

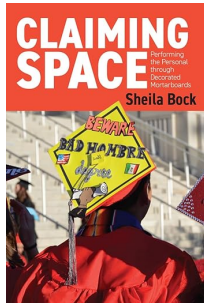
Simon J. Bronner - Review of Sheila Bock, *Claiming Space: Performing the Personal through Decorated Mortarboards*

Sheila Bock. *Claiming Space: Performing the Personal through Decorated Mortarboards*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2023. 160 pages. ISBN: 1646425235.

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The folklore of college students is often cited in contemporary folkloristic surveys as a prime example of Alan Dundes's distinction expressed in 1965 of the folk group as consisting of individuals sharing a common factor who probably do not know all other members but will know traditions that help the group have a sense of identity (Sheila Bock in fact acknowledges her debt to Alan Dundes for introducing her to the discipline of folkloristics). The folklore of students who are devoted to learning and potentially becoming civic leaders is pointed out to dispel

the stereotype of folklore as the crude, immaterial expressions of remote unlettered persons on the fringes of society. Yet the number of monographs focusing on the meaning of particular college traditions, especially material ones, is surprisingly small. Maybe budding folklorists are hesitant to tackle topics in which the rite of professional passage of being "out in the field" is suspect when the subjects are so close to home and seemingly ordinary. Yet if folklore is to be valued as evidence not available in other forms in the present of a pivotal, and threatened, institution of American life, and looking to the future, of the society inhabited and shaped by graduates, then indeed a priority of research should be the kind of scholarship pursued by Sheila Bock in *Claiming Space*.

One might at first question whether decorating mortarboards constitutes a folk or traditional custom if it is indeed highly individualized in concept as well as production. Bock points out, however, that crafters are aware of precedents to the practice and the perception that by being repeated and varied by the individual, decorating the mortarboard is perceived as a "tradition" that indeed lends to the wearer a sense of identity associated with the youthfulness and subordinate position of the student. Although apparently individualized, the messages and images of the decorated mortarboards exhibit patterns and themes that Bock analyzes. She draws from these patterns the uses of decorated mortarboards to comment on the usefulness of the degree, suggesting anxieties about one's economic future; calls for ethnic, racial, and gendered inclusion; and commentaries on the pressure of hyper-capitalist America and problematic fulfillment of the "American Dream" of economic success and social mobility. Bock examines, in particular, points of tension when performances of social as well as personal selves through the decorated mortarboards and issues of dress have been administratively restricted. Bock intersperses through the narrative "vignettes" referring to occasions when expressions became politicized and traumatic, often suppressed, discourses from the past rose painfully to the surface. An example is the banning of eagle feathers and beaded caps worn by Native American students.

Bock takes a deep dive into a phenomenon that has become more conspicuous, and elaborate, at university commencements—decorated mortarboards. The title, *Claiming Space*, carries a double meaning, on the one hand, using the unusual black square on the cap to make a strong visual statement, and on the other, to insert oneself, more broadly, into society. The subtitle refers to the idea that within the context of a standardized ritual of commencement marked by uniformity of dress, the decoration of mortarboards provides opportunities for many graduating students to personally craft, in Bock's words, "performances of self," in the sense that they are intended to be singular expressions when students are the center of attention, literally on a stage, at a propitious moment visible to a broad audience. Accordingly, Bock applies the performance-centered methodology of folkloristics, with an interpretative emphasis, informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of the dialogic nature of expressive acts, on the generative and transformational reference to previous discourses implied by the messages, styles, and images on mortarboards. Implied in this interpretation is an analysis of the frame of the commencement as custom, one

that despite its historic roots in sober monastic rituals of the past, is shaped by students as an occasion for play, thereby making the decorated mortarboards a metafolkloric critique about the very construction of commencement as a culminating coming-of-age ritual.

This performance approach can be limited if it is restricted to an inventory of observed mortarboard designs, but toward the goal of finding explanation for the emergence and spread of the tradition, Bock deserves credit for seeking motivations of students becoming unsolicited “performers” at commencement, by compiling interviews with individuals about their productions. Bock connects their stories to overall desires, and anxieties, about “claiming space” in an increasingly massified society that apparently runs counter to the “liberal” values of higher education. More could be done psychologically with the individual testimonies and life story contexts, but the linkage that Bock makes between outlook, intention, and production is a strength of the book. Bock also is to be credited for delving into the way that the structure of the genre constructed as a culminating ritual presents challenges for social as well personal selves. Readers and administrators should take heed of Bock’s suggestion that commencements operate on “straight time,” thereby setting up a structural challenge to the genre, or what Bock calls “re-membering” and “undisciplining” in “queer time.” Visual display more than representing creative exuberance is insightfully recognized as “one clear illustration of how graduates use decorated mortarboards to reposition themselves in relation to the dominant cultural narratives affirming linearity and forward progression” (103). A relatively slim book with abundant illustrations, many in color, *Claiming Space* can serve as an exemplary case study in folklore courses to show students the meaningfulness of their own traditions—and designs.

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