Claiming Space: Performing the Personal Through Decorated Mortarboards by Sheila Bock (review)

Elizabeth Tucker

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is. Jordan Abel's *NISHGA* offers alternative modes of knowledge and understanding, perfect for teaching Indigenous folklore and the history of folkloristics, as well as suggesting potential new directions in folkloristic knowledge, learning, and collective understanding.

Claiming Space: Performing the Personal Through Decorated Mortarboards. By Sheila Bock. (Utah State University Press, 2023. Pp. xiii + 160, list of figures, acknowledgments, notes, references, index.)

Elizabeth Tucker
Binghamton University

Many of us who teach at colleges and universities in the United States find commencement ceremonies meaningful and entertaining. Every spring, I love seeing expressions of student spirit take the form of mortarboard decorations. Some students cover their graduation caps with messages of appreciation such as "Thanks, Mom!" while others prepare elaborate designs with fraternity or sorority letters, artificial flowers, and other materials. With *Claiming Space: Performing the Personal Through Decorated Mortarboards*, Sheila Bock succeeds in elucidating the importance of this form of students' material culture, which expresses both individual and group identities in the context of discourses of belonging, citizenship, and the American dream.

One of this book's major strengths is its inclusivity. Using a performance-centered approach that involves observation, as well as interviews and surveys, Bock finds expressions of belonging that come from diverse ethnic groups and a wide range of other identity categories. In the introduction, she explains that "universities are becoming more amenable to students' adaptations of the ritual dress of commencement" (p. 5). Because of institutions' greater openness to these creative adaptations, students can use their mortarboards to express "thoughtful engagement with the promises and critiques of higher education" (p. 7). From 1991 to 2001, Bock collected responses from students who identified as male, female, and nonbinary, with racial and ethnic identities including "Arab American, Asian, Asian American, Black, Latina/o/x, Native American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and white" (p. 9). Her emphasis on diversity makes this study richly meaningful.

In chapter 2, "Crafting Performances of Self," Bock explores how graduates engage in material expressions of themselves "that are shaped by different (though often overlapping) social and discursive forces" (p. 30). Vignettes of several graduates' performances of self show how much this process means to them. Brenda, who received her bachelor's degree in 2017, chose a Spanish saying for her mortarboard: "Vuela tan alto como puedas sin olvidar de donde vienes," that translates to "Fly as high as you can without forgetting where you come from" (p. 31). Abigail, also a 2017 graduate, cared so much about expressing herself on her mortarboard that she designed two of them: one with a joke about Ted Cruz and another with the saying "Math is nice, but music charms the soul" (p. 37). Because she had been in band for 4 years and majored in math, although studying math was not easy for her, she wanted her mortarboards to demonstrate her learning process in college as well as her sense of humor.

One of the most interesting chapters is "Into the Public Sphere: Countering, Rearticulating, and Reimagining Dominant Narratives of Citizenship." When decorating their mortarboards, students may "engage with ongoing national debates about belonging and exclusion" (p. 79). Like protest signs carried at commencement ceremonies, a message on a mortarboard "'authorizes' the individual wearer, so to speak, in their call for attention" (p. 80). Immigration has been a frequent theme on mortarboards posted on social media with the hashtag #LatinaGradCaps. Criticism of immigration policies problematizes the American dream, according to which anyone who works hard may succeed. Symbolizing the fulfillment of academic goals and acceptance by an educational institution (a pillar of society), the mortarboard "becomes a visible way to rhetorically claim a sense of value and belonging" (p. 85). Phrases such as "Sí se puede!" (Yes, it can be done!) on graduation caps are "*both* infused with personal hope and

accomplishment *and* connected to the struggle of working-class Latinx communities and the quest for pro-immigrant rights" (p. 90). The author's multilayered interpretation expresses the subtleties of mortarboard messages very effectively. Because Bock's analysis is complex but clear, the book would work very well as a text in college classes.

Visual presentation of these messages matters greatly, and this book includes a plethora of images. One shows a mortarboard festooned by a gender and sexuality studies major with pink and white roses next to the word "Sc(ho)lar" (p. 27). A picture of a pair of mortarboards offers both humorous and serious messages: "Student Conduct's Most Wanted" and "Life is Long & Beautiful" (p. 55). A mortarboard with the message "Insert Inspirational Quote HERE" (p. 16) gently mocks the wish for graduation ceremonies to inspire young people but also expresses openness to observers' own choices. As Bock aptly points out, "there is much more to explore as this rich expressive tradition continues on and adapts in the future" (p. 119). I hope that other scholars will use *Claiming Space* as a model for further research on this significant subject in the future.

Rethinking the Anthropology of Magic and Witchcraft: Inherently Human. By Phillips Stevens, Jr. (Routledge, 2024. Pp. viii + 179, preface, notes, references, glossary of frequently confused terms, index.)

Alf H. Walle
Independent

Folklorists and anthropologists will benefit from Phillips Stevens' contemporary analysis of the psychological forces underlying magic and witchcraft, as well as Stevens' approach to how people relate to such phenomena. His work (in the form of a textbook) builds upon a careful examination of the existing literature coupled with his personal experiences, including those provided by his stint in the Peace Corps in the 1960s and his anthropological fieldwork in Nigeria. The writing is stimulating and timely, and includes interpretations of lyrics from noted blues songs as well as other examples of popular culture and current events.

Stevens' monograph has taken decades to develop; his book is an outgrowth of a course on witchcraft and magic that he taught at the collegiate level for many years. Its value as a textbook builds upon the long-term evolution of Stevens' ideas within a classroom setting.

He begins by observing that conventional anthropological theories of magic and witchcraft—and related activities—are closely linked to structural/functionalist social and cultural theories stemming from the work and influence of seminal anthropologists such as Emile Durkheim and Bronislaw Malinowski, as well as folklorists such as Sir James Frazer. Such perspectives focus upon how thinking and behavior contribute to social cohesion and stability. Thus, these orientations emphasize social, not psychological, perspectives.

As an alternative and an enhancement of such thinking, Stevens combines anthropological theories and reasoning with evidence and orientations offered by the neurological sciences that focus upon the nature and functioning of the human brain. In developing his thesis, Stevens briefly refers to earlier thinkers, such as Carl Jung and William James, in order to draw attention to their pioneering psychological perspectives. Stevens, however, focuses upon more state-of-the-art neurobiological research. The book's subtitle "Inherently Human" reinforces his emphasis upon the intrinsically human biological and psychological nature of humankind and how these traits influence magic and witchcraft as well as how people relate to these phenomena. Such analysis embraces psychological interpretations in addition to cultural concepts such as social solidarity.

In accordance with its textbook role, Stevens begins with an overview of anthropological methods and paradigms coupled with discussions of the benefits derived from neurobiological research. He explains: "There is now sufficient material from several social and neurobiological sciences to convincingly declare that the scope and method of anthropology offers superior perspectives" for examining magic and witchcraft (p. 22). After advocat-