramatizing much of students’ experiences within their institution. As discussed earlier, the ritual dress of commencement is a significant way that graduates’ individuality is symbolically erased

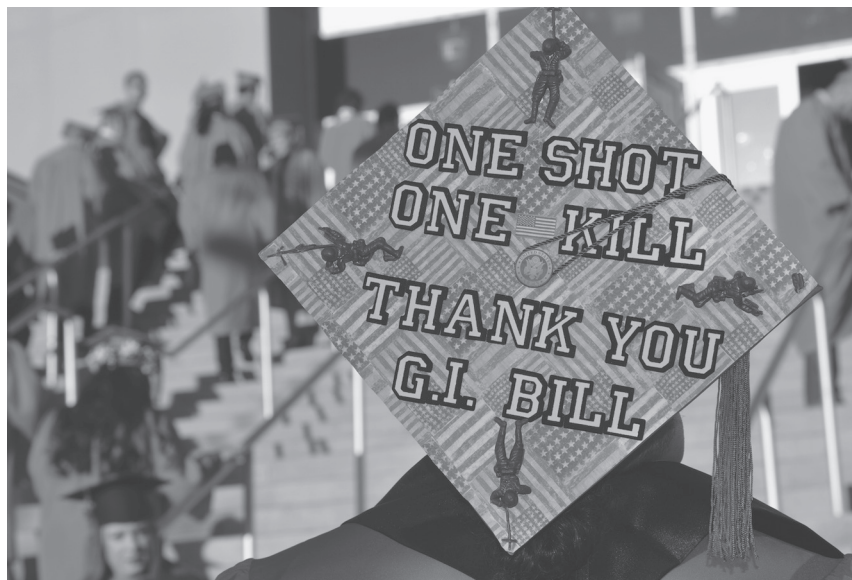


Figure 1.7. Graduates often use the space of the mortarboard to highlight aspects of their identity and experiences that extend beyond their role as a student. Photo credit: Sheila Bock.

within the formalized ritual space of commencement, though it is certainly not the only one. As Simon Bronner explains, at many large institutions, graduates “are recognized simply by quickly standing together in the midst of a huge arena” (Bronner 2012, 393). Even when they get to walk across the stage, their moment in the spotlight is brief, and often their individual names might not even be called. Graduates who *are* highlighted as award recipients or student speakers are most often selected because of their academic success, and they are introduced as embodying the core university values being performed within the commencement ritual. Individual identities are invoked to affirm their membership in, and solidarity with, the university community more broadly. Put on display in this broader institutional context, the blank canvas of the mortarboard provides students the opportunity to claim some of this ritual space and make visible those nonacademic aspects of themselves that they wish to be publicly represented. Consider the cap of one graduate, adorned with United States flags, toy soldiers, and the seal of the United States Army, along with the words: “one shot one kill thank you GI Bill” (see figure 1.7). Referencing the occupational folk speech of the sniper team he led while serving in the military, service that included a thirteen-month deployment in Iraq, this cap served as a way of marking—and valuing—this part of his life.



Figure 1.8. Sometimes elements of the mortarboard's design are selected with the intention of offering implicit critiques of the university setting. Photo credit: Nicole Cristina Espinosa.

In the interview data collected for this study, the claiming of this ritual space is not always presented as an intentional critique of the way individuals are positioned within the university setting, but sometimes it is, as we see in the explanation offered by one graduate about the different elements she incorporated into her cap's design (see figure 1.8):

I chose pink because it reflects my femininity, especially in this space which makes you kind of be asexualized because it is considered to be inappropriate. So I chose pink. I highlighted the word “ho” in “Scholar” because that is the source of my scholarship [as a gender and sexuality studies major] and my identity and my personality within this space. And I also chose a cactus sticker because it commemorates resistance, especially in this non-forgiving climate that we call academia.

As many of the mortarboard displays are shaped by how individuals are positioned by the university as institution, they are also informed by discourses surrounding higher education, and they position individuals in relation to these broader discourses. While there are certainly multiple discourses framing prevalent understandings of higher education in the