

Performing the Personal in a State of Transition: Decorated Mortarboards

by Sheila Bock

In the 1960s, a new informal tradition of decorated mortarboards began to emerge at university commencement ceremonies, and it is still going strong today. My interest in this topic began in December 2011, when I attended my first commencement as a faculty member at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). At this event, as I watched the procession of the graduates, I was struck not only by the large number who had decorated their caps, but also by the diverse range of creative expression presented through this form of adornment. Since then, I have attended four additional ceremonies at UNLV, and I have spent a good deal of time online seeking mortarboard photos and admiring the thoughtful and clever ways that graduates transform their ritual garb into material forms of self-expression. In this essay, I draw upon my observations to share some initial thoughts on the role these public performances of the personal play within the ritual space of the commencement ceremony.



When it comes time to graduate from a college or university in the United States, many students participate in the ritual ceremony known as commencement to mark their formal transition from the status of student to the status of graduate. This ceremony functions as a kind of rite of passage that, according to the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, is characterized by three distinct stages – separation from a former status, a liminal state of transition, and reintegration into society with a new status. Graduates find themselves in a transitional stage, separated from their previous identities as students and looking ahead to their new status once they have diplomas in hand. Folklorists and anthropologists know that formalized rituals help mediate these liminal spaces of transition, and the highly performative nature of commencement offers a clear example. In fact, by ritually marking “the achievement of educational milestones,” these ceremonies work both “to facilitate this transition and convey institutional values” (Magolda 2003:787).

Dress takes on special symbolic meaning within the ritual space of the commencement ceremony. With the exception of family and friends in the audience, participants are donned in academic dress that has its roots in medieval Europe. This 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, the highest degree a university offers, wear a velvet tam and a robe with a velvet face running down the front and three velvet stripes on the bell-shaped sleeves. Undergraduates, on the other hand, wear unadorned robes with pointed sleeves and tasseled mortarboards. Dress, then, makes visible the distinctions between the educational accomplishments celebrated in the ceremony. The uniformity of dress also diminishes the differences between individuals within each category, such as socioeconomic status, reasons for pursuing a degree, family obligations, or the number of years it took to complete the degree. 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.

Dress is just one way that graduates' individuality is symbolically erased within the formalized ritual space of commencement. As the folklorist Simon Bronner explains, at many large institutions, graduates "are recognized simply by quickly standing together in the midst of a huge arena" (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.

The liminal state in which the graduates find themselves is a time of flux and ambiguity, and the anthropologist Victor Turner showed how the betwixt and between nature of this state opens up possibilities for participants to engage in both reflexivity and ludic, or playful, expression. Within the ritual space of commencement where public affirmations of shared identities and values are symbolically performed, then, we also find creative expression: the decorated mortarboard. These flat, four-sided caps function easily as blank canvases, and, if greeting cards and graduation-themed party decorations offer any indication, the mortarboard is a classic image of graduation in American culture today. Thus, mortarboards provide a practical and highly symbolic way for graduates to take some control and personally encode their ritual dress.

Emerging Themes

Many mortarboards that I have seen foreground important relationships and group affiliations. Often, graduates show pride in the school they attended by writing its name on their caps, including an image of the school mascot, using school colors, or expressing a school cheer, such as "Go Bears!" – in effect validating the ideal of the unified university community so central to the ceremony. At the same time, students reference alternate group affiliations, including majors or student organizations. For example, at the Spring 2014 commencement ceremony at UNLV, one graduate focused on her affiliation with Women's Studies, while another highlighted the completion of her nursing degree. Similarly, it is not at all uncommon to see members of a sorority decorate mortarboards using similar colors and designs featuring the letters of their social organization to make visible their connection to one another.

The relationships referenced on caps also extend beyond the university community. For example, I have seen numerous references to religious affiliations ("Proverbs 3:5-6," "Thank you Jesus."). In addition, a very common message expresses gratitude to family members who have offered emotional and financial support ("Thanks Mom and Dad!"), although references to family take other forms as well. In 2014, for example, one UNLV graduate donned a cap decorated in crayon by her young niece that read, "I'm a McCrea."



The diverse range of group affiliations and relationships referenced on caps should not be surprising, especially if we consider the cultural anthropologist Rebekah Nathan's assertion that "there is little that is automatically shared among people by virtue of attending the same university" (Nathan 2005:39). 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, use their caps to articulate the importance of these communities and relationships not otherwise visible within the more formal structures of the commencement ritual.



Another common theme is the foregrounding of the individual. Of course, the very act of decorating the mortarboard is meant to make the individual stand out from the crowd. Often, though, the content itself further highlights individuality. In addition to writing their names on their caps, many graduates use mortarboards to highlight their personal interests, serving as a form of self-presentation. In the words of one blogger who decorated her cap, "I also wanted my cap to represent me...therefore I decided to incorporate my favorite things, Phi Mu, Lilly, and Pearls!" (SarahSmiles 365 2011). Decorated mortarboards commonly feature personal pronouns ("I Did It. Yay Me!," "3 Years...2 Majors...1 Graduate...Me!"), along with identifications of individual accomplishments such as getting into graduate school ("Next stop...USC!") or sources of personal pride ("First generation"). Consider one UNLV graduate who, after completing her Masters in Social Work, decorated her mortarboard with the Wonder Woman insignia. When I asked why, she explained that on the first day of graduate school her wife chose Wonder Woman as a symbol of the graduate's hard work and sacrifice. She thus wanted that symbol, and the personal meanings it carried for her and her family, to be represented on the day she walked across the stage and received her diploma.

People also use the tops of their mortarboards to showcase their personalities, most often in the form of humor. For example, one graduate thanked "Mom, Dad, and Coffee," while another noted, "99 Problems, But a Diploma Ain't One," in reference to an iconic hip-hop lyric. Many amusing messages that I have observed involve playful re-framings of popular culture references. For example, one mortarboard humorously referenced the ad campaign for Dos Equis beer. At the end of each commercial, a character deemed "The Most Interesting Man in the World" says, "I don't always drink beer, but when I do, I prefer Dos Equis." Pasting a large image of this character on her mortarboard, along with an image of a space shuttle, the graduate included the adaptation, "I don't always graduate from college, but when I do I go work for NASA."

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—such as family roles and sense of humor—are not inherently valued in the academic arena, and often are seen as standing in the way of student success. 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 bar code.” As I described above, the formalized structure of the commencement ceremony diminishes individual differences, ritually dramatizing much of students’ experiences within their institution. 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.

One final recurring theme that I have encountered is reflection on the future. While the purported function of commencement is to mark graduates’ shift in status ritually, students find themselves still in a liminal state, no longer a student but not quite sure what life as an alumnus will be. The reincorporation stage of the rite of passage has not yet been reached. Many decorated caps communicate a sense of optimism, marked by phrases such as “The Best Is Yet to Come” or “Time to Fly.” Thoughts about the future can also stir up anxiety and inspire decorations that call attention to being unemployed (“Hire Me,” “Dude, Where’s My Job?”). One graduate wrote, “May the job offers be ever in your favor,” drawing connections between the challenges of the current job market and the ruthless world portrayed in the popular book series and film *The Hunger Games*. Another common source of anxiety referenced on mortarboards is student debt, as when one graduate prominently displayed the words “Game of Loans,” adapting the title of the popular book series and television show *Game of Thrones*. In 2012, as part of an organized protest against the rising rates of student loans, graduates from universities across the country used their mortarboards to display how much they owed in student loans. Some also decorated their caps with plastic balls and chains to symbolize the effects this debt would have on their futures (Rema 2012).

The themes that I identified above are by no means comprehensive, nor are they mutually exclusive. Often, decorated mortarboards engage with many of these themes at once. For example, one New York University graduate decorated her cap with a large, bulky model of a computer, representing her master’s degree in digital imaging and design, and a piggy bank, representing her loans. In effect, her decorated mortarboard became a richly multivocal text communicating pride and anxiety, specific group affiliations, and her humorous personality. Whether graduates decorate their mortarboards in ways that reinforce or speak back to the vision of higher education that is central to the ritual of commencement, this essay has shed light on the ways in which individuals use this reflexive and playful genre of creative expression to fashion (quite literally) their personal engagement with the ideas of self, community, education, and the unknown future.

Sheila Bock was trained in Folklore at The Ohio State University, where she received her PhD from the Department of English in 2010. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.



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Classroom Application: Ritual Clothing and Adornment

To design a ritual documentation project, here are questions to select or adapt according to curricular needs.

In what rituals have you participated?
(Examples might include christening or naming ceremonies, bar or bat mitzvahs, weddings, or ceremonies marking grade level transitions.)

What ritual would you like to document?

Does it occur at a special time or season?

Where does it occur? Is it religious?

What do people wear?

How do they wear their hair?

Do they use special objects?

What do the dress and adornment mean to the wearer?

Do dress and adornment differ for men and women, for age groups, for those who have different roles in the ritual?

Rites of passage are universal yet unique to each cultural group. Investigating rituals helps students to recognize moments of importance in people's lives and find meaning in the stages of their own and others' lives. Rituals occur in special times and spaces and involve special clothing and adornment as well. In her article, Sheila Bock describes how graduates use mortarboards to mark transitions, connect with others, acknowledge challenges, and thank supporters. In addition to observing rituals in their personal lives, young people participate in an array of transitions in school, from kindergarten "100 day parades" to graduation. Assigning a documentation project for students to observe how ritual clothing and adornment contribute to personal and cultural identity deepens literacy skills for all ages.

Rites of Passage Resources

The *Louisiana Voices* Cycle of Life unit features three lessons with worksheets and rubrics.

http://www.louisianavoices.org/Unit9/edu_unit9_p2.html

The 2004 *CARTS Newsletter* focused on teaching across curricula with the life cycle, see especially the essay by Steve Zeitlin, "Folk Customs of Passage."

<http://locallearningnetwork.org/library/articles>