Embodying American rituals: a corporeal understanding of cultural production

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**PREFACE**

This text is meant to complement a multimedia exhibition of photography and soundscape. The exhibition is the heart of the project, but I hope this written statement can serve as a theoretical framework for the content of the exhibition. This project aims to initiate a conversation about the relationship between bodies and culture, and how ritual practice and ritual-making sits at the intersection of these two things. The aural-visual component of the exhibition hopefully allows the viewer to experience the way in which ritual taps into a deep corporeality. In looking at the way bodies perform and/or, are conditioned to perform in specific rituals, we can try to better understand how bodies are implicated in the production, maintenance, transformation, and destruction of culture. Understanding this can allow us to recognize the way bodies are used and misused in the project of cultural formation, but can also help us uncover the potential of ritual to transform culture through the leveraging of intersubjective energy and imagination.
INTRODUCTION

Throughout this essay, I invite the reader to constantly relate these concepts back to their own life. Everyone participates in a culture, everyone embodies a social identity which situates them within this culture, and everyone engages in some sort of ritual. Implicating ourselves in these easily abstracted concepts is a maneuver that I think American Studies scholars should constantly be doing.

I will spend the first half of this essay establishing a theoretical and intellectual framework for the themes explored by my installation; namely, embodiment, corporeality, culture and ritual. In the second half, I’ll go through each of the six rituals that I documented, talking about their cultural significance, and how I perceived embodiment and intersubjectivity playing out within them. I will speak to my own embodied experience of each of them.

CONSIDERATIONS / SITUATIONS

What constitutes a ritual? What role do embodiment and corporeality play in the process of ritualization? What is the relationship of ritual to culture? Can we say that ritual creates culture? Or does culture create ritual? If rituals create culture, and bodies perform rituals... then are bodies the very locus of culture, by way of ritual (and counter-ritual)? Are people aware of this – that the power to shape culture is in their hands? How do American people create and perpetuate cultures through performing certain rituals – protesting, celebrating, forgetting, spectating, voting, fantasizing, consuming? How much agency do they have to transform these rituals?
The stakes are high right now. The process of ritualization is integral to the process of normalization; the more we repeat action and behavior, the more normal they become. And with so many at-risk bodies being publicly and popularly targeted by the current administration and its army of “alt-right” white nationalists, it is essential to be able to recognize the process of ritualization and subsequent normalization, so that we can challenge it when it involves normalizing something harmful or violent. Conversely, understanding the power of ritualization can be helpful in the continual effort of resistance; it can be an incredibly powerful tool for social change via the transformation of culture.

**CULTURE & BODIES**

In the field of American Studies, our discussion of culture often treads in the realm of the theoretical and the abstract. We talk about “culture,” American or otherwise, as if it exists as an autonomous entity, and is then projected onto the bodies that populate a society. For the purpose of this project, I want to challenge this analysis, and reframe culture as something produced, performed, maintained, and transformed by people – by bodies – through the act of embodied ritual.

There is no fixed definition for the word “culture”. Culture is used to describe many things: artifacts, such as music and film; traditions; language; values. Culture can also describe the way bodies are conditioned to behave. Defining a singular national culture is impossible, especially for a country like America, which consists of many different communities and therefore, many different cultures. We could maybe work towards a definition of a dominant American culture, as in one that is exported globally, or one that pervades mainstream media. But the American
experience is far too varied to define it monolithically. So, to clarify: this project does not attempt to define American culture. It simply attempts to open up the conversation about how bodies are implicated in the production of culture via the performance of rituals.

In their text *Culture and Everyday Life*, David Inglis posits that the human body is as much a cultural phenomenon as it is a biological one (22). Studying bodies as cultural objects, and conversely, locating the nexus of culture in the body allows us to theorize about culture without abstracting it. This maneuver also makes our analysis personal, in that we implicate our own bodies in the production of culture.

In talking about bodies and culture, it is important to differentiate the terms “embodiment” and “corporeality” from one another. Abby Wilkerson does this through the lens of ability and disability in her essay on “Embodiment,” from the *Keywords for Disability Studies* collection. “Corporeality,” on the one hand, is used to describe the experience of existing in a physical human body, and how the material reality of the body shapes the way one moves through life. The concept of corporeality is relevant to this project on a basic level, in that we use our bodies to perform ritual. “Embodiment,” on the other hand, goes beyond the physical to include “pleasures, pain, suffering, sensorial and sensual engagements with the world, vulnerabilities, capabilities, and constraints as they arise within specific times and places” (Wilkerson 67). The Oxford English Dictionary defines embodiment as “a tangible or visible form of an idea, quality, or feeling,” as in, *she seemed to be a living embodiment of vitality*. Corporeality is the material; embodiment is how we use that material to express ourselves. Embodiment is our most intimate and sure ground of knowing and understanding the world around us and participating in culture; Csordas went so far as to claim that “embodiment is understood as the existential condition of
cultural life” (15). When we move beyond an analysis of the body as a biological entity to an analysis of it as an artifact of culture, we are unearthing a phenomenology of the body. As Marjorie O’Loughlin summarized: “to be embodied is to be in touch with the world” (125), and to be in touch with the world is to be in touch with the specific cultural conditions of one’s world.

Prior to the late 20th-century, “bodies” were intellectually and academically relegated to the realm of the biological sciences (Hancock et al.). Since then, “the body has come to be recognized as a contested terrain on which struggles over control and resistance are fought out in contemporary societies” (Hancock, et al. 1), meaning that intellectual interest in bodies has moved beyond the biological and into the social and cultural. Some ways that bodies are invoked today include: the incarceration and police killings of Black and brown bodies; the removal of “illegal” immigrant bodies; refugee bodies being barred entry to the United States; Indigenous bodies protecting their land and water; women’s bodies and the men who decide what can and cannot be done to them; Trump’s grotesque body and Hillary’s sick and ageing body. When we reference bodies in these contexts, we are talking about the way people embody certain politicized identities, and how that shapes their role in society.

The emergence of bodies as a relevant cultural buzzword can be traced back to the proliferation of identity-based movements in post-war America, specifically the Civil Rights and the Women’s Movements. In the wake of these movements, popular culture began to embrace embodied identities, such as Blackness, Womanhood, and Queerness. In response to this shift in popular discourse, the social sciences underwent a “somatic turn”. Although the “founding fathers” of sociology were somewhat interested in the relationship between corporeality and society (i.e. Durkheim’s “homo duplex” and Weber’s “necessary body discipline” (Gillear...
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Higgs 3)), the discipline in general had not dedicated itself to investigating the embodied human experience. With the somatic turn, however, social scientists and cultural critics began to understand bodies as inextricably linked to dynamics of society and culture through concepts such as class, race, and gender. This new way of thinking about bodies resulted in new terminology that will be helpful to our analysis of rituals; namely, “body technique” (Mauss), and “intercorporeality” (Merleau-Ponty).

This “epiphany” – that the relationship between bodies and culture is mediated through embodied social identities – inevitably leads to the question of power and biopolitics. In *Culture and Everyday Life*, David Inglis expands upon cultural theorist Raymond William’s claim, that “culture and forms of social power are intimately bound up with each other” (Inglis 10). In his elaboration, Inglis references Weber, Marx, and Foucault to make the claim that dominant culture is dictated by the ruling class in a tactical power move, and anything outside of the dominant culture is marginalized and discredited. In America, despite regional variations, male heterosexual whiteness is the dominant culture. This doesn’t necessarily mean that white people create this culture; white people frequently steal the cultural work of Black artists and take the credit for it (e.g. popular music).

Thinking about the relationship between embodiment and culture, specifically as they converge in public spaces, prompts a pressing question about consciousness and agency. As Thomas J. Csordas suggests, while the body often is understood as the passive being onto which culture is projected, embodiment theory resituates the body as the agent in the production of culture. However, to what extent are people aware of their own embodiment, and how much agency do they actually have in the process? Where is the line between agency over personal
embodiment and the manipulation of this embodiment by external perception? In other words, people will “read” my embodied identity in a certain way, and can I really have any control over that? The answer to these questions may vary across disciplinary backgrounds; a performance studies scholar may have a different answer than a theologian, or a philosopher, or a cognitive scientist. Prominent gender and performance theorist Judith Butler writes often about this tension, describing the body as simultaneously ‘one’s own’ and yet, in the public sphere, somehow ‘not theirs (O’loughlin 3). I don’t think the question can be (or needs to be), answered within the scope of this project, but we should keep notions of agency and consciousness in the foreground as we shift the discussion towards ritual.

**R I T U A L**

In its most elementary form, rituals exist in every society, both contemporary and historical. That said, ritual is an amorphous concept; the appearance and cultural importance of ritual varies substantially throughout different societies and communities. We cannot reach a universal, perfect definition of ritual, given the wide diversity of behavior, thought, and action that it encompasses. We can, however, outline the fundamental elements of rituals, as well as the primary ways in which we perceive and think about the concept.

An impulsively conjured definition of ritual might be: *a significant action or event that is repeated* – simple, and general. However, given the varied understanding and experience of ritual, the word means something different to every person. For some, the word “ritual” may evoke religious rituals: Sunday Mass, Shabbat dinner. For others, it may evoke “secular” rituals (although
they may feel religious): going to the farmer’s market every Sunday, monthly book club. All of these are appropriate examples of rituals.

Many writers have attempted to craft a singular definition of ritual, and I will include several of these definitions in order to grant us a loose and dynamic understanding of the concept. In his short text, *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction*, Barry Stephenson writes, “broadly conceived, ‘ritual’ is not a particular kind of discrete action, but rather a quality of action potentially available across a spectrum of behavior” (3). To understand this “quality of action,” we can look at a list of the formal characteristics of ritual as outlined by Sally Moore & Barbara Myerhoff in their text *Secular Ritual: Forms and Meaning*: 1) Repetition, 2) Acting, 3) Special behavior/stylization, 3) Order, 4) Evocative presentational style, and 5) Collective dimension. Another way of conceptualizing ritual is as a form of nonverbal communication that is used to convey meaning, and another is that ritual is simply a punctuation of time, allowing us to construct meaning around things that may not, in reality, be meaningful at all (i.e., birthdays). Across all definitions, what is universally agreed upon is that ritual is only made relevant by the existence of a society and culture within which to situate it, evidenced by the fact that many rituals continue to exist despite their lack of pragmatic value, because what they do have is social and cultural value.

A ritual consists of two layers. One is symbolic: What does this ritual represent? What does it say about the culture from which it originates? The other is literal: What are the basic components of this ritual? How does one perform it? What does it do to the body? The latter frames ritual as a corporeal concept, speaking to the way a ritual is physically embodied and performed. The former wants to understand the metaphysics of ritual. Literal vs. symbolic: “if ritual is action, it is also an idea” (Stephenson 3). While the symbolism of ritual is culturally
contingent, the corporeal aspect is not; rituals are always embodied practices. Therefore, we can name embodiedness as a universal element of ritual. Given this, we can say relating to the concept of ritual through its corporeality is accessible to everyone (because we all live embodied lives), while relating to ritual through its symbolism is limiting.

In both academic and colloquial contexts, rituals are often used as reference points to demarcate “us” from “them”. Anthropological writing from the 19th and early 20th century is especially guilty of this maneuver. During this epoch, many white male anthropologists published writing about their experiences living among communities of color, detailing the “exotic” rituals of those communities. The tone employed by these authors is one of condescension and superiority; the writer and observer is the modern spectator, and the “subject” is the pre-modern, less civilized Other. In this way, the concept of ritual is politically loaded, having been associated with irrationality, mindlessness, and primitivism in order to culturally subjugate communities of color. This process of using ritual to mark identities remains prominent today. When non-dominant rituals enter hegemonic spaces, for example, a student wearing a hijab in a predominantly white American public school, the person embodying that ritual is marked as someone who does not belong. Just as ritual is a marker of identity and belonging, it is equally a marker of the Other. In this way, ritual is used by those in power as a tool for constructing hegemony. Crossley expands on this:

It is not merely society’s need which is protected by ritual calls to order but equally the need of specific (often dominant or elite) social groups within society. Agents who experience their hegemony slipping may mobilize rituals as a way of calling those whom they dominate back to order, reestablishing the stability of their rule. (41)
Recognizing the way rituals can be weaponized in order to marginalize certain communities and cultures is vital, especially when we consider that ritualization effects normalization, which means something as terrible as “alternative facts” could become normalized if we’re not vigilant.

The situation with Colin Kaepernick demonstrates a different employment of ritual as power. His choice to continually opt out of and kneel during the pledge of allegiance — one of our nation’s most ubiquitous rituals — provoked outcry in the media, because ritualization is tethered to normalization, and when one subverts normalcy while calling out established systems in power (white supremacy, nationalism), it does not go unnoticed. Especially when it garners an incredible amount of media attention.

As any theologian would likely tell you, place is often central to religious ritual. The significance of a space can be inherent or projected; that is to say, certain spaces (places of worship and other sacred spaces – churches, mosques, synagogues, confessional, the holy Mecca) are endowed with sacredness from the moment of their construction, while others can become significant when a ritual is performed within it. Spaces intended for ritual are constructed in such a way that enables visitors to reach a different state of mind, whether that be transcendence, peacefulness, or jubilance. I’ll come back to this idea when I talk about Las Vegas and Dodger Stadium. Other spaces can be transformed into one of ritual if necessary – think of the way a dining room is transformed for Thanksgiving dinner.

**Performing Rituals: Embodiment & Corporeality**

This paper has thus far discussed corporeality, embodiment, and ritual as separate concepts; now, where do they intersect?
This is my working analysis: when people engage in corporeal rituals (which includes all collective rituals), they embody certain identities and behaviors, whether aware of it or not. This embodiment represents their social engagement with the ritual – i.e., which identity or which behavior guides or frames one’s performance of a ritual. A ritual participant has more agency over their corporeal experience of ritual than they do over their embodied experience of ritual, because their embodiment is more directly subject to the manipulation of other ritual participants’ embodiment. (This is intersubjectivity at work. We’ll define intersubjectivity in the next section).

Perhaps Gilleard and Higgs can help illuminate my thoughts:

Embodiment encompasses all those actions performed by the body or on the body which are inextricably oriented towards the social. It is subject to and made salient by the actions and interpretations of self and others and, in this sense, can be thought of as an “epigenetic” property of the body emerging from the endless engagement of the corporeal with the social. (17)

The performance of collective ritual is inherently social, thus, this performance is, according to Gilleard and Higgs’ definition, a type of embodiment. They go on to say, though, that this embodiment is largely mediated, or “made salient by,” the interpretations and reactions of others.

In his writing, sociologist and ritual theorist Nick Crossley is especially interested in understanding the corporeal effect of ritual than he is in the symbolic implications of it. In his essay, “Ritual, body technique, and (inter)subjectivity,” he analyzes the intersections of corporeality, embodiment, and ritual through Marcel Mauss’ concept of the “body technique”.

A body technique is an embodied know-how, located somewhere at the intersection of embodiment and corporeality; a body technique is a gesture, a movement or behavior that exists within our body and can therefore be performed without necessarily engaging the mind. Typically, body techniques are culturally specific, and learned through socialization. Crossley takes the body
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technique concept and applies it to ritual, arguing that rituals are in fact a kind of body technique, an embodied form of practical reasoning. The more we perform a ritual (ritualization), the better we, and specifically our bodies come to know it. When we enter ritual spaces that are familiar to us, we know how to move within them. If the ritual is new to us, it doesn’t take long before the appropriate behavior is absorbed into the body, and eventually becomes second nature. This sensation, to which most can relate, speaks to the power of ritual to “tap into the deeper corporeal basis of our (inter)subjective lives” (Crossley 49). It is in this way that rituals are body techniques; they both occupy a liminal space between conscious and subconscious.

At what level of consciousness does our embodiment of ritual behavior take place? Rituals occupy a somewhat liminal space in the body and mind, in that they are mindful yet ‘pre-reflective’, as Crossley describes it; they are “operating below the level of conscious volition” (40). Once we’ve adopted a ritual as one of our very own body techniques, we can embody it almost impulsively and instinctively. This does run the risk of being problematic; it is important to always consider and reflect on our actions, especially if they are ritual.

Trying to locate consciousness in ritual embodiment raises the question of whether or not ritualists understand the ‘greater meaning’ of their behavior. Crossley responds to this by thinking of ritual actors as the driving force of the ritual: “Integral to the learning of rituals, qua body techniques, is the habitual “feel” for their appropriateness and the capacity to use them without needing to reflect on doing so.” Though he puts a lot of responsibility in the hands of the ritual actor. He argues that rituals embody the practical wisdom of individuals and societies; similarly, Stephenson describes ritual as “an innate, embodied intelligence and know-how.”
Returning to the previous discussion of power dynamics as they relate to rituals, I want to emphasize that the intersection of corporeality and ritual necessitates an intersectional analysis of the limitations of embodied rituals. How is embodiment shaped by ability, race, gender, or any other politic surrounding the body.

**Harnessing Intersubjectivity**

Nick Crossley and Catherine Bell believe in the power of ritual specifically as a tool for social change, but they believe it can act as this tool in two different ways. As I mentioned earlier, ritual has often been used as a marker of difference; when an unfamiliar ritual enters a collective, hegemonic, cultural space, the impulse is to focus on that difference. Ideally, this difference would be celebrated, but we know the American nation-state far too well to believe that could happen. Instead, ritual difference is feared and targeted. Catherine Bell wants to reframe ritual as a universal phenomenon, one that every culture practices in their own, unique way. Ritualization is a way of making sense of the world around us, the world that we all share. Thus, Bell wants us to understand ritual as the “transcultural language of the human spirit”. This perspective is slowly becoming more accepted, as globalization has catalyzed a “drawn-out, complex, and intrinsically political process of negotiating cultural differences and similarities” (Bell 273).

Bell’s speculation is a bit too utopian for my taste, because it neglects to consider factors of racism, sexism, classism, and all the other forms of bigotry that demonize difference and conceal commonalities. I prefer Crossley’s argument for ritual as a tool for change, which analyzes the more literal, corporeal power of ritual through the lens of intersubjectivity, arguing that “rituals
can effect social transformations... because they effect transformations in our subjective and intersubjective states” (40).

Intersubjectivity builds upon the concept of subjectivity, so it follows that intersubjectivity refers to the way multiple subjectivities interact and affect one another. Intersubjectivity structures collective rituals, in that ritual performers embody what is understood to be the accepted behavior of said ritual, and those around them respond accordingly. As Marjorie O’loughlin summarizes, “bodies perform in culturally visible space – they are therefore ‘read’ by others and themselves in ways that are culturally determined” (3). This dynamic interaction between ritual participants is what perpetuates the ritual.

Intersubjectivity relies on a mutual understanding and acceptance of shared social codes and norms, thus, it is shaped by cultural specificities: “Humans... do not respond automatically to particular stimuli. How they respond to them depends upon the set of ideas and attitudes — the culture — that they have been socialized into by the society and/or the particular social group they were raised within” (Inglis 5). I would push back against this statement, however, and argue that specific responses to stimuli, once socialized into the body, do become semi-automatic, a sort of “innate know-how,” as Stephenson calls it.

How can we harness intersubjective energy and imagine social change? To begin to answer this, we can think about counter-rituals. Counter-rituals are initiated by people in response to pre-existing rituals or systems that practice violence, cruelty, bigotry, or oppression. Un-Thanksgiving Day is an example of a counter-ritual. How can intersubjectivity be leveraged in order to normalize new rituals; to ritualize redistribution of power or rearrangement of power dynamics? I don’t think I can answer this, but perhaps being aware of intersubjectivity and the corporeal resonance of
ritual embodiment will encourage myself and anyone who reads this to engage in ritual behavior with more appreciation, awareness, and engagement in the future.

**PROCESS**

I documented six different rituals for this project: Black Friday; the presidential election; Las Vegas; Thanksgiving; a political rally; and a baseball game. Because these six sites differ considerably in nature, the way I in which I documented them differs as well. This manifests itself in both style and subject matter. While the photographs of the rally, the Dodger Game, Black Friday and Thanksgiving focus more on the organization and behavior of bodies, the photographs from and Las Vegas and Election Day lend equal weight to the bodies as they do the place.

Something to note is that I chose six rituals that are collective as opposed to singular or individual. This was purposeful; not only are collective rituals easier for me to engage with and to capture truthfully, but they are also more directly related to the production of a shared culture. Additionally, I wanted to explore intersubjectivity, which necessitates multiple bodies interacting.

I chose photography and audio as the mediums for this project for several reasons. In all my years at Vassar, I’ve written hundreds of pages, and I’ve read thousands. Throughout my experience in the American Studies program, I’ve engaged with dynamic, multi-dimensional topics, including Guantánamo Bay, Manhattan dancehall culture of the 80s, Beyoncé, the cult of girl power perpetuated by American Girl Magazine, the Superbowl, Ford’s empire in Detroit, the Korean-American immigrant experience as told through Doc Hata, quilts made by Black women from Gee’s Bend, and the co-optation of gay pride by the beast of American capitalism. All of these topics merit multi-disciplinary and multi-media investigations, and yet, I continued to find myself
tucked away in the library, writing essays. This prompted my initial desire to experiment with media.

More importantly, though, I felt that visual and aural text could better engage with the topic of embodied rituals than could written text. Key to ritual effectiveness is the manipulation of subjectivity by sensory stimuli – visuals, sounds, smells. Photography can capture actual moments of bodily and gestural movement and visual stimuli, and audio can capture the dynamic sound that can permeate and even define a ritual or a ritual place. Writing about embodiment is certainly not fruitless, but it does not reach the same level of impact as visual and aural material does.

I also hoped that seeing images of a ritual performance while listening to the sounds of that ritual could manipulate the subjectivity of the viewer in a way that reading about that ritual could not. Perhaps, looking and listening can even prompt the viewer to embody the ritual themself. If I could facilitate this through my installation, I could achieve what I originally intended: to ground culture within the body, rather than abstraction.
LAS VEGAS

You would be hard-pressed to find a hotel in Vegas (or its surrounding suburbs) without a casino on the ground floor, and my family usually stays in a hotel whenever we visit, which means that I’ve been walking through casinos my entire life. The sensory experience of being in a casino is one that I love, despite it being kind of depressing and gross. Stuffy, thick, casino air fills your lungs with smoke and hugs your body tightly. The air is cold – on purpose – it keeps gamblers more awake, more alert. As far as you can see, fluorescent lighting floats up from the horde of slot machines, but somehow, the room is still dark. The soundscape is dynamic: miniature-like video game sound effects; coins getting stuffed into coin slots; slot machines spitting out tickets; slot machine reels getting yanked by hopeful, (sad-looking), old folks. My mom’s mom, troubled by
rheumatoid arthritis in her right hand, pushes through the pain and pulls that reel down again and again, her face decorated with a giant smile. She gives me a $20 and I blow it all in the Easy Money slot machine (and feel really badly about it, but she doesn’t seem to mind). My brother and I look out across the valley of lights, sounds, and smoke, and we spot the bowling alley on the other end of the casino. We head in that direction.

My dad and his four siblings were born and raised in the suburbs of Las Vegas. Of the five children, my dad was the only one to leave, moving to Los Angeles after high school to attend the University of Southern California. When my brother and I were younger, my family went to Las Vegas every year to spend Thanksgiving with my dad’s family; it was usually the only time we spent with them. Whenever I tell people that my dad is from Vegas, the response is usually a mix of confusion and surprise, because nobody is from Vegas, right?

The Vegas I know is vast desert, shopping malls with mega-movie theaters, tract housing, chain-smoking, casinos, teen motherhood, card-playing, and my extended family (which seems to extend exponentially each year). But to most, Vegas exists in the realm of fantasy; it embodies desire, ecstasy, escape, indulgence, greed. magic. And this, of course, is true. If you’ve ever walked down the Strip, this will make sense to you (you could also just look at my photographs). Walking down the Strip is like walking through an amusement park: everything is excessively big, all the lights are excessively bright, every surface is excessively crowded, and you feel a unique combination of excitement and claustrophobia. Vegas is an immersive place, to say the very least.

Although Las Vegas is a city, we can think of it as a ritual. For one, going to Vegas is a ritual for many. I’m sure the reasons people choose to visit Vegas are manifold, and I won’t attempt to outline them all; but from what I know about Las Vegas, I think people visit to escape, to be
entertained, to test their luck, to party, to shop. It’s an endlessly entertaining world; you could visit twice a year for your entire life, and you would not be able to see everything.

My Vegas images are three different locations: the airport, the Strip, and the Venetian Hotel. One of the more striking things about these images is the ubiquitous presence of consumerism and capitalism, as represented by things like advertisements, sculptures, and giant billboards. This haunting capitalist presence intersects with an aesthetic that fluctuates between futurism and nostalgia. Note the Kate Spade, Steve Madden, and Diane von Furstenberg storefronts behind the gondolier in the images of the Venetian Hotel, and the couple sitting with the Pepsi cup, perfectly framed by the romantic architecture. Note the TMZ airport slot machine, the supersized Coca Cola bottle bursting out of the dark background on the Strip, the electronic Chippendale’s billboard next to the Airport tram. At a certain point in Vegas, all you can do is stare. Note the images of my grandmother and brother doing just that.

Vegas has a way of crowding your headspace to the point at which you can’t really think straight – the point at which you don’t think twice about paying $100 for a ride in a fake gondola, down a fake river, which runs through a fake Venice. You don’t think twice when you feed the slot machine another $20, even though the odds of walking away any richer are extremely low. Through the constant overstimulation of the senses, Las Vegas conditions bodies to exist somewhere between passivity and engagement. Of course, the ritual would prefer you to be intrigued and excited enough to continue to patron the casinos and shopping centers. At the same time, though, it wants you to remain in a place of relative disassociation and mesmerization. If you stare at the Venetian ceiling for too long, you’ll realize that the cloudy sky is just painted on.
Thanksgiving, federally instated as a national holiday by President Lincoln in 1863, is a core mythology in the American cultural-political lexicon, and the celebratory dinner, which is the embodied ritual of the holiday, is practiced by most non-Indigenous American families. The ritual of Thanksgiving dinner has been almost entirely isolated from its historical significance – whitewashed and disfigured into a symbolic misremembering of the “peaceful” and mutually beneficial relationship between white European settlers and the Indigenous tribes of the Americas. While most indigenous Americans understand Thanksgiving as a day of mourning the systematic genocide carried out against them by the colonists, non-indigenous Americans
understand the holiday as an excuse to get their family together, reflect on the things for which they are grateful, and overindulge in greasy, delicious food.

As I mentioned, I spent this particular Thanksgiving in Las Vegas at the house of my Dad’s sister, my Aunt, Danna. The Thanksgiving ritual is different from the other five rituals in that, while it is typically a collective ritual, it is also typically private, taking place in the home of family. While this certainly changes the dynamics of visibility, the elements of performance and embodied identity are present nonetheless. The patriarch carves the turkey; the matriarch sets the table, makes everything look nice; the teenaged girl cousins watch the baby cousins while the aunts help the matriarch in the kitchen; the uncles and brothers and sons watch football. That’s how it went at this particular Thanksgiving dinner, anyway.

The Thanksgiving ritual involves an intense pressure to perform family and domesticity. I feel this especially when we spend Thanksgiving with my extended family, because it’s kind of the one chance I get that year to make a good impression, to let my family know that I’m on track to graduate, that I’m happy, and generally doing well. My brother and I fought all the time when we were younger, which embarrasses me to think about, and I feel the need now to prove to my extended family that we’ve both grown up and out of that behavior.

Something I always find funny about Thanksgiving is the disproportionate amount of time we spend cooking and preparing, compared to how rapidly everyone wolfs down their food. This probably doesn’t say much about the embodiment of the ritual – it’s probably just a sign of really good food – but it somehow makes all the preparation feel like a big hurrah for a short-lived moment of glory.
According to Variety, 71.43 million Americans watched coverage of the election on Nov. 8th, 2016, a number comparable to that of the 2008 election of Obama. Presumably, the Americans who watch election night coverage are also those who voted if they could, and it is for that reason that they watch the results – to see how their personal contribution manifests itself on a national scale. We, the people, have the opportunity to participate in and observe democracy at work.

Sometimes, election coverage can drag on for hours, and for most of it, political pundits and newscasters reference complicated political processes – the logistics of which, I would guess, many Americans do not understand. I certainly don’t. If you are someone who knows all about the
American political system, you probably watch election coverage with genuine interest. But if you are someone who only knows the bare bones of polling bureaucracy, the viewing experience is probably more for the sake of the ritual itself. After all, nobody wants to be alone in their room when it’s announced that Donald Trump will be our next president.

Elections are one of many political rituals meant to showcase our shining democracy. In his *Keyword* essay on “Democracy,” Fred Moten takes a rather pessimistic position on such rituals:

> U.S. democratic politics is a mode of crisis management whose most conspicuous and extravagant rituals — elections and the inaugural celebrations and protests that each in its way confirms them — operate at the level of the demonstration. Elections in the United States are meant, finally and above all, to demonstrate that an election took place — a central consideration for structures of authority that depend on the eclipse of democratic content by the ritual reanimation of supposedly democratic forms. (Moten 74)

Moten’s analysis of democratic rituals makes the election-night-viewing-party-ritual feel pretty pathetic. Even more pathetic and sad is looking through the photographs from that night, knowing how the night turned out.

The unfolding of this particular election on Vassar’s campus was, in a word, devastating. Throughout the night, I watched the election in three different places. I started out at my friend Lily’s house with another friend. We projected the computer screen onto the wall of Lily’s living room, switching between MSNBC and CNN coverage while trying to do homework for our classes. We texted our families and video chatted with friends, feeling the weight of the heightened stakes. At this point in the night, anything was possible, but like most other white liberal Americans, we didn’t really believe that Trump had a chance.

I left Lily’s and went to UpC, where the Vassar Democrats were hosting a viewing party (open to all political identities). There were probably 50-60 people there, watching CNN’s coverage projected onto two screens at the front of the room. Given the ethos and political leanings of our
student body, it is safe to assume that Trump supporters were few and far between in this space. I did see a few students whom I know are Republicans. The majority of the students were white. For the few hours I was there, the energy was subdued, if not underlined by a dormant anxiety. Students did homework on their laptops, ate snacks, gazed somewhat mindlessly at the projector screens.

As the outcome of the election started to crystallize, speechlessness pervaded the campus. On the one hand, white liberal students just could not believe what was happening. On the other hand, students of color that I talked to shrugged, like, *are you really that surprised?*, because they had come to expect this from America.

I ended the night at my friend’s house next door, where ten or so of our friends were watching CNN in his tightly packed bedroom. At this point, the outcome was clear, though the election had not yet been called. But we continued to watch. I remember feeling confused by the way liberal pundits and news anchors were talking about what was happening – I wished they would reflect the way I was feeling, dumbfounded. But, being professionals, they kept their cool. Then, Van Jones said something that would later go viral on the internet:

People have talked about a miracle; I’m hearing about a nightmare. It’s hard to be a parent tonight for a lot of us. You tell your kids: don’t be a bully. You tell your kids: don’t be a bigot. You tell your kids: do your homework and be prepared. And then you have this outcome. And you have people putting children to bed tonight and they’re afraid – how do I explain this to my children? I have Muslim friends who are texting me tonight saying, *should I leave the country?* I have families of immigrants that are terrified tonight. This was many things – this was a rebellion against the elite, true. It was a complete reinvention of politics and polls – it’s true. But it was also something else. We’ve talked about everything but race, we’ve talked about income, we’ve talked about class, we’ve talked about region. This was a *whitelash*. This was a whitelash against a changing country. It was a whitelash against a black president, in part. And that’s the part where the pain comes. And Donald Trump has a responsibility tonight to come out and reassure people that he is going to be the president of all the people who he insulted, and offended, and brushed aside.
My Black friends smoked in the other room while my white friends and I sat in silence, watching deflated liberal pundits shift their tone from one of determined hopefulness to one of concession. I had stopped taking photographs once I left the Dems screening, but I don’t think I’ll ever forget that moment.

**DODGERS VS. CUBS**

Let me paint a picture for you: you’ve been sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic for two hours, and you finally reach your exit, Exit 24B onto Hill Street towards Dodger Stadium. The road then slants upwards, and you are driving up the side of a hill. After you pass through the parking attendant kiosks and you’re officially in the parking lot surrounding the stadium, you look out and
realize you can see the Los Angeles skyline. The air is cleaner and cooler up here, but it’s warmer, too, because you’re closer to the sun and the sunlight is not obscured by buildings. Dodger Stadium is a heavenly bubble that sits atop a hill, overlooking downtown Los Angeles. It is surrounded by mountains and palm trees. It’s a dreamy place that seems to float above the city.

The fan base of the LA Dodgers is notoriously fickle, but tonight, the stadium is packed, a uninterrupted sheet of royal blue enveloping the bleachers. The Dodgers are playing the Cubs in Game 4 of the Champion Series; whichever team wins best of six advances on to the World Series.

The characteristics of a Baseball game that activate one’s subjectivity are probably the same as with any other sporting event. Fans get to transcend above the city and escape from reality; they become invisible amidst the crowd, both physically and sonically; they indulge in overpriced beer and questionably sourced hot dogs; and most importantly, they feel a shared sense of belonging and community. Maybe, what makes Baseball games unique is the relaxed nature of it. No disrespect to the sport, but baseball is pretty simple. It’s slow, there aren’t too many rules, and the action in a game is easy to follow. But that’s coming from the perspective of someone who plays and loves to watch soccer.

Sporting events are one of the few contexts in which strangers can become friends, and the apathy of everyday life is replaced by a sheer enthusiasm to talk to your neighbor, high five them after a home run, and invite them to bad-mouth the other team with you. Your love for the Dodgers brings you together. This is the dynamic that enralls me most about the ritual of Baseball, and sporting events in general.

Dodger Games specifically are one of those Los Angeles rituals that brings all kinds of people together – people of varied socio-economic status, race, gender, and age. When it comes to the
Dodgers, though, Latinx Los Angelenos hold it down. In a city defined by its vast size and its isolated neighborhoods, that the ritual of the Dodgers can bring people and facilitate such a natural intimacy is very special.

There are highly performative aspects of baseball though, as one might suspect from “America’s favorite pastime.” Baseball players themselves embody a white masculinity, represented by the chewing tobacco, the ‘rugged’ aesthetic (thick beards and long head hair), and a pretty serious streak of homophobia.

I don’t think this embodiedness necessarily gets transplanted onto the body of the fan, I know I don’t embody any of those things, but there is no question that this culture of masculinity would make many people feel too uncomfortable to partake in the ritual.
On January 20th, 2017, and the days that both preceded and proceeded it, protests took place all over the country (and the world) in response to what many considered unimaginable: the inauguration of Donald Trump. People protested him, but they really were protesting everything he represented: bigotry, racism, xenophobia, bullying, sexual violence, religious discrimination.

In theory, protesting is quintessentially democratic, and therefore quintessentially American; it represents average people expressing their opinions and making their voices heard.
The infectious quality of ritual is especially potent in the protest/march/rally/demonstration ritual. Intersubjectivity is key to understanding the embodiment of the protest ritual, because the entire point is to leverage the power of the collective in order to get people to listen.

Protests, though ritualistic in their characteristics, represent the counter-ritual, in this case, to the ritual of an all-white male administration, or, the ritual of normalizing bigotry and sexual assault. Protests are a great example of the corporeal power of ritual to manipulate subjectivity; the embodiment of the protest ritual activates real feelings of anger, frustration, and disgust. Though these feelings may be real, protestors perform them in order to make a point.

The collective singing and chanting, the feeling of being enclosed in a crowd of bodies, and the shared sense of anger and solidarity all generate a transformative energy, one which is harnessed by those who emerge as leaders, as the loudest. Protest rituals do the imaginative work of embodying a collective “we,” a people who share similar values and will fight for those values. Of course, this analysis is utopian. Take the women’s march: the choice of the pink “pussy hat” as the march’s symbol automatically excludes trans folks from sharing in the identity of womanhood. The march was also dominated by the voices of white feminists. So the spirit of togetherness in itself is definitely not enough to initiate a revolution, but it is powerful and transformative, and can serve as a foundation upon which to imagine a shared future.

This specific rally was organized by “United Against Hate,” an anti-Trump organization founded in the wake of his nomination. Because the rally was meant to call out oppressive systems and ideologies, like white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and xenophobia, there was a heightened sense of identity in the space. I was acutely aware of both my whiteness and my gender. For example, I took photographs of the police lining the periphery, something I felt comfortable doing
because of my whiteness. I was also aware of who around me would be more directly targeted by Trump’s violence.

The images of the rally focus more on bodies and how they interact both with the space and each other. The protest took place on the day of the inauguration, in front of Los Angeles City Hall. A giant bus, outfitted with a stage and powerful PA system, was parked in front of City Hall. Protestors gathered in the street, facing the bus, watching and listening to the speakers deliver speeches from atop the bus. Symbolic as the location was, *place* was not necessarily integral to the ritual - the people were.
I did not execute my Black Friday plans the way I had imagined. I had envisioned myself outside of Wal-Mart or Best Buy before the stores opened Friday morning, interviewing people and taking photos. As I mentioned, I was with my family in Las Vegas at the time. After we finished eating Thanksgiving dinner at around 4:00, my Uncle Daron pulled out that day’s newspaper, the last few pages of which were plastered with Black Friday advertisements. His son Jake, and Jake’s wife Ashley were planning on hitting the mall after dinner, as the deals apparently started that evening and not, as I previously believed, on Black Friday itself. Jake and Ashley have two young kids, and this year, the toy their kids needed to have (as did all other kids) was the Hatchimal, a furry stuffed animal that hatches from the egg in which it is sold. One Hatchimal costs $60, which I
would imagine is very expensive for a child’s toy. Ashley explained the protocol to me: when you enter a Wal-Mart or Target, you are given special tickets which represent your claim to a Hatchimal, and no one person could buy more than four Hatchimals in one purchase. Ashley was planning to buy four, two for her kids and two for her girlfriend who had asked her for a favor.

On our way home from dinner, I convinced my family to stop at the Best Buy near our hotel. It was around 7:00pm, and we had already missed the rush; the sales had officially begun at 5:00pm. There were still a lot of people in Best Buy, though, but many of the shelves were emptied.

Though retailers have marketed the day proceeding Thanksgiving as the start of the holiday shopping season since the late 19th century, the name “Black Friday” was not officially adopted until the 1960s. Since then, Black Friday has grown into a highly sensationalized ritual, associated with the frenzied shoppers who camp outside big name retailers, sometimes for days, and rush inside as soon as the doors open, make a beeline for the best deals.

Maria Bamford’s manic Target lady character in the series of Black Friday Target commercials embodies the energy of the holiday, which is interesting, because Bamford is public about her struggles with mental illness, specifically bipolar disorder. Every year, major retailers spend loads of money on commercials with high-profile celebrities (see my Black Friday soundscape, which features the audio from Macy’s 2015 Black Friday commercial), and news channels send reporters to the biggest superstores to interview people waiting out in the cold.

Dynamics of class and race are integral to an appropriate reading of the ritual of Black Friday. Many are quick to judge the ritual, myself included. My mother, who has anxiety in crowds and deals with intense claustrophobia, would never put herself through a morning of shopping on
Black Friday. However, my mother is fortunate enough to not have to rely on discounts to purchase things like Televisions and household appliances. Most of those “crazy consumers” that camp outside of Best Buy are low-income people of color. The public eye demonizes this group of people for succumbing to the seduction of the capitalist holiday, ignoring how capitalism may have led them to occupy that position in the first place.

In his article, “Black Friday: Crowdsourcing Communities at Risk,” Kenneth Rogers revisits the tragic death of Jdimytai Damour, a Wal-Mart employee who was stampeded by Black Friday shoppers in 2008. Rogers begins his piece by establishing the role of the Black Friday ritual within the American imagination, questioning its ethical positionality:

Yet both the popular and journalistic conversations about Black Friday rarely deviate from a spendthrift battle cry or scratch beneath the superficial caricature of consumer bliss to question directly the systemic linkages between social, cultural, and economic factors that make the phenomenon of Black Friday possible, factors that, if followed, run deep into the fissures, contradictions, and dangers inherent in a global postindustrial capitalism increasingly dependent on and threatened by deepening systemic risk. (Rogers 172)

Rogers alludes here to the way normalization is a product of ritualization; the annual frenzy of Black Friday has become so normalized that it rarely is questioned.

Specifically looking at the death of Jdimytai Damour at the Green Acres Shopping Plaza Wal-Mart in Valley Stream, New York, Rogers explains how the financial crisis of 2008 frames the situation in a much more sinister light than what one may initially think. Because low-income Black and Latino communities were specifically targeted by the predatory lending practices that led to the financial crisis, these very communities were hit the hardest when the housing bubble burst. Consider this, and then consider that the vast majority of the Black Friday shoppers outside Wal-Mart on that morning were Black. Then, as Rogers does, consider the way this crowd was (and the way most Black Friday shoppers still are), represented in the news as crazed, greedy, hungry
consumers, stripped of their own humanity. Referring specifically to the way media depicted the crowd that killed Jdimytai Damour, Rogers writes:

The crowd, personified as a variety of types, was by all accounts identified as the singular source of an enigmatic motivation, an entity that must carry the full burden of culpability... Others painted portraits of the crowd as grotesque, as a drunken devolution of human civility to its basest and most primal animal instincts. (Rogers 174)

In this quote, Rogers beautifully analyzes the embodiedness of the Black Friday ritual. He details how the crowd of shoppers becomes morphed into one giant body, characterized by the same traits, losing their individual identities. On a micro level, though the shoppers embody relational identities; most shoppers aren’t there just for themselves. They’re there to get toys for their kids, Christmas presents for the family members and their significant others.

Though Rogers does not go into detail about this, I would say that the salespeople become one body during this ritual, too. The way Black Friday is embodied, salespeople represent the corporation (Best Buy, Target, Wal-Mart), acting as the gatekeepers of the deals, the peacemakers, and the referees, whose primary job is to maintain the safety and sanity of the wild crowd. They have to stick together in order to perform damage control while still satisfying their customers.

**CONCLUSION**

Studying the role of ritual is useful in analyzing any society or community, but it is especially so when studying America. The process of ritual-making is a process of producing culture and meaning; the ritual performance is a performance of meaning, identity, and belonging. If American Studies has taught me anything, it is that the process of making meaning in America is, and always has been, fraught. Because of the rootlessness of all non-Indigenous Americans, we (white America) have constructed mythologies to dominate our national identity and imagination;
we have both stolen from and defined ourselves in opposition to non-white cultures in order to construct a national identity; we have rewritten history. You could even say that these are the most American rituals that have been discussed so far.

I hope that anyone who reads this essay will also look through the photographs and accompanying audio (the links to which can be found on the following page). Though a few images were included in this text, I chose not to engage in visual analysis of my images, in part because written analysis of visual culture is not my strong suit. Rather, I tried to outline theoretical frameworks that I hope will create a more enriching experience with the installation. I also tried to ground my analysis of ritual embodiment within my own self, relating each of my chosen rituals to my embodied experience of them.
**M E D I A**

Link to website, containing thesis photographs. Please note that the soundscape files are embedded at the top of each photo stream; in order to simulate the installation experience as closely as possible, play the soundscape as you scroll through the images.

http://cargocollective.com/embodyingamericanrituals

Link to Soundcloud page, containing ritual soundscapes (same files as from the previous website, just easier to navigate if you only wish to listen).

https://soundcloud.com/embodyingamericanrituals
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