

Staging an Insurrection: The Application of Theatre and Memory on January 6th

by

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A dissertation accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Political Science

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Spring 2024

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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In this dissertation, I apply the concepts of theatricality and cultural memory to the January 6th insurrection. I suggest that read together, theatricality and cultural memory tell a compelling story about the motivations and impacts of the January 6th insurrection, more than traditional partisanship analyses. I analyze three instances of memory building during and after the insurrection: the memorialization of Ashli Babbitt and the state's commemoration of Lt. Byrd's actions defending the Capitol; the history and use of American flags in American culture and their deployment during the insurrection; and finally, the use of ceremony by the state during Biden's inauguration. These three cases highlight the convergences of cultural memory creation by the insurrectionists and by the state, both of which believe themselves to be the legitimate inheritor of America's cultural memory and legacies. This dissertation includes previously published materials.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation chair, Alison Gash, without whom this dissertation would not have been possible. From distracting toddlers, to providing feedback (and snacks), to making sure Romy and I had housing, there would be no dissertation or graduation without you. To Lucy Ware McGuffey, without whom I would have never applied to graduate programs: thank you for always lending me your books in faith that I would return them promptly. To Ariel Yabek: I simply would not be here without you. Your enduring support and friendship has been a light over these tumultuous years. To my fellow graduate students and cohorts at the University of Oregon: thank you for the solidarity during the many late nights and months spent studying for comps and agonizing over seminars. You are the humans that offered me coffee when I needed it, housing when I was without, and childcare when I had none: graduate school is impossible without this community. I would also like to thank the faculty at the University of Oregon that helped me along the way: Priscilla Yamin, Anita Chari, Faith Barter, Alai Santos-Reyes, Sharon Luk, and Joe Lowndes. Also my cats: Thomas O'Malley and Papillion, The Very Fluffy Kitty. To my beloved tiny human of chaos, creativity, and cuddles: Mama would not be here without you.

For Romy Sol, who deleted all my notes. ☺

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>CH. 1: The Necessity of Theatricality in Cultural Memory and Law</i>	9
Introduction	9
From Family to University: Informing a Dissertation	14
Keeping America Good	19
Literature Review: Collective/Cultural Memory	22
Literature Review: Law and Memory	29
Case Selection	33
Outline of the Dissertation	34
<i>CH. 2: The Storm Coming—Deploying the Memory of Ashli Babbitt</i>	36
Introduction	36
Methods.....	38
Data	40
Returning to Cultural Memory: Art in the Capitol.....	44
“The Storm Will Come. Stay Out of its Way”: Trump Inciting January 6 th	45
Ellipse Rally—January 6th, 2021	47
“Whose house? OUR HOUSE!”: Inside the Capitol Building	51
“Who Killed Ashli Babbitt?”: Memorializing the Insurrection.....	57
Lt. Michael Byrd—a Hero?	62
Reciprocity: Linking the legacies	64
Conclusion.....	67
<i>CH. 3: Flying the Coup—American Flag Apparel and the January 6th Insurrection</i>	70
Introduction	70
Political Flag Culture	73
The History of Flags: From Ancient Nations to the American Colonies.....	75
Political Flag Culture in Early America	78
History of the Flag as Apparel	81
White-Supremacy, Trump, and the Flag.....	85
“It’s 1776, baby!”: Re-Founding America on January 6 th	86
Alternative-Histories.....	89
Conclusion.....	91
<i>CH. 4: Pomp and Circumstance—Building the Inaugural Tradition</i>	92
Introduction	92

Literature Review: American Cultural Memory and the Presidency.....	94
Scaffolding America’s Heroes: The History of the Inaugural Ceremony.....	100
Comparing Inaugurations: Obama’s First Inauguration	103
Comparing Inaugurations: Trump	108
Comparing Inauguration: Biden	113
Ceremonial Legitimacy: Anchoring the Present in the Past.....	117
<i>CH. 5: Speaking of Failures and Conclusions</i>	<i>122</i>
Introduction	122
The Failure of American Cultural Memory	122
<i>References Cited</i>	<i>127</i>
CH. 1	127
CH. 2	130
CH. 3	134
CH. 4:	135
CH. 5:	138

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1. CONTENT SOURCES ARCHIVED BY R/DATAHOARDERS. (CHAPMAN 2021).....	42
FIGURE 2. SOCIAL MEDIA POST SHOWING THREE SEPARATE CARAVAN ROUTES TO D.C. FOR 1/6/21. (AKANSOMI 2021c).	47
FIGURE 3. MAN POSING WITH STATUE OF GERALD FORD, WITH TRUMP HAT AND FLAG. MISCELLANEOUS ARCHIVES, DRIVE_DOWNLOAD..	
.....	54
FIGURE 4. ASHLI BABBITT FLAG DESIGN (ADL.ORG)	59
FIGURE 5. SHIRT READING "ASHLI BABBITT MURDERED BY CAPITOL POLICE JANUARY 6TH 2021" SPOTTED DURING PUBLIC HEARINGS	
(RUPAR 2023).	59
FIGURE 6. MAN HOLDING A CONFEDERATE FLAG IN THE CAPITOL. MISCELLANEOUS ARCHIVES, DRIVE_DOWNLOAD.	68
FIGURE 7. SNAPCHAT FROM JANUARY 6TH SHOWING INSURRECTIONISTS ON SCAFFOLDING IN AMERICAN FLAG GEAR. SNAPCHAT, STORIES,	
W7_EDIX.....	71
FIGURE 8. THREE PERCENTER FLAG AND AMERICAN FLAGS WITH INSURRECTIONISTS ON THEIR PHONES. CC IMAGE CURTESY OF BRETT	
DAVIS ON FLICKR.	89
FIGURE 9. PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE INAUGURAL CEREMONY OF JAMES BUCHANAN ON THE EAST PORTICO OF THE CAPITOL BUILDING ON	
MARCH 4TH, 1857. PHOTOGRAPH BY MONTGOMERY MEIGS, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.	101
FIGURE 10. LEFT: TRUMP 2017 UNCROPPED PHOTOGRAPH OF INAUGURATION CROWD. RIGHT: OBAMA 2009 INAUGURATION CROWD.	
SWAIN 2018.....	104
FIGURE 11. STRAIGHT VIEW OF REAGAN'S FIRST INAUGURATION IN 1981. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL.	107
FIGURE 12. FRONT VIEW OF OBAMA'S 2009 INAUGURATION CEREMONY. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL.	108
FIGURE 13. A WIDE SHOT OF THE AFTERMATH TRUMP'S INAUGURATION CEREMONY FROM BEHIND. TRUMP 23 JANUARY 2017, TWITTER.	
.....	110
FIGURE 14. STRAIGHT SHOT OF BIDEN'S INAUGURATION. JCIC 59TH INAUGURAL CEREMONIES.....	113

CH. 1: The Necessity of Theatricality in Cultural Memory and Law

*I think somebody is burning down my country
I think somebody is burning out my heart
I think somebody has smoked me out and gassed my mouth
But if you believe in money, then you believe in God
I think somebody is burning this place I built
But if you believe in Vegas, then you believe in God*
Mission Drift by THE TEAM

*Do not believe that you alone can be right.
The man who thinks that, the man who maintains
that only he has the power to reason correctly,
the gift to speak, the soul - a man like that,
when you know him, turns out empty.*
Antigone, Sophocles

Introduction

It was over 80 years ago that Virginia Woolf penned the words, “the public and the private worlds are inseparably connected... the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other” (1938, 130). For many feminist scholars, the idea that politics is affected by and affects the home is nothing new. This is summed up in the feminist rallying cry: “The personal is political.” Psychologist Judith Herman (1992), in her groundbreaking study of the political nature of trauma from war to domestic violence, adds “It is now apparent also that the traumas of one are the traumas of the other” (32).

In the aftermath of Trump’s presidency, Black Lives Matter, and the COVID-19 Pandemic, I’ve met more and more millennials and Gen-Zers who are estranged from their conservative or Republican parents—myself included. While politics is only a part of the multitude of complicated reasons people choose to cut ties, the events of the past several years have pushed politics into the home in ways unmatched by prior generations. The schisms between family members could no longer be ignored and became threats to the very

relationships and stability of the family unit (Warner et al 2020; Afifi et al 2020; Chen and Rohla 2018; Iyengar et al 2018; Mayer et al 2023). Yet, as Woolf (1938) counsels, “For such will be our ruin if you, in the immensity of your public abstractions forget the private figure, or if we in the intensity of our private emotions forget the public world” (130). With the advent of social media, internet, phones, and tvs—all of which carry our political communication to us—it seems ruin may have already come from the merger of worlds and estrangement is the last-ditch effort—for some of us—to create stability and separation, aligning the personal and political to do less personal harm.

In August of 2017, a few weeks before I moved to Oregon to begin graduate school, white nationalists marched in Charlottesville holding tiki torches to protest the removal of Confederate monuments. They chanted “you will not replace us” and spoke of “blood and soil.” Vice reporter, Elle Reeve, documented the “Unite the Right” rally and interviewed attending white supremacists. She then released the clips online.¹

The following day was a work day for my parents and I had the rare moment alone in the house. I put the documentary on the TV in the living room to watch. As the footage from Charlottesville played, I couldn’t sit down. I stood fascinated, not struck by glory or beauty, but the horror and fear of this moment. The anger, the fire, the faces. I stayed frozen for the better part of an hour, as if tearing my eyes away would shear my retinas in two. When I heard the familiar sound of the garage door, I made no move to turn off the tv. Usually my mother came home before my father so I assumed it would be her footsteps I’d hear come in the door.

¹ Charlottesville: Race and Terror—Vice News Tonight on HBO. https://video.vice.com/en_us/video/charlottesville-race-and-terror-vice-news-tonight-on-hbo/59921b1d2f8d32d808bddfbc

It wasn't. I heard my father's heavier steps and his usual pause to drop his bags, keys, and empty his pockets in the closet before stepping fully inside. When my father walked in the room, chipper and friendly, I knew there was no stopping what was about to happen. I was still standing two feet away from the television, riot sounds echoing throughout the house. While I knew seeing more of the footage would just make things worse, I also knew scattering to turn it off would make me look guilty, like I was hiding something, and he'd demand to see it anyway. A part of me wanted my father to see the ugliness spread out on his prized 70-inch screen. I wanted him to feel the disgust that I did and hoped he would agree with me. In some small way, I was offering us, bound together by pain and years of searching for love in one another, a chance to salvage some small part of our relationship before I left for Oregon. It was a daughter's optimism or perhaps a child's naivete.

It was a bad fight. My father and I often had run-ins like this: angry conversations that would find me no matter what I did or what I said. My father would seek me out no matter where I was or what I was doing and start arguments, pinning his anger at the liberals, young activists, or other countries on me. I became the representation and defender of all the things he believed were unjust, immoral, or illegal—regardless of whether or not I knew these people, their arguments, or held their beliefs myself. The confrontations almost always began with my father, in earnest, asking what I thought and seeking my intellectualized answers, but even with good intentions, the best of trains can still crash off the rails and burn.

When he saw the Vice documentary playing, he asked me what I thought about Charlottesville. I refused to say, grinning uncomfortably to acknowledge the trap. He pressed on and said, "no really, I really want to know" as if he were just a friend asking my opinion about

the new paint on the walls. I remember I repeated several times, “I don’t want to talk about this right now.” But he wouldn’t back down, so I responded, giving a little. I’d bravely step forward into battle, and then, overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of what I was facing, try to retreat. I again repeated “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. This conversation needs to be over.” Once these conversations began, however, there was rarely anything I could do to stop them. The trap was triggered the second he walked in the door.

As we continued to parry, my father slipped down every slippery slope offered to him. He became less and less bound to facts and repeated phrases from the likes of FOX News and Rush Limbaugh. He stated proudly that America was the first country to get rid of slavery, that global warming was a hoax, and referred often to the “liberal agenda.” He stated blatant falsities and attacked my age, intellect, gender, and morality. He was proud of the white men in Charlottesville for defending their history and their rights and seemed sad to have missed out. As the conversation unraveled, I repeated “this conversation is over. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” A low hum to my voice like simmering water.

I retreated to the bathroom, but he followed me in and ignored my pleas to get out. Bladder still full, I stepped out of the restroom into the hallway, now only a few inches away from my father. I looked at his chest instead of his face and yelled. Up to this point in my life, my parents constantly had to push to get me to speak loud enough to hear. I’d never yelled at anyone. But what can a trapped beast do but snarl and attack? I followed my father’s example and insulted his intellect. I said that he just needed to think for himself for once, instead of believing everything some jackass talk radio host said. I begged him to see what he was doing

beyond the fun little “political debates” we had. I begged him to see what he was doing to me and our relationship and to see the cost of politics on our family.

He kept talking at me so I walked back to the living room to the couch where my laptop and water bottle were piled haphazardly. I sat down and started to cry. I felt like I would never get out and this moment would never stop. Seeing my tears, my father laughed and turned his voice to that of a childish bully. Towering over me, he taunted, “awwww, did the wittle liberal get her feelings hurt? Is the wittle wiberall cwying?” This was not unlike Trump’s own tone when, in 2016, he made fun of a news anchor for allegedly crying when she found out he won the election.

I remember in the midst of my father’s laugh consciously choosing anger. I grabbed my half-full, 1-liter water bottle and chucked it as hard as I could onto the floor and underneath the loveseat to the left of me. I aimed the trajectory underneath the couch on purpose so it wouldn’t ricochet and damage the walls or hit one of the nearby dogs. It only stopped him for half a second.

Not long after the bottle landed, my mother walked in the door, arms too full of groceries. She immediately knew what was going on, but instead of intervening or even saying, “hi,” she turned and went back out to her car to get more groceries. Most of the time, the only way to end my father’s “conversations” with me was to get my mother involved. She would get so upset about the discord between us that my father would eventually stop talking. Seeing her walk in the door, he quickly threw out to an “agree-to-disagree” ceasefire and left to exercise in the gym. I walked out to the garage where my mother was slowly collecting more bags, biding her time so she wouldn’t have to witness my father and I in our newest cycle of pain. My eyes

burned and tears slipped out. My throat closed around the bitter pill of grief. “Are you okay?” my mother asked tentatively. I shook my head, got in my car, and drove away. Two weeks later, I moved halfway across the country. Four years later, I would establish a permanent estrangement.

From Family to University: Informing a Dissertation

While my family already had a foundation built on sand, swamp goo, and gasoline, Trump’s election brought the matches. My father always had a reverence for America, but Trump spoke to the parts of my father that he, most of the time, kept hidden under Christian decorum and the rest of my family followed suit. Whenever there was a particularly egregious encounter between my father and I, news inevitably spread through the whole family. However, no matter how many times I told my tale, my account never stuck. The story that everyone believed was that my father was a good man and that I was the bad child—I yelled and threw a water bottle. Even when my father made me cry, laughed at me, stalked me through my own house like a predator, and continually told me I was too young, female, and stupid to be in politics, he was still the good father. I began to question how he could still be “good” and do the things I witnessed.

I began to question the stories my family told and passed down through generations, realizing that they weren’t fact-based retellings of the past, but rather embellished myths that upheld the underpinning beliefs of our families existence: that god is good, the father is good, and the world and the child are sinful.

When the insurrection happened on January 6th, I saw men and women much like my parents violently attacking Capitol Police, despite their belief in “Back the Blue.” I saw people

smashing in windows and doors while they criticized anyone else's use of violence. I heard people threaten to hang the Vice President or rape Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, even though they preached "love thy neighbor" on Sundays. This dissertation emanated from these paradoxes: how can people who think of themselves as "good" and who think that America is "good," destroy their own Capitol building? How did the delusion get this far?

America's foundation rests on genocide, slavery, revolution, and war, and much like Trump's disastrous influence on my toxic family, his political ascension inflamed these histories and pushed on the pre-existing precarities in American culture and politics. People ranging from early MAGA fanatics, experienced conspiracy theorists, to Obama-voting Democrats, "non-political" Christians and first-time voters were all mobilized by Trump and his rhetoric. As he reminisced on the "good times" like Reagan, the early colonial period, and the American revolution, he crafted his own version of American cultural memory that unified a sector of the American people that cannot be understood in traditional partisan language.

The study of parties has been a bedrock of political science as a discipline and many have theorized about their behavior (See Key 1955; Schattschneider 1960, and Aldrich 1995). Some scholars argue that Trump's victory in the 2016 election was due more to the fact that his opponent was Hillary Clinton than his own political prowess and that the "intense dislike for [Clinton] enable[d] Trump to consolidate support among Republican identifiers and Republican-leaning independents despite many of these voters' reservations about his candidacy," (Abramowitz 2018, xiii). Mason et al (2021) also argue that parties have become social identities that are increasingly aligned along racial and religious lines and that growing out-group animosity contributed to the rise of Trump and his eventual win. Analyses about the

nature of parties and their influence on our political system abound (see Duverger 1983; Green et al 2004; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Hetherington 2009). However, these analyses cannot account for a large segment of voters who did not participate in parties prior to the 2016 election, Obama-voters-turned-Trump, and the development of the community around Trump that eschews party involvement entirely. In order to understand Trump's mnemonical power and how it unfolded on January 6th, we need to look at the myths and tales that have been passed down to this generation of alt-right believers and how they use those beliefs to orient their relationships to the world, to each other, and to their government. The January 6th insurrection is a question not of partisanship, but of cultural memory and how those memories are politicized.

January 6th, 2021, is one of the most contentious events in contemporary American cultural memory. For some, it represents a gross upheaval and betrayal of our governing institutions by a fascist wannabe king. For others, it is the realization of a dream and the beginning of the fight to reclaim America and its institutions from the elite. The very understanding of what is "American" is bifurcated into opposing factions. Both the insurrectionists (including Trump) and the institutional members and politicians behind the January 6th investigations were inspired by the framers of the constitution and the 1776 revolution. Both bound their political and cultural successes to the "original" inspirations and ideals of America. This paradoxical feat of two opposing groups claiming the same histories as their own speaks to the fluidity of cultural memory and its complicated relationship with history, facts, and contemporary politics.

There are several signposts in American cultural memory that are taught to most everyone. These are institutionalized via federal and state holidays, school curriculums, memorials, and museums. Children learn songs and rhymes about the history of America, from the founding fathers and the revolution, to westward expansion, to the winning of the World Wars, and maybe some contemporary history if you're lucky. Some states may teach about the Civil Rights Movement, but others may not. There is a reason that school textbooks have become such a topic of debate in state and local legislatures. As Zerubavel (1995) writes, "Collective memory continuously negotiates between available historical records and current social and political agendas" (5). Politicians and parents alike recognize that within these books holds an important element of history and cultural memory. For those who find their perspectives and histories often suppressed (Black history, immigrant and BIPOC stories, LGBTQ+ history, etc.), the fight to be a part of the education and cultural memory of young Americans is akin to fighting for their ability to be acknowledged as part of their own history. Zerubavel continues, "in the process of referring back to these [historical] records, [collective memory] shifts its interpretation, selectively emphasizing, suppressing, and elaborating different elements of that record" (5). Historical facts can only be disregarded to an extent ("alternative facts" be damned) and their relationship to the broader cultural memory speaks to the politics of the mythologization of history and the importance of understanding how this cultural memory can affect the very institutions that govern our lives.

Law itself can act as an archive of cultural memory and builds the very scaffolding that supports American cultural memory. However, many of the scholarly interventions into law and cultural memory engage in literary criticism or a critique of the narrativization of history

without engaging in the larger performative aspects of cultural memory. January 6th highlights the negotiations of cultural memory in the theatricality of the moment. I argue that theatricality is a key element in the development and negotiation of history and memory in the American context and that the failures of January 6th proffer a fertile investigative ground in which to unpack the mnemonical soil of American culture. Theatricality is a concept similar to performativity and both terms have been used to denote a variety of ideas, some connected to theatre as an art form, but many with no ties at all. Performativity can mean opposing things as well. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) refers to performativity as an *outward*-oriented concept when she refers to “the extroversion of the actor,” but she also refers to performativity as an *inward*-oriented concept when she refers to “the introversion of the signifier” (7). McKenzie (2001) also refers to this as the paradox between “subversive and normative valences of performativity” (15). This is informed by the Butlerian school of performativity which understands performance as a reiteration of norms (1993). Discussing performativity and gender roles, Butler (1993) writes, “performance as a bounded ‘act’ is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists of a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer...further, what is ‘performed’ works to conceal, if not disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable,” (234). There are many elements of overlap between the concepts of theatricality and performativity and many scholars define and redefine the concepts for themselves and their work. For this project, I utilize the term “theatricality” from Samuel Weber’s (2004) book, *Theatricality as Medium*.

Weber utilizes the concept of theatricality to analyze the reader’s desire for completion and closure as desires for mastery and detachment, which result in unfulfilled wish-fulfilment,

frustration, and conflict. Theatricality as a medium, however, can provide alternate avenues of ending, where the separation in theatricality allows for multiplicitous *ways* of being. In his discussion of theatricality in America's founding texts and theatre in democracy, Weber writes, "this is turn calls into question the traditional concept of theater itself. It can no longer be taken for granted as a medium of literary representation, in which *spectators* are simultaneously and perhaps above all *readers*. Rather, in the theater of democracy, these *spectators* have literally become the *audience*. Referencing Tocqueville's observations on America, Weber continues:

[Tocqueville's] designation is more precise: it suggests, first, that the "emotions" appealed to and touched by theater are felt by the "audience" to be as intimate and as internal as a "heart;" and second, it implies that the most intimate, "heartfelt" feeling draws its force from the way it confirms the sense of being *alive*. Such a sense of being enlivened can, but need not, entail an experience of living-on, surviving, and this is surely one of the aspects that makes the position of the spectator so seductively powerful in individualist democracies generally and in the United States in particular. (2007, 36)

The theatricality of America's governing institutions and practices, which stem from the co-development of theatre and law in western European states, is unique by way of its deployment by the citizenry. I discuss more of Weber's theorization of theatre as method in later chapters and while it is not the aim of this dissertation to continue the development of this concept, it is an important overarching framework that informs how I approach the data involved in this project and how I understand cultural memory as necessarily theatrical.

In this chapter, I introduce the concept of cultural memory and discuss different bodies of scholarly literature and debates within the subfield of memory studies. This is followed by an introduction to law and cultural memory. Finally, I outline the content of the remaining chapters.

Keeping America Good

My family is but a symptom of a deeper cultural imperative to keep the father good. In this case, my entire family rallied around my father and continually blamed me for inciting his episodes. Beyond this, however, for my father, I represented the very possibility that America as he understood it—the America that compelled him to join the army and to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan—was falling apart. The possibility that America itself could be *bad* destabilized too much of my father’s world. And thus, I became everything bad in America and in our family.

While some political scientists may attempt to classify my family as a case of partisanship taken to the extreme (see Chen and Rohla 2018), my framework allows for a recognition of the cultural forces that take place both within and outside of what we have traditionally called “the political.” By applying theatricality and cultural memory together to the problem of politics, January 6th—and my family—becomes a much more sensical pieces in a larger cultural endeavor to make sense of the larger world and our place in it.

Fairbairn (1952) famously writes, “It is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to be a saint in a world ruled by the Devil,” (66-7). If the world itself is good and the individual is bad, there is a sense of stability in the outer world and a sense of control over oneself. It’s even better if someone *else* is the bad person. “If they/I just stop being bad, then these bad things will stop happening to them/me.” There is a chance at redemption or that things could get better for the individual. While Fairbairn writes about the impact of relational trauma in early childhood, John J. McNeill, a queer theologian, applies this same logic to the relationship Christian believers have with the theology and religiosity surrounding their god. McNeill (1996) writes:

Just as the faithful will do everything in their power to keep their image of God good and take responsibility for all evil onto themselves, so a child will do everything to keep

mother good and transfer all the badness onto him- or herself. If the child's mother is evil and abuses the child, the child will think: I must be terrible to make mother act like this! ...if the child truly saw his or her mother as evil, the only choice would be to withdraw from reality altogether through a psychotic breakdown. Keeping mother good is the only way the child has of staying in touch with reality. While Keeping-Mother-Good syndrome may be a healthy adaption for a child with abusive parents, in later life it has a tendency to become a disastrous kind of masochism. (60)

American political culture comes by its delusions naturally, having roots in Christianity and the history of colonization and genocide. What has happened in recent years is a more obvious rift in the cultural memories and tales of our shared past and our historical heroes—like the founding fathers, confederate generals, or Christopher Columbus. There has been a shift where younger generations have learned more about the histories of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy in this country and have rejected the glossed over textbooks and state-mandated commemorations of these memories. In doing so, they are building new cultural memories for America—memories that challenge the idea of America's inherent goodness and the thesis of American Exceptionalism (see Tocqueville 1835; Myrdal 1944; Lipset 1963; Hartz 1955; Rogin 1988; Rogers 1993; Romney 2010; Cheney 2015).

Not everyone is on board with this new reckoning, however (my father included). Conservative politicians have framed this newer challenge to American cultural memory as an attack on the very foundations of America and have responded by banning books that discuss the enslavement of Black people and its repercussions, the genocide of indigenous peoples, or anything deemed "critical race theory," or part of the "woke" agenda. Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis has been extremely forward in his attacks on anything that criticizes America's past or proffers alternate experiences of "mainstream" history. Thus far he has banned AP's course on

African American Studies, discussions of race and sexuality in schools, and moved to stop funding for universities with diversity, equity, and inclusion programs (Izaguirre 2023).

For those who see the discussion and recognition of oppression as itself oppressive, changing the cultural memory of America becomes a massive threat to the stability of their internal and external worlds. The memories of the past become hyper-important indications of the future. For many conservatives, America's past must remain good as it defines their relationship and obligations to the state. For many liberal politicians, America's *past* can be littered with historical wrongs and errors, but America itself must still remain good or on "the right side of history." This imperative entwines itself with theology, history, our institutions, and culture, and its cleavages result in the excesses of President Trump, the continued strength of right-wing politicians, and the ineptitude of liberal politicians to bring meaningful change.

Literature Review: Collective/Cultural Memory

First introduced by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, the term "collective memory" defines a social framework in which individuals can locate themselves and participate in the act of recollection (1992, 38). While many scholars before Halbwachs were interested in the study of memory, Halbwachs utilized Durkheim's sociological method and Berger's problematization of memory and the experience of time to build a largescale social framework of memory that created an abundance of scholarship based on (or critiquing) its conclusions. Halbwachs argues that memory is more than a philosophical inquiry into the ways of the mind: it is a study of society and social understanding. For Halbwachs, society is what shapes and informs memory. He states, "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories," (1992, 38). By participating in society, the

individual can share relevant experiences in order to integrate their own individual memories into the larger social framework. For Halbwachs, even individual, autobiographical memory takes place within the realm of the social. He states:

There is no point in seeking where they [memories] are preserved in my brain or in some nook of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled to me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any time give me the means to reconstruct them, upon condition, to be sure, that I turn toward them and adopt, at least for the moment, their way of thinking... It is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection. (1992, 38)

Memories are only given meaning through participation in society. Collective memory is a social process through which individuals can understand the larger context in which their experiences occur. Halbwachs differentiates history as the *inactive* past, whereas memory is the active past that shapes current identities. In his later work surveying the cultural memory and myths surround Christ and Christianity, Halbwachs (1941) concludes that the construction of collective memory corresponds to the present organizational and transformational needs of society.

As groundbreaking as Halbwachs theories of collective memory were at their publication, his theories have since come under much critique, particularly for its presentism and ahistoricism (Armstrong and Crag 2006; Gensburger 2016; Narvaez 2006; Olick 2007). Halbwachsian collective memory, while moving from philosophy to sociology, still understands consciousness as separate from the body (in the tradition of Descartes) and has often rejected scholarship that suggests memory can function both below and beyond consciousness (Narvaez 2006, 52). Narvaez endeavors to create an account of embodied collective memories expanding on the Halbwachsian theory of collective memory. He says:

Embodied things, unfolding from the past and unto the present, can also be records of the past that help the group see from within. And because bodily things are also identity, they can be sites where cultural identities, boundaries and consistencies are disturbed... [T]hough embodied things can be carriers of the past, they can also call forth the unfamiliar things of the future...Note as well that these bodily things also carry the imperatives of institutions. (2006, 64-5)

Narvaez (2006) expands Halbwachs concept of collective memory, bringing both the complications of the body into the theory and the emphasis on memory as being also about *possibility*. Narvaez writes, “collective memory is not only about remembering (the past) or about social order and action (the present)” (66). “Critically,” he continues, “it is about how social groups project themselves toward the future...embodied collective memory involves a structure of possibilities, which helps individuals and groups apprehend not only the past and the present – but also the possible.” (66). For Narvaez, the larger social structure utilizes memory as a means to frame and understand the possibilities of the future.

A key point in Narvaez’s argument is the implication that bodies, as participants and purveyors of memory, also carry the imperatives of institutions such as the state. Assmann (2016), trained in the tradition of German cultural theorist Aby Warburg, creates a framework for a more defined category of “cultural memory”—a smaller concept within the larger, sweeping definitions of collective memory in the Halbwachsian sense. Assmann argues that cultural memory is a collective symbolic construction that is secured through institutions, social communication, and individual memories (19). While Assmann also understands the transmutability of individual and social memory in Halbwachsian collective memory, she tries to further study the transition between social and cultural memory, demarking the two as separate arenas of memory. Assmann argues that the transition from social to cultural memory requires a “coupling and decoupling of memory and experience” (20). This is informed by

Giesen (2004) who, in analyzing the Holocaust and German national identity, found that “as soon as the experts take over the reconstruction of the past, debates about these reconstructions tend not only to be decoupled from issues of personal identity, but also to be institutionalized and tempered by the sober rituals of scholarly methods” (136). In order for memories to become cultural, it takes more than the engagement of the individual in the larger society. If that was all it took to create social or cultural memories, then every person’s memories would have equal viability within the larger culture. The question that Assmann studies and attempts to answer is how some memories become cultural memories and others don’t. In other words, what is the cultural role of forgetting?

As social memories make the transition to cultural, Assmann (2016) argues that the carriers of symbolic media—the individuals, groups, institutions, and rituals that have an interest in co-creating the future of the political community—depersonalize and remove the individualized nature of memories in order to externalize and objectivize the memories as cultural. This also shifts the temporal scope of the memory from the finite, individual lifespan of the human being to the possibly infinite lifespan of a symbol of the culture. Once memories have become cultural, they must once again be appropriated by community members, incorporated into their living memories in order for them to maintain a cultural memory and identity alongside their individual and social memories and identities. This is why symbolic carrier of memories such as group rituals, commemorations, and institutions are so important (see Alexander 2012).

Cultural memory, argues Assmann (2016), “is not geared toward the greatest possible comprehensiveness; it assimilates nothing arbitrary but rather operates according to a more or

less fixed principle of selection” (22). For large communities up to and including the state, a totalized memory is impossible. There are too many individual accounts of events and too many events to be able to create a coherent narrative. When there are *too many* memories vying for attention, cultural memory loses its ability to articulate the relationship between the self and the group, and between the past, present, and future, which results in a loss of identity. “Forgetting is therefore a constitutive part of individual and collective memory” says Assmann (22).

But how do we choose what to forget and what to remember? Assman (2016) argues that the principles of selection that cultural memory adheres to establishes two separate mnemonic functions: the archive (storage memory) and the canon (functional memory). Storage memory is a broad set of cultural knowledge that is a product of forgetting—mechanisms of invalidation, destruction, or loss, act as the selection process. Functional memory, on the other hand, is a much smaller set of memories that is continually engaged and reinterpreted on individual, social, and cultural levels. “Forgetting,” Assmann continues, “is not just the unavoidable and quasi-natural consequence of a life of growth and renewal, but it is also a deliberate cultural aim” (36). These processes of forgetting are essential to the formation of a coherent cultural narrative, social structure, and the obligations of oneself to their community and state.

Cultural memories are also utilized to create the mythologies of the culture and history. According to Novick (1999), “collective memory simplifies...[it] sees events from a single committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; [and] reduces events to mythic archetypes” (4). These mythic archetypes assimilate history in order to construct a

narrative that corresponds with cultural memory. Events in history are de-historicized—taken out of context and suspended in time—which isolates them from generational shifts and increases their affective persuasion. Because of this de-historicization, an event is cushioned from the loss of memory resulting in generational shifts. Cultural memories shift, not because of generational turnover, but because there is a change in mythologies that make the memory no longer legible in its new cultural context. The beginning of this process can be seen with the fights around Confederate monuments and school textbooks and the inclusion or exclusion of race and sexuality.

This is why the mechanisms of cultural memory are key to understanding the state and the political community bound to it. Eyerman et al (2017) states “In constructing the political community that is the nation [...] ‘agents of memory’ selectively draw from a reservoir of images and stories in a process of remembering and forgetting” (14). The process of mythologizing memories allows for the substitution—or forgetting—of memories in order to promulgate the myth itself and not the history alone. Assmann (2016) says, “myth denotes the affective appropriation of one’s own history” (26). Likewise, Renan (1996) states, “forgetting, I would even say historical error, is essential to the creation of a nation” (19). Cultural memory, in providing a sense of continuity to American collective identity, develops narratives and mythologies that contextualize the relationship individuals and groups have with the state, who is part of the state, and who is not. Memory mythologizes the origin or heritage of the state and is a constitutive force behind the relationships that society and individuals have with their nation’s past. The construction of cultural memory is a moment of shared identity creation for a community, which allows the individual to construct an affective relationship with their past,

whether or not they possess lived or biological memory of those events (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995, Tirosh and Schejter 2005, Zerubavel 1996).

Implicit in this literature is the assumption that the values of the nation are not inherent, but rather sustained through social processes and institutions. When a historical event does not match the hegemonic cultural mythology, it is forgotten, radically de-historicized, or sanitized to the point that its muted characteristics are normalized (Eyerman et al 2017). The only conflictual memories available when this kind of cultural forgetting occurs are any remaining living or social memories, but with generational shifts, the muted memory becomes more susceptible to total loss. This is why there can be a huge push from oppressed groups to bear witness, participate in, and archive their cultural memories that may not survive the hegemonic mnemonic culture without this help. There seems to be, then, a dynamic relationship between history and memory, where some cultural memories and histories can have an antagonistic relationship with each other. Assmann (2016) cautions:

[Memories] require active shaping, but we are also passively influenced by them. The notion of instrumentalization suggests that the present has the past firmly in its grip, but it is also the case that the past—especially a traumatic past—often has the present in its grip. In such cases, it is not we who possess it, but it that possess us. (239)

One of the most important stories a nation or a state can tell is its origin story. In the telling of this story, the politics of memory erupt. The mythologization of events, the de-historicization and appropriation of the past, the affective persuasion of individual and social identities: each of these elements denotes a fundamental arena of contestation. Giesen (2004) states:

Social constructions of collective identity...are prone to conflicts and subject to public debates; they vary according to the life-world of the social carrier group and are transformed by the turnover of generations. Rituals can bridge the cleavages of political

conflicts and public debates, but they also sometimes cause public controversies. Although the perspectives may shift and the evaluation may differ, the institutional arenas may vary and the rituals may change, constructions of national identity cannot escape from an orientation toward the past, which does not pass away, whether traumatic or triumphant. (112)

History becomes the foremost battleground for the mythologization of the past, the actions of the present, and the ideas of the future. The institutionalization of cultural memory is a key initiative for the continuity of the state.

Literature Review: Law and Memory

Law is one of the ways in which states scaffold their cultural memory and define the mnemonic imperatives of the state. One example of this is the creation of federal holidays. In a study examining the symbolization of national identity in history, Hobsbawm (1983) described the period of years from 1870 to 1914 as a time of institutionalizing symbols. He cites the French Revolutionary Calendar as a prime example of the state creating a new framework for collective memory and identity. In this same period, US Congress passed the first federal holiday law and legislated seven of the U.S. federal holidays (Straus 2014; Schwartz 2008). Each of these holidays was designated, according to Straus (2014), “to emphasize a particular aspect of American heritage or to celebrate an event in American history” (1). Halas (2002) argues that “the calendar of holidays is an important framework of collective identity, both in primitive and post-modern societies. Social change obviously affects the temporal order of a social group and its recollection of the past” (116).

Tirosh and Schejter (2005) argue that legal institutions themselves are one mechanism of systematized remembering and forgetting. According to Tirosh and Schejter (2005), the construction of cultural memory is:

interwoven within the legislation that directs the institutionalization of a national collective memory. It identifies the national symbols, national holidays and memorial days created by law, the preservation of heritage through the erection of museums and physical monuments, the commemoration of leaders, and the prevention of certain symbols from entering the public sphere. (23)

Tirosh and Schejter (2005) argue that the mythologized and ritualistic components of cultural memory serve a dualistic purpose, which is both essentializing and epochal: 1) to define the tradition, character, and culture of the nation, and 2) to construct a historical context in which the state's actions are justified. In short, this construction of the cultural memory of the state shore up the inherent goodness of the state and its continued existence. Tirosh and Schejter rely on Giesen's (2004) argument that the mythologization of the past is tied to traumas or triumphs. Giesen (2004) theorizes that:

Because they refer retrospectively to liminal horizons of the social community, triumph and trauma have to be imagined, renarrated, and visualized in myths, pictures, and figures. Thus, the triumphant and sovereign subjectivity is embodied in the figure of the hero, who lives beyond the rules and establishes a new order. In contrast, the traumatic reference to the past is represented by the memory of victims who have been treated as objects, as cases of a category without a face, a name, a place. (113-14)

For Verovsek (2017), crises, like traumas, open up the political community to the possibility of reimagining political life. He argues that even a single generation that experiences a historical rupture or crisis large enough could utilize cultural memory as a means of social transformation, a way to change the memories of the past, the actions of the present, and ideas of the future. Verovsek defines crisis as a "profound dislocation, when events can no longer be subsumed into existing [cultural] narratives" (3). States rely on the stability of the law and cultural memory in order to define the individual's relationship and obligation to the state and to develop a cultural identity that allows citizens to act as coauthors of the law, thereby giving legitimacy to the state and its actions. When a crisis or trauma occurs, there is a rupture

between the mythologization of the past and the actions of the present, a deep disconnection between the cultural memory of a nation, its present, and future. When the cultural memory of the state is opened up to such a shift, many interpret this openness with fear: a sense of the loss of stability in their relationship to the state or even their internal and external worlds. It is in these moments that the political community, according to Verovsek, has the ability to start anew. For those with deep personal interests and stakes in the established cultural memory and its institutions, this can seem extremely unsettling and threatening.

When crises threaten to destabilize the obligations of the citizen to the state, often the state begins to assimilate the crisis into the existing narrative plot structures through legislative means. The creation of holidays and memorial days are semiotic modes of categorizing both the heroes and the victims in a national tradition that is actively shaping the cultural memory of past crises and events. Zerubavel (1995) calls this a “myth plot structure” of the state (216). This structure reinforces the larger, hegemonic cultural narrative by stabilizing the events of the past, their relationship to the state and its people, and extending memories beyond their original temporal horizons. Much like Assmann and Novick, Zerubavel’s myth plot structures strip the individual from the memory, suspends the memory in time, and recontextualizes it in order for the event to be reassimilated by the individual as part of the mythologized master narrative.

Law is in many ways the keeper of the cultural memory of the state. Savelsberg and King (2007) argue that law is the transformation of cultural memories into legal norms and practices through applied commemorations. Applied commemorations are, “commemorations not for the explicit sake of addressing historical events, but commemorations in the context of

decision-making debates that involve historic events” (191). Law acts as the playwright leaving staging notes: creating an archive of past decisions in order for future actors to reenact the past. Through the power of ritual, law helps reinforce cultural memory.

Law can also constrain cultural memory. Through the regulation of “the production of, access to, and dissemination of information about the past” law can utilize its archival power to embellish or diminish historical events (206). In this way, law is not solely about facticity, which many assume it to be. Rather, it is a series of stage directions contextualizing the narrative, which may or may not contain truth. Law is ultimately a part of a myth-making structure that’s goal is the perpetuation of the state’s sovereignty.

Examining how fiction “serves as a memorial device” at the heart of law, Motha (2018) writes:

Fictions may be deployed as “consciously false” precepts that are deemed “necessary” to sustain a legal order or the stability of a state. They may sustain destructive social and legal practices, or inspire progressive ethical and political formations. Such is the memorial and archival work of law. (1)

Motha argues that law functions as an archive of sovereign violence. Law acts as a container for cultural memory by memorializing decision-making processes in order to sustain the state.

Motha continues:

Law as a craft of judging by re-citing precedent and narrating origins relies on an archival mode of drawing on the past to authorize decisions in the present...In the judicial doctrine of stare decisis the present decision potentially conditions the future in advance. Authority is affirmed with reference to past decisions and judgements, or new lexicons of rights are created by discarding or distinguishing superseded precedents. (8)

The archival power of the law is its ability to limit or influence future decisions, with the ultimate goal of perpetuating the state regardless of its rights or wrongs (See Zerubavel 1995 on the creation of Israel’s national traditions).

Case Selection

Prior to January 6th, 2021, American audiences were used to reality-tv-star-turned-President Donald Trump's brash handling of politics and his supposed affinity for the righteousness of America's past. There was a lot of big talk and a lot of tweets. For some, that was all President Trump would ever be—a litany of tweets in all caps. For those who were paying attention, Trump's words echoed white, Christian America and its white supremacist origins. Bold affirmations of white nationalists as “good guys” and Black and brown people as criminals, poor, or otherwise immoral, unethical, and illegal beings, Trump played to the very cultural battles that were being waged in and by many conservative Christian homes. His resounding support of America's greatness and call to “Make America Great Again” fell foot over face into a growing instability in America's cultural memory: the reckoning, fear, and panic, about what to do if the father is *not* good. For many groups who cling to the greatness of the founding fathers and the rightness of the actions of politicians like Reagan and Bush Jr., the idea that America was and continues to be flawed and make mistakes is a tough idea to handle. The idea of America's inherent rightness falls apart much quicker if you also add in its history of colonialism and the violence of the founding.

The clash of January 6th is part of a much larger conflict in American culture. Both camps—whether the liberal or conservative lawmakers counting electoral votes or the white supremacist insurrectionists breaking in—believe in the legitimacy of the American state. *Both* believe in a kind of heroism of the founding fathers and the majesty of the Capitol, its art and its history. It creates a paradox where insurrectionists break the law in order to uphold “law and order” and keep the state under their own control. This points to the instability of the rule

of law and its relationship to the cultural memory of America: law only has power if you believe that it does and that your relationship to the state requires you to follow it. Law acts as the arbiter of American cultural memory which means that if one of those things is destabilized, so is the other. Utilizing three main cases of theatricality in January 6th—the memorialization of Ashli Babbitt, the use of American flags as apparel, and the use of the inauguration ceremony—I am able to tease out more of the relationship between law, theatricality, and American cultural memory building.

Outline of the Dissertation

In the following dissertation, I continue my investigation of the relationship between theatricality and American cultural memory. In Chapter 2, I discuss the death of Ashli Babbitt inside the Capitol, the commemorations of Lt. Byrd's actions, and the two separate mnemonic traditions the state and insurrectionists partake in. This includes a discussion of the data and methods used in the overall dissertation and an introduction to the concept of theatricality. In Chapter 3, I discuss the use of the American flag as apparel on January 6th. I first outline the development and history of America's political flag culture that has developed from the Revolution and its resurgence in the Trump campaign and its deployment during the insurrection. This is followed by an extended consideration of the flag as an item of costuming during the January 6th insurrection, where participants were, in essence, reenacting the founding of America and the revolutionary war. A version of Chapter 3 will be published in the *Palgrave Handbook on Fashion and Politics* (forthcoming Summer 2024). Chapter 4 discusses the cultural memory informing Biden's inauguration as it responds to the insurrection. I focus on the history of the inauguration ceremony and the utilization of rituals and commemorations

in American cultural memory. This includes a dissection of three historical inaugurations: Obama's first inauguration, Trump's, and Biden's. Chapter 5 concludes with a brief comparison of the cultural memories between the insurrectionists and institutional members and some reflection on what I deem the failures of American mnemonic culture.

CH. 2: The Storm Coming—Deploying the Memory of Ashli Babbitt

I would not have come to know sin except through the Law.
Romans 7:7

When bad men combine, the good must associate, else they will fall
one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.
Edmund Burke

A note to readers: This chapter contains descriptions of violence and death during the insurrection.

Introduction

One of the most flabbergasting elements of the insurrection was the sheer amount of selfies and livestreamed videos participants posted online. Thousands of users posted photographs, videos, and shared content from other people that showed them storming the Capitol...which is a crime. People livestreamed themselves breaking into offices and ransacking them. Nancy Pelosi's office was entirely trashed, with items stolen, and the message "we will not back down!" left on the walls. There are videos of people destroying furniture, relieving themselves in offices, and stealing government property. People laughed and cheered as they took a break from the destruction and took a selfie smoking marijuana in the Capitol Rotunda. It was a brazen show of idiocy, not realizing or not caring that anything they did was illegal.

In the hours and days after the insurrection, over 1,000 users of the Reddit community r/DataHoarders compiled a huge, crowd-sourced archive of insurrectionists' social media posts. They deliberately collected information on as many insurrectionists as they could, connecting names to faces, phone numbers, addresses, and places of employment. On social media, people were urged to turn in their friends who posted about the insurrection to the FBI and screenshot and save any and all of their content before it was deleted.

What ensued was a massive public archive project. This helped aid federal investigations, but in some cases, users pursued extralegal means of justice by harassing insurrectionists, their employers, and their friends. Many redditors in the DataHoarders thread openly discussed the ethics of this practice and many disagreed with the use of doxing—targeted deanonymization. Chapman (2021) writes, “Open-sourced intelligence...and the practice of doxing... can be used for accountability but run the risk for harm, harassment, and arguably unethical public shaming,” (2). Many of the insurrectionists took to their social media accounts to say they were being unjustly targeted because of their participation in the insurrection. However, in his study of the activity in the r/DataHoarders subreddit, Chapman found that “while ethical transgressions and potential for misuse were found in the r/DataHoarders archive project, the bulk of the activity was focused on practical matters of digital archiving, namely the identification, acquisition, and preservation of evidence related to the January 6th Capitol insurrection” (2). Most of the comments that urged people to dox insurrectionists were from outside redditors in single comments, not from members of the DataHoarders community itself. Rather than a unified campaign to ruin their lives by liberal redditors, like many insurrectionists claimed, people were merely experiencing the consequences of their actions.

Over 1,000 insurrectionists have been charged thus far for their actions on January 6th, 2021 (USAO-DC 2023). Approximately 350 defendants have been charged with assault or assault with a deadly weapon. 935 defendants have been charged with entering federally restricted grounds. 61 defendants have been charged with destruction of government property. 49 have been charged for theft. Lastly, 55 defendants have been charged with conspiracy

(these charges are mainly for leaders of white supremacist groups who helped organize). There are still more trials and sentencing hearings on the way.

There was also fall out in the personal lives of insurrectionists. Many lost their jobs or businesses from public pressure (Lee 2021). Paul Davis, a lawyer from Texas, reportedly lost his job, fiancé, and friends because of his participation in the insurrection. “In my mind, I didn’t do anything wrong,” he said. “I don’t regret going because I just feel like it’s part of God’s plan for my life.” Davis has since begun his own law firm representing workers who refuse to get the COVID-19 vaccine (Dzhanova 2022).

This chapter serves three purposes: first, it discusses the application of theatricality as method to the cultural memory production of the January 6th insurrection. This includes an explanation of the data used in this chapter and the overall dissertation. Second, it recaps Trump’s activities during the insurrection and the general timeline of events. Third, it utilizes livestreamed accounts of the 6th to discuss the shooting of Ashli Babbitt, her status as a martyr, and the response from the state. This opens up a discussion of the relationship between the cultural memory production of the insurrectionists and the state, both arguably inheritors of American cultural traditions.

Methods

The literature on January 6th is few and far between. The impact of this event on the American political system and collective memory is still developing. We may not see the full repercussions of these events until after the 2024 election or years to come. There is no doubt that this is one of the most shocking events to take place on America soil in recent memory. This project endeavors to shed some light on the 6th and some of the potential impacts it may

have by looking at the utilization of cultural memory by the insurrectionists and the state. In addition to the literature on cultural memory, this project is informed by Samuel Weber's (2004) understanding of theatre as method, or theatricality. Weber writes, "the basis of most political communities...involves confounding theater with nature, or, more precisely, with things themselves" (7). For Weber, theatricality as medium is not a medium of representation, but a "medium that redefines activity as reactivity, and that makes its peace, if ever provincially, with separation" (7). Theatre take place in the "hollowness" of this separation (27). Weber uses the example of the Peking Opera and writes:

But the fascination of the scene—in which Chen finds the Boatman, boards the ferry, and makes her way across the river to its distant shore—derives, not from the notion of a journey that might be completed, for instance, with the reuniting of lovers, but rather from the deployment of a different kind of *desire*, involving separation rather than fulfillment. "Autumn River" stages one of the ways in which separation is experienced, traversed, negotiated—but never simply overcome or forgotten. (26-7, emphasis in original)

Weber uses the dance or balancing act between Chen and the Boatman as an allegory for theatricality and states that even "*in their separation [they are] linked* through the reciprocity of their movements" (26, emphasis in original). He argues "The staging of 'Autumn River' demonstrates how theater can be the medium of a displacement or dislocation that opens other *ways*, not bound to arrive at a final destination... Theatre thus emerges as a powerful medium of the *arrivant*" (29, emphasis in original).

This project utilizes Weber's theorization of theatricality as the larger conceptual framework for the collective memory work explored in each chapter. While it is not the work of this dissertation to further develop this concept, it is utilized as a conceptual background as I further explore the relationship of linked separation between insurrectionists, the state, and

their conceptions of America. What does it mean to be in a reciprocal relationship when both parties view each other as illegitimate inheritors and creators of America's legacy? Considering how Narvaez (2006) theorizes cultural memory as necessarily forward-looking, this project reads both the works of cultural memory and theatricality *together* endeavoring to investigate how this can help us understand American politics and more specifically, American cultural memory. If cultural memory is built by anticipation of the future, theatricality is the space in which the possibilities unfold.

Data

This project utilizes over 3TB of digitally archived materials from the r/DataHoarders crowd-sourced archive project for the January 6th insurrection. On January 31st, 2021, the moderators of r/DataHoarders stopped updating the archive, as most of the posts submitted at that point were duplicates. All of the collected materials were uploaded to the Internet Archive, a huge digital library nonprofit started in 1996, and were duplicated in MEGA. MEGA is a file-hosting, cloud data-storage service based in Auckland, New Zealand. Redditors can still scroll through the original subreddit as well and see the original comments from users, though their uploads and links to social media posts may not be available as most were deleted by insurrectionists facing criminal charges (Lynch 2021). As of 13 February 2024, the MEGA archive containing the all of the January 6th materials has been deleted and is no longer accessible. The account was reported for containing objectionable material, such as violent extremism.

I was aware of this data project when it began and shared its information for people to add to the archive in the days after the insurrection. After the archive was copied to MEGA, I also downloaded a copy for myself as the permanence of digital archives can be precarious in a

capitalist world where websites may transfer owners, lose files due to errors, or go offline entirely. This happened to the platform Parler. Parler was well-known as a haven to white supremacists and right-wing conspiracy theorists and was where the majority of organization for the insurrection and livestreams occurred. In the days after January 6th, Parler was dropped from both Google and Apple app stores and Amazon also ended its web service, effectively forcing the website to go offline. Parler videos make up the bulk of the content in the archive. With the MEGA file no longer accessible, the public availability of this archive and the Parler videos is limited to those of us who downloaded our own copies.

After downloading the MEGA file to my own external hard drive over several days, I spent the better part of a year going through its content. I began by watching hours and hours of livestreamed and recorded footage archived from Parler, Dlive, LiveLeak, Periscope, Reddit, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Streamable, Twitch, YouTube, and Twitter. I started with Parler as that represented the bulk of the live video footage in the archive, but then proceeded through the rest of the platforms alphabetically. Dlive is a streaming service with lax content enforcement rules so it is popular with right-wing and QAnon patrons. There isn't much footage here from the 6th, but what is archived is from well-known right-wing personalities, like BakedAlaska (Anthime Gionet), AustinZone, PortlandAndy, Zykotik, and Loulz. These users have duplicate files from their multiple social media pages in the archive because they posted their footage of January 6th on all of their accounts. Figure 1 below shows the sorting of content by number of items and size per platform.

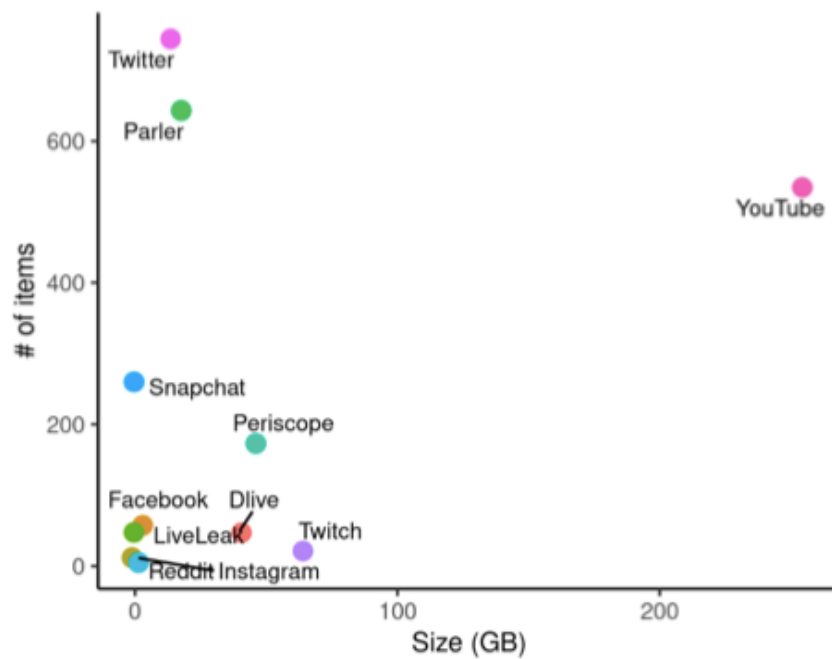


Figure 1. Content sources archived by r/DataHoarders. (Chapman 2021)

After watching and taking notes on several hundred hours' worth of videos, identifying account names and connecting them to real names, any federal charges, or current ties to the right-wing online community, I turned from live footage to other video content. This included various homemade trailers that circulated on social media about the 6th, personal videos before the 6th detailing the pro-Trump beliefs of some of the participants, some memes, and other video content (including a pro-Trump rap and music video). After this, I looked through the various text and picture files included, which were mostly screenshots of Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook captions. There were also several copies of news coverage regarding the insurrection (this is the bulk of the YouTube submissions), but as my research wasn't interested

in news media coverage so much as the actual live footage, I did not watch most of this footage.

As I was watching this footage, my first reactions were a lot of curses and shock. I had trouble sorting through what was happening where inside the Capitol and figuring out which videos were from D.C. on January 5th versus the 6th and what was from other state capitols on the 6th as well. I kept reminding myself that federal agencies had entire teams watching this footage, while I was slogging through it alone. Luckily, or unfortunately, my toddler accidentally deleted all of my notes from the first time I went through all of this content so I had to go through it all again and re-do all of my notes. This second inquiry actually helped me put together the flow of events on January 5th in D.C., pull out important moments during the mayhem of the 6th in D.C., and put videos from other states into greater context.

I was already used to the violence, loudness, and chaotic nature of the footage by the time I had finished my first set of notes. The second time through, I was able to make more connections, do some more digging, and notice more details. I was able to differentiate between different streamers, find clues to their relationships to each other, and gain more insight into their movements on the 6th. I also triple-saved my notes and kept my toddler far, far away from my computer.

For this chapter, I primarily use material archived by Reddit user Akansomi, filed under “miscellaneous archives.” This file contains one 40-minute long recording by user JaydenX as well as several screenshots from Facebook and Twitter. The JaydenX video is one of the longest and highest quality videos in the entire archive. While there are several hours-long videos from the rallies on the 5th, most of the videos from the 6th are only a few minutes long as most users

had challenges livestreaming and uploading their content while in D.C. Cell service struggled due to so much usage and livestreams routinely glitched or stopped entirely.

Chapter 3 of this dissertation uses photographs from social media posts as well as from screenshots from Parlor and Facebook archived in MEGA. Chapter 4 utilizes data from the Joint Committee on Inaugural Celebrations and the Library of Congress digitized archive of inaugurations past as well as screenshots from various archived livestreams and posts on the 6th.

Returning to Cultural Memory: Art in the Capitol

In a study of the art housed in the Capitol, Schwartz (1982) looks at the three main wings of the Capitol building: the Senate Wing, the House of Representatives Wing, and the central Rotunda. The building is filled with artwork and statues that are “meant to be interpreted as an expression of the virtue of the nation’s past” (378). Schwartz found that the period of colonization and revolution are the subject of the majority of artworks in the Capitol and that the first five presidents are also memorialized the most (380). The Capitol’s Statuary, however, has more representations of presidents and vice-presidents from the post-revolutionary period. Schwartz looks at why there are so few commemorations in the Capitol from the post-Civil War period. One practical answer is the limited space in the building. Another reason Schwartz identifies is that even though it would be easy to replace images of previous leaders, “this procedure would be against American political tradition, which places great value on the orderly transfer of power and the continuity of government. Thus, once an image is placed in the American Capitol, it is very likely to remain there” (394-5). Including more

recent works of art commemorating America's leaders would rupture the continuity of the past.

Thus, the commemorations in the Capitol serve two functions:

[T]he Capitol iconography has become specialized: by *selectively* commemorating historical events and heroic figures up to the Civil War, it celebrates the origin of the nation. By *indiscriminately* commemorating the offices and functions which are important for the routine operation of government, it affirms the nation's stability and permanence in the post-Civil War period. To represent the late nineteenth and twentieth century by its administrators rather than its more dramatic historical agents is to imply that the ultimate salvation of the republic resides in its institutional order... (395).

During the antebellum period, the unity of the republic was in doubt so the main push of their selective commemoration processes utilized the history of great men: The Founding Fathers and the heroes of the Revolutionary War. However, once the Civil War was over and the unity of the nation prevailed, commemorations began to focus of the bureaucratic leaders of the nation and the stability of the institutions (Schwartz 1982, 396).

When Trump came to office, he garnered the support of many as another great patriot. One more great man to add to the statuary. However, since the end of the Civil War, Presidents have often been memorialized for "doing their job" and not for pioneering great political change like the founding fathers. How "good" or "great" a president is, is often a measure of how well he worked within the established institutional rules already established. Trump, however, became president specifically to do things his own way. Not simply a bureaucratic leader, but a true leader of the American people. He did not react well when the institutions did not uphold his rule come November 2020.

"The Storm Will Come. Stay Out of its Way": Trump Inciting January 6th

The tempest began as soon as Biden was declared the 2020 election winner. Trump alleged that several state's counts were fraudulent and that the election was illegitimate, stolen

from him and the American people. He started the “Stop the Steal” campaign in the weeks leading up to the electoral vote, set to take place on January 6th, 2021. On December 18th, 2020, Trump tweeted “Statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 Election. Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!” (Trump 2020a). On December 30th, he tweeted, “JANUARY SIXTH, SEE YOU IN DC!” (Trump 2020b). His followers quickly mobilized, setting up trains and rideshares to D.C. or rallies in their own state capitols for the occasion. People began seeing eerie messages online like “wait until the liberals find out about the 6th” and calling it the “Million MAGA March.” Several homemade trailers circulated online, a mix of horrid cataclysmic and patriotic music, hinting at things to come and calling it “the coming storm.” One user posted, “Let’s add to the big DC protest, Arizona style! Million MAGA March Will be the Biggest Trump Rally in History!” (Akansomi 2021a). One social media post, perhaps, gave too much away. DonaldJTrumpFanClub on reddit posted “Come roam the Capitol building Jan. 6th!” with a picture of Trump with a lions shadow and bold, red lettering reading “Jan. 6th Capitol Building! WE ARE THE STORM!” (Akansomi 2021b). Figure 2 below shows one post organizing three caravans from areas surrounding D.C. There are videos from similar caravans on their way to the Capitol. Lines of trucks and cars, with people yelling, honking, flying a variety of flags and decorations on their vehicles. Various “Trump Trains” headed to D.C. to participate in the 6th. They were joyous in solidarity, ready to reclaim their country for themselves.

Ellipse Rally—January 6th, 2021

In the weeks leading up to counting of electoral votes, Women for Trump received a permit to hold “Ellipse Rally” the morning of January 6th in the National Mall with various speakers, including Rudy Giuliani and Donald Trump. Trump openly spoke about marching with the people to the Capitol to protest the counting of electoral votes and to “add pressure” so the electors would “do the right thing” and refuse to certify the election results. Trump also tried to pressure Mitch McConnell and Mike Pence to overturn the election results, but neither gave way to his demands. Trump marked them both as disloyal traitors and the eventual insurrectionists turned on them as well. In later remarks, Women for Trump said they did not organize the march to the Capitol building, only the rally that morning.

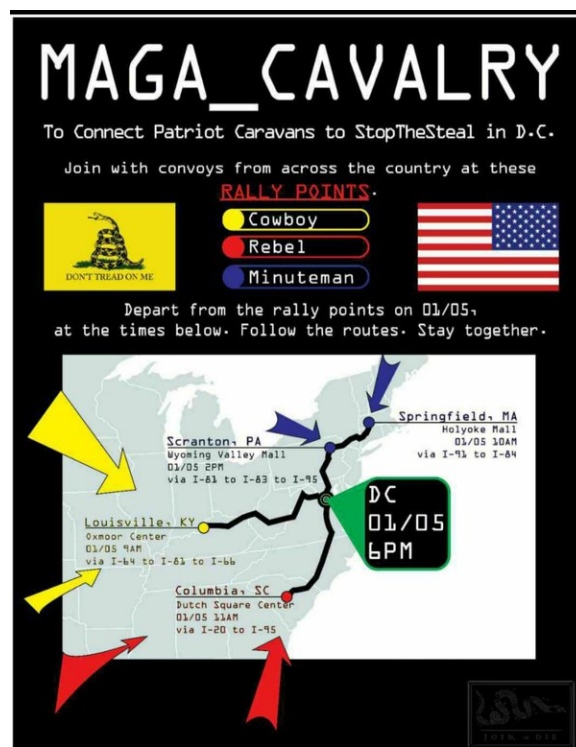


Figure 2. Social Media Post showing three separate caravan routes to D.C. for 1/6/21. (Akansomi 2021c).

Tensions were high in D.C. Protesters and white supremacists amassed in the hours and days before the 6th. Many white supremacists, MAGA fans, and live-streamers met up on January 5th for a series of rallies in Freedom Plaza. Groups of MAGA extremists and white supremacists wandered D.C. into the late hours of the night. A crowd grew at BLM Plaza, where Capitol police had set up to protect the few counter-protesters there. There were several skirmishes between police and MAGA protesters, with some minor injuries, including mace.

The morning of the 6th, Trump's crowd gathered in the National Mall. After the investigation, it was revealed that Trump's chief of staff, Mark Meadows, informed Trump that about half of the rally attendees refused to undergo security screenings and were waiting outside the rally area. Unhappy that the rally would look small for news coverage, Trump reportedly told rally security to get rid of the metal detectors. "They're not here to hurt me," he said, "Take the fucking mags away. Let my people in, they can march to the Capitol from here...I don't fucking care that they have weapons," (Chowdhury et al 2022).

At 12 p.m., Trump took to the stage to wild cheers. He stated, "It's just a great honor to have this kind of crowd and to be before you and hundreds of thousands of American patriots who are committed to the honesty of our elections and the integrity of our glorious republic," (Naylor 2021). Throwing blame on big tech and fake news media, Trump said "all of us here today do not want to see our election victory stolen by emboldened radical-left Democrats... We will never give up, we will never concede. It doesn't happen. You don't concede when there's theft involved." In his usual meandering monologue, he put together a less-than-coherent critique of election fraud in several swing states and expressed anger at the weak republicans who refused to "stand up for the Constitution." It's clear in his speech that his faith

in Pence was waning and that the crowd needed to march down to “help” Pence and the weak republicans “do what is right.” “Because you'll never take back our country with weakness,” Trump said. “You have to show strength and you have to be strong. We have come to demand that Congress do the right thing and only count the electors who have been lawfully slated...” Addressing the critique that sending election results back to the states to be recounted was unconstitutional, Trump said, “The Constitution says you have to protect our country and you have to protect our Constitution. And fraud breaks up everything, doesn't it? When you catch somebody in a fraud, you're allowed to go by *very different rules*” (emphasis added). He continued to say:

I know that everyone here will soon be marching over to the Capitol building... Make no mistake, this election was stolen from you, from me, and from the country... So today, in addition to challenging the certification of the election, I'm calling on Congress and the state legislatures to quickly pass sweeping election reforms, and you better do it before we have no country left. Today is not the end, it's just the beginning... Our brightest days are before us. Our greatest achievements, still away... And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore. Our exciting adventures and boldest endeavors have not yet begun. My fellow Americans, for our movement, for our children, and for our beloved country. And I say this despite all that's happened. The best is yet to come... (Naylor 2021)

During Trump's speech, Capitol police found pipe bombs at both Republican National Committee and Democrat National Committee headquarters and found an empty van with a handgun, loaded assault rifle, and equipment for 11 Molotov cocktails with homemade napalm (USAO-DC 2021). 19 minutes before Trump's rally speech ended, the first line of police fell at the Capitol and insurrectionists pushed towards the building.

Even though Trump told the crowd he was going to march with them to the Capitol, when his speech ended he was whisked away by his security detail to an armored car. Trump staff aid, Cassidy Hutchinson, later testified that Trump became irate when informed it was

unsafe to take him to the Capitol like he wanted and that he was being taken back to the White House. Hutchinson (2022) testified that Trump yelled, “I’m the fucking President. Take me up to the Capitol now!” Allegedly he then lunged forward and attempted to grab the steering wheel, shoving one of his security detail in the process. After returning to the White House, Trump sat in his dining room and watched the insurrection unfold on FOX News. He made no calls to the attorney general, homeland security, law enforcement, or the national guard. At 4:03pm, Trump and his media team gathered in the Rose Garden to film a video asking the insurrectionists to go home. Instead of using the script written for him by his staff, Trump spoke off the cuff:

I know your pain. I know your hurt. We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election, and everyone knows it, especially the other side, but you have to go home now. We have to have peace. We have to have law and order. We have to respect our great people in law and order. We don’t want anybody hurt. It’s a very tough period of time. There’s never been a time like this where such a thing happened, where they could take it away from all of us, from me, from you, from our country. This was a fraudulent election, but we can’t play into the hands of these people. We have to have peace. So go home. We love you. You’re very special. You’ve seen what happens. You see the way others are treated that are so bad and so evil. I know how you feel. But go home and go home at peace. (CBS News 2022)

While Trump retired for the day after his video post, at the Capitol, the insurrection had reached its peak violence. The news that a woman had been shot by police inside the Capitol building had spurred on the most violent of insurrectionists outside. The clash between insurrectionists and Capitol police at the tunnel on the west side of the building quickly became the most violent push of the entire insurrection. Around 6pm, Trump tweeted, “These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long.

Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!” (Tan 2021). This tweet was later deleted.

Capitol police didn’t secure the west exterior of the building until 6:14pm. The interior of the building was secured by 8pm. The counting of electoral votes resumed at 9pm and Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election at 3:32am on January 7th. An exhausting day for America.

“Whose house? OUR HOUSE!”: Inside the Capitol Building

The sheer number of people taking photographs, selfies, and live streaming their siege of the Capitol Building, pushed D.C.’s cell service to the brink. Nevertheless, people were determined to showcase their actions and their participation in this historic moment. A Parler video, posted by user JaydenX, and later saved and archived by user Akansomi, shows 40-intense minutes of the push into the Capitol building: from the initial moments breaking into the west side terrace from the scaffolding, to wandering the Rotunda, to the shooting of Ashli Babbitt outside of the Speakers Lobby in the House Chamber. JaydenX is the username of John Sullivan, who identifies as an independent journalist. Sullivan, however, has garnered controversy for his coverage/participation and connections to right wing protests and riots (Marantz 2021). When Sullivan came to Portland to document the Black Lives Matter protests, he said he was a part of the movement, but local activists were wary of him and there were rumors he was a right-wing spy. Seattle BLM also put out a community memo warning protesters about him (Rebellion Baby 2020). While Sullivan claimed to only be at the Capitol to document the insurrection, he was convicted on five felonies and two misdemeanors for his actions that day. The video recorded by Sullivan is his own incrimination. It manages to capture

some of the most intense and violent moments of the insurrection and Sullivan can be heard egging on the crowd and saying “Burn this shit down!” and “It’s our home motherfuckers!” He also claimed he had a knife to get to the front of the crowd at the House chamber doors. His video is one of the clearest accounts of the shooting and death of Ashli Babbitt, which gave Sullivan much attention online and was routinely used by news sources.

The video begins after Capitol police had already surrendered the scaffolding set up for Biden’s inauguration to the insurrectionists and moved their lines away from the west exterior of the Capitol building. The video shows masses of insurrectionists outside of the scaffolding structure, packing the stairs up to the next level balcony of the west exterior of the Capitol building. Several men can be seen underneath the scaffolding, positioned up under the bars to get better views, take shortcuts to the top, or post their signs and flags. One man covered in fox pelts excitedly talks to his companion, while another man in all black yells from above. Sullivan, in a hoarse voice, says, “Oh we’re going in? We’re going in!?” The masses of yelling insurrectionists take over the soundscape of the video as we see the crowd of insurrectionists rush up the stairs beside the scaffolding. The entire block of people moves like loose sand. You can hear men yelling “GO! Let’s go! Fuck yeah!” and coughing from smoke bombs and mace. The crowd easily knocks over the few metal barriers, now abandoned by all but a handful of Capitol police who back away. One woman shouts at police, “Are you going to follow the constitution?” while several people thank the officers.

This was a common occurrence during the insurrection: the quick whiplash between calling Capitol police traitors, some beating them with flagpoles and metal-toed boots, while others thanked them as members of the police force. A curious moment for Back-the-Blue.

Sullivan, one of the first on the balcony, walks to the edge and points the camera at a truly massive crowd of red, white, and blue. Rioters making their way towards the Capitol. He screams, “fuck yeah! Seize what’s ours! Aroo-roo-roo!” like a military battle cry. Air horns and yells make it difficult to make out what individuals are saying. Sullivan says, “They’re climbing up the wall!...let’s go! You guys are savage! Let’s fucking go! They’re badass!” He sits down on a planter to grab some water as a woman walks by with a police officer’s shield. People help more insurrectionists climb up the wall and make their way to the balcony.

As Sullivan walks towards a broken window where insurrectionists have started infiltrating the building, video shows security personnel inside wielding guns and trying to force people back outside. Some people exit, while Sullivan and nearby insurrectionists discuss whether or not it’s a real gun. There are calls to push forward. One insurrectionist tells Sullivan the gun has rubber bullets, and that he was hit with one, which Sullivan dismisses as no big deal.

By the time Sullivan gets into the building himself, security personnel have backed away, yielding the area. Insurrectionists wander around yelling “whose house? Our house!” while Sullivan says, “we gotta burn this shit.”

Sullivan and other insurrectionists wander the corridors. Some smaller hallways are blocked by police in riot gear, but insurrectionists mostly leave them alone, content to wander up and down the main hallway. When Sullivan and other insurrectionists realize they’ve been led back outside, they try to go back into the building. Police try to push them out, but the crowd resists. One police officer is hit in the face and nearby insurrectionists ask if he is okay. Sullivan uses this moment to ask the officer if he needs anything and works his way behind the

officer and back into the building. Having made their way to a new section of the building, Sullivan and other insurrectionists get into arguments with a new line of police, angry that their movements are being blocked. The insurrectionists eventually push past the few officers and make their way to the center of the Rotunda, meeting up with a larger group of insurrectionists in the process. They chant “USA! USA! USA! Whoo!”

When Sullivan makes his way up the stairs to the next level of the Rotunda, he sees all the large paintings and statues on display. He and other rioters stop in awe. Sullivan videos the beautiful ceiling and paintings, saying, “this is 2021, y’all. This is insanity... this is surreal, bro, like look up top. Damn...” When he enters the statuary, many insurrectionists are also filming the room and taking pictures with the art. Figure 3 below shows a man posing for a picture with



Figure 3. Man posing with statue of Gerald Ford, with Trump hat and flag. Miscellaneous archives, drive_download..

a statue of Gerald Ford. One insurrectionist says, "I've never seen this before!" Another man moves the decorative gates blocking the house chamber and gently says, "It's our house, guys, come on. Welcome home everybody!" like a father welcoming his sons home for dinner. Sullivan continuously says, "this is surreal." One passerby replies, "this is real life. This is revolution." Sullivan remarks, "this is history."

The crowd breaks out in a chant of "USA! USA!" as they make their way to the next line of police. One rioter yells at the police "Tell Pelosi we're coming for her. Fucking traitorous cunts... We're coming for all of you!" Others call the police traitors as well. "Take off the mask and talk to us!" one yells. The crowd chants "stop the steal!" and "We want Trump!"

As the crowd insults, bargains, and thanks the police officers blocking them, they eventually get angry enough to stop negotiating with the officers and push past them. Once the line is broken, one officers backs away, and says "fuck!" overwhelmed at the interaction and their failure to hold the line. "Hey! No violence!" calls an insurrectionist. "It's too late for that," replies Sullivan.

The crowd stops at a door and tries to break it down. After several failed attempts, many of the insurrectionists break off, looking for more ways forward. This is where they find the door to the Speakers Lobby of the House chamber. "The window is broken" someone says. "I have a knife," Sullivan offers. "Let me through I got a knife. I got a knife!" he says, making his way to the front of the crowd at the doors. The insurrectionists yell to each other "They're leaving! They're leaving now!" and quickly disseminate the information that the representatives are still in the chamber, but on their way out. Unknown to insurrectionists at the time, Vice

President Pence and his wife and daughter were being moved to a safe location only feet away, behind the next set of doors.

As Sullivan videos the doors, there are three officers blocking the doorway, not enough to stop the crowd from gaining access and kicking/hitting the doors with their hands, feet, helmets, and poles. Both the windows in the doors are cracked. There's furniture in a makeshift blockade behind the doors. One insurrectionist steps in between the increasingly angry crowd and the few officers blocking the doorway and tries to de-escalate the situation. Sullivan tries to talk to the officers too. "I don't want you to get hurt. Let's make a path [to get you out]. I want you to go home," he says. Sullivan helps make a path to get the officers clear of the door. As the officers abandon the door and move down a nearby staircase, insurrectionists continue to beat the glass and break in the windows.

Sullivan is the first to say, "there's a gun!" as a Capitol police officer, later identified as Lt. Michael Byrd, aims his gun at insurrectionists. His hands shake. He tests and retests his grip, his finger still off of the trigger. Ashli Babbitt's foot is on the edge of the broken window and she's posed as the first person to jump through and gain entry to the House chamber as officer Byrd shoots her in the shoulder. She falls backwards towards the crowd, eyes unseeing, and blood gathering on her neck.

Insurrectionists cry and yell. Some back away in shock. Some keep pushing. More police in SWAT gear arrive at the same moment and try to clear the area, having come up the side staircase. One of the police officers yells to insurrectionists, "she's gonna fucking die! Get the fuck back! You want to be next? Get the fuck out!" Sullivan replies incredulously, "you're gonna shoot everyone? You're gonna shoot everybody?" Sullivan backs into the hallway. A man from

infowars.com talks to Sullivan about getting the death on video. Another man tries to deescalate someone who is traumatized and ready to attack the officers and says, “they need to get her body out. I love you man.” This portion of Sullivan’s footage ends here.

Sullivan uploaded his footage to YouTube and his other social media accounts that evening from his hotel. Sullivan’s clip of the Ashli Babbitt shooting was used in news coverage and quickly gained popularity online. While the footage only showed the hands of the officer who shot Babbitt, speculation about who he was, his political affiliation, and his motivations spread like wildfire.

“Who Killed Ashli Babbitt?": Memorializing the Insurrection

The death of Ashli Babbitt caused a split reaction during the insurrection. Some who were close by were shocked, scared, and immediately put their hands up and let themselves be moved by police out of the corridor and outside. Some of those people moved back into the crowd and joined the attempt to break in to the tunnel. The word spread quickly that Capitol police killed a girl inside. Several livestreams at the tunnel capture insurrectionists first learning about the death of “a girl” (Ashli Babbitt was a 35-year-old air force veteran). For most who heard this news, they were enraged. The clash between Capitol police and insurrectionists at the tunnel became more dangerous as a result.

Fueled by the idea that Capitol police had murdered one of their own, a young and innocent girl, the male-dominated insurrection pushed forward, eager to avenge her death. By the time police regained control of the Capitol building, Ashli Babbitt was considered a martyr to the cause and rumors about her death spread in right-wing circles. Conspiracy theories abounded that she was killed by a Democrat, a victim of an ANTIFA plot, beaten to death by

police, or her death was faked. Already, Babbitt's death was becoming part of the justificatory mythologies that insurrectionists were creating around their actions in the Capitol.

When Trump was interviewed on FOX News via telephone, he hinted that Babbitt had been killed by an unknown Democrat. The exchange painted Babbitt as a young, wonderful woman who had been shot "climbing out of a window during a peaceful demonstration," not breaking into the house chamber in the midst of an insurrection. Here's the brief exchange with Fox News anchor, Maria Bartiromo:

Bartiromo: I want to talk about that because, Ashli Babbitt, a wonderful woman, fatally shot on January 6th as she tried to climb out of a broken window. Her family has spoken out, her family spoke on Tucker Carlson, and they want answers why this wonderful woman, young woman who went to peacefully protest was shot. Do you have any information? There is speculation that this was a security detail in a leading member of Congress's security detail, a Democrat. What can you tell us in terms of who shot Ashli Babbitt? What do you know Mr. President?

Trump: So—I've heard that. I will tell you they know who shot Ashli Babbitt. They're protecting that person. I've heard also that it was head of security for a certain high official—a Democrat—and we'll see because it's gonna come out. It's gonna come out. (Rupar 2021)

Memorials and merchandise were quick to pop up in right-wing spaces. Kmart and Sears sold a shirt that read "Ashli Babbitt American Patriot" with a rustic outline of an American flag on it (it was eventually pulled from all stores) (Hutson 2021). QAnon Youtubers wore shirts that said "Who Killed Ashli Babbitt?" in support. Poems were written. Raps were composed. Babbitt's family created and sold their own t-shirt design stating that Babbitt was murdered by Capitol police. Babbitt's death was also memorialized on flag designs. One showed a woman in front of the Capitol with blood on her neck. Another version of this flag adds the Star of David on the

Capitol building with the word “vengeance” in a gothic font. Figure 4 below shows both designs side by side.



Figure 4. Ashli Babbitt Flag Design (adl.org)

When the January 6th public hearings began in June of 2022, a man wearing a shirt featuring Babbitt can be seen in the background (Figure 5). The man wearing the shirt is Gary McBride, a self-identified “J6 Archivist” (McBride is somewhat controversial in the J6 community, but has his own news network and following).



Figure 5. Shirt reading "Ashli Babbitt Murdered by Capitol Police January 6th 2021" spotted during public hearings (Rupar 2023).

Many of the insurrectionists believe Babbitt, a 14-year Air Force veteran, to be a hero and a martyr who died defending America. Patriot Depot on the page selling a t-shirt that reads “Justice for Ashli Babbitt is justice for all” writes:

Ashli Babbitt was shot dead for a non-violent protest at the US Capitol. Ashli Babbitt was an air force veteran and American patriot, who was shot dead to make an "example" for any other Trump supporter who may protest the US capitol. To this day, the police officer that shot Ashli Babbitt has still not been brought to justice. (Patriot Depot)

Bruce Dale Wise of the Classical Poets Society (a nonprofit organization that has committed to reviving traditional poetry, but continually finds itself in controversy for posting racist, xenophobic, and transphobic poems), eulogizes Babbitt in his poem titled “A True American: January 6, 2021”:

Within the U.S. Capitol, there still remains a debt.
O, don’t forget her—Ashli Babbitt—who was shot to death.
An Air Force veteran and California resident,
she had gone to D.C., protesting the fake President.
Who murdered her—that patriot—protesting the deceit,
the national enshrining of complete dishonesty?
O, don’t forget her, though the hateful bullet pierced her through,
a martyr for America, a martyr for the truth.
O, don’t forget her—Ashli Babbitt—who was shot to death—
for longing to be free and breathe free, she gave her last breath.

The comments on the poem range from discussing the tenors and form to whether or not the 2020 election was legitimate. The majority of comments are from Trump supporters and other right-wing believers, several of which are fellow poets in the Classical Society. One commenter says they were brought to tears reading the last line. The insurrectionists were truly moved by the idea that Babbitt was murdered by a Democrat, a traitorous Capitol police officer, or an inside ANTIFA agent. They weren’t quite sure which theory to believe, but all were unified

around mourning Babbitt and seeking justice. Shrines popped up all over the US to honor the fallen hero and some called her the first victim of the second civil war.

Babbitt's mother and family routinely participates in a nightly candle light vigils for Babbitt and all J6ers who are incarcerated. Trump reportedly called Babbitt's family to offer his condolences and still commemorates her birthday and the anniversary of the 6th.

For Memorial Day in 2023, J6 Patriot News posted this about the holiday:

Memorial Day—We recognize Ashli Babbitt

There is no word that can console a mother whose daughter was unjustly murdered by a despicable cop – Lt Byrd – on January 6th 2021. We join Micki Witthoeft and Aaron in the mourning of this wonderful woman, wife, and daughter. A veteran, she served in the Air Force for 14 years. She will not be forgotten though the military denied her a proper military burial and honor! Set a candle in your window to remember her. Micki, since the murder of her daughter, passionately advocates for the political prisoners [insurrectionists who have been sentenced to time in prison] especially those incarcerated at the DC Gulag in Washington DC. She has been supporting them every night in from of the jail for several weeks. On September 14, 2022, President Trump called Micki during the nightly vigil. The President is not about to forget this injustice. **We must not either.** The President kindly commemorated Ashli's birthday last year and did again this year at his latest rally. (Goodwyn 2023)

Participants in rallies around America on January 6th, 2021, now call themselves "J6ers"—a tight-knit community of true patriots and Trump supporters. This community has rallied around each other amidst arrests and trials. They consider anyone arrested because of their actions on the 6th to be a political prisoner. They believe that Trump is still president and will return to office. They wait for when he can conduct a "real investigation" into the 6th. They

seek justice and “truth” and hope to find the ANTIFA or BLM agents who were truly responsible for Babbitt’s death.

Babbitt’s family filed a suit against the US Government claiming wrongful death, but the lawsuit was dismissed. Babbitt remains a key symbol for justice and unity among the J6 community and her QAnon comrades.

Lt. Michael Byrd—a Hero?

Capitol police officer Michael Byrd’s name was posted online by right-wing insurrectionists in the days after the insurrection. When he went public as the officer who shot Babbitt in August of 2021, he said he had been in hiding after receiving violent threats, including racist attacks and threats to cut off his head (Schapiro 2023). Byrd opened up in a dignified interview with NBC’s Lester Holt. The interview took place within the Capitol itself, with clips of Byrd walking through its beautiful spaces, and talking gently.

In the interview, Holt asked Byrd to walk him through what happened on the 6th, his view of his actions, and some of the points of controversy that insurrectionists and Republican-allies could attack him for publicly. When he heard of Trump’s critique of his actions, Byrd replied, “It’s disheartening,” but continued to say that he would still protect Trump and do his job if he were assigned to his detail. Byrd also addressed a previous charge in his career as an officer where he left his weapon unattended in a Capitol bathroom. He spoke with humility and continually referred to his actions as “doing his job.”

The interview made it clear that Byrd wasn’t politically motivated, negligent, or angry at Trump. He was painted as a man doing his job and protecting the individuals in the House chamber as was his duty during the time of the insurrection. “I know that day, I

saved countless lives. I know members of Congress, as well as my fellow officers and staff, were in serious danger. And that's my job," Byrd stated (Schapiro 2021).

The investigations into the shooting by the Capitol police and the Justice Department exonerated Byrd and agreed the use of force was justified. In a press release by the Capitol police, they wrote, "The actions of the officer in this case potentially saved Members and staff from serious injury and possible death from a large crowd of rioters who forced their way into the U.S. Capitol and to the House Chamber where Members and staff were steps away" (USCP 2021). When Holt quoted this portion of the report to Byrd, Byrd replied with emotion, "those words meant a lot because that's exactly what I did on that day. That was my mission. That was what I prepared for" (Schapiro 2021).

On MSNBC, Congresswoman Madeline Dean commented on Byrd's interview and showed a clip of Byrd instructing members of Congress to put gas masks on during the insurrection:

I was staggered to learn that it was Lt. Byrd who made that announcement on the floor of the House. For the last seven months, I have wondered [who was] trying to help save our lives. I was up in the gallery that day as they told us first, "sit down, prepare to lie down, and get your gas masks out from under your seat..." that announcement: "they've infiltrated the Rotunda and tear gas has been deployed." I have wondered for months who did that to save our lives. What I want people to know is for one, thank you Lt. Byrd, thank you. Number two... while he was protecting our lives at one door... Out the other side, they were taking the Vice President... other members of leadership, other members of Congress... Those rioters came to kill everyone in the line of succession... my reaction [to Byrd's interview] is just an extraordinary thank you to Lt. Byrd... What courage, what decency and integrity... This is a man who has some sense of duty that is absolutely within his core... you can see the extraordinary integrity in him... (MSNBC 2021)

Other news stations picked up the interview and news articles popped up everywhere, recounting Lt. Byrd's interview and his actions on the 6th. Mentions of Babbitt

varied in length, some recounted her history in the Air Force and loyalty to QAnon and Trump. None painted her as a martyr or a hero fighting for the republic. They instead talked about Lt. Byrd and how honor- and duty-bound he was. His role as a Capitol police officer was depoliticized and referred to as “a job.” Even news sources that stood with BLM and usually critiqued police were quick to talk about this hero who was doing his job. Articles critiqued Trump and his rallies telling his followers that they should “go get him” and attack Byrd for killing Ashli Babbitt. They separated Byrd and Capitol police from other state police—who are flawed and open to a host of critiques—and praised them for their actions on the 6th and honored them as heroes.

Biden gave 13 people, including Byrd, the Presidential Citizens Metal for their actions related to the 6th. In the small ceremony, Biden said:

It's not an exaggeration to say America owes you all—I really mean this—a debt, a debt of gratitude, one we can never fully repay unless we live up to what you did... All of it, all of it was fueled by lies about the 2020 election...But on this day two years ago, our democracy held because we the people, as the constitution refers to us, we the people did not flinch. We the people endured. We the people prevailed. (Scott and Hutzler 2023).

Lt. Michael Byrd was considered a hero, one of many who saved American democracy and the legitimacy of its institutions. He was depoliticized, not a member of a controversial occupation like the police force, but simply a man doing his job—at least that’s what they hope will be remembered of him and that day.

Reciprocity: Linking the legacies

The death of Ashli Babbitt is easily viewable online from several viewpoints. Sullivan’s recording is the clearest, but there are several other videos from nearby insurrectionists as well. Regardless of the fact that there is visual record of what occurred,

the fact that Babbitt was in the middle of a violent insurrection, or the fact that she was trying to break into the Speakers Lobby with a crowd chanting “Hang Mike Pence,” insurrectionists insist that Babbitt was no threat and that her death was unwarranted. Her death has become a mythologized tale of a martyr and American hero. It is doused in conspiracy—was this politically motivated by the Democrats? Was Babbitt tricked and used by ANTIFA? Was her death faked? Is this a police cover up? These ideas still shore up the belief that Babbitt was a martyr in the fight to regain America, its institutions, and its culture. The idea that any of Babbitt’s actions were illegitimate or unamerican is so threatening that it’s dismissed immediately. The visual record? That doesn’t matter anymore. What matters are the stories surrounding the event and people’s beliefs about themselves in relation to them.

The J6 community is full is splits in the minutia. The subscribe to different levels and versions of conspiracies, but they are united around one thing: their belief in Trump, election fraud, and the martyrdom of Babbitt.

Babbitt wasn’t the only person who died that day, however. One man, Kevin Greeson, died of a heart attack while on the phone with his wife. Another, Benjamin Philips, suffered a stroke before reaching the building. Officer Brian Sicknick was struck in the head with a fire extinguisher during the fight at the Capitol, returned to duty, and later died after suffering two strokes. Another woman, Rosanne Boyland, died during the push into the tunnel during the insurrection. Initial reports speculated that she was crushed to death by the crowd; however, the Chief Medical Examiner released a report that said Boyland died from acute ketamine intoxication. Other conspiracies were quick to populate online and some believed she was

beaten to death by Capitol police. Boyland's death, however, did not receive the same treatment as Babbitt's. Trump did not comment on it or call her mother on her birthday. There was no merchandise sold or flags made. No poems written or memorials created around the country. Instead, the only people who were left to mourn Boyland were her friends and family, who are still left with questions.

Babbitt and Boyland had similar beliefs, existed in similar social circles, and both were on the front lines of the insurrection. Boyland's death, however, points to the insurrectionists for culpability. It paints them as a violent mob that could not stop to help one of its members in distress—a group that failed to look out for their own. Babbitt's death, however, creates an innocent victim, shot by a traitorous, Capitol police officer, defending an illegitimate election.

Lt. Michael Brown is a Black man and Capitol police officer. Both of these elements make him an easy villain for white supremacists and the J6 community. For them, Byrd did not represent the upstanding police they believe in for "Back-the-Blue," but rather a traitor. A political agent protecting democrats and a fraudulent election. He was part of the vast conspiracy to keep America's institutions in the hands of a liberal elite, rather than with Trump and the people. Because of the circumstances around Babbitt's death, it is easier to turn her into a martyr rather than anyone else who died that day. Babbitt becomes a martyr, like one of the many men and women who died fighting the British in the Revolution or the Union in the Civil War. The cultural memory surrounding Babbitt endeavors to hold her up alongside the Founding Fathers and the great acts of the people who built America in the revolutionary and antebellum periods.

Conclusion

There are two diverging mnemonic processes chronicling the events of January 6th: the selective commemoration of Ashli Babbitt as a martyr by J6ers and the indiscriminate commemoration of Lt. Michael Byrd as a “man doing his job.” President Biden and members of the governing institutions of America have attempted to depoliticize Byrd’s membership in the police force and commemorate him for upholding the rules and procedures of his job, thus saving the institutional integrity of America itself. Ashli Babbitt, on the other hand, has been pulled out of thousands of insurrectionists who participated that day, fought, were injured, or have been jailed since.

Studying the developments of these two cultural memories of the same event suggests that the J6 community and its allied groups like QAnon and Trump followers engage in similar mnemonical processes as the memory creation around the founding fathers in American cultural memory. The same kind of mnemonical process that took place in America prior to the Civil War, when unrest and the very future of the nation was at stake. This speaks to the use of the confederate flag during the insurrection as well and the overlap between J6ers and those who still commemorate the confederacy. Figure 6 below shows an insurrectionist walking through the Capitol with a confederate flag over their shoulder.



Figure 6. Man holding a confederate flag in the Capitol. Miscellaneous Archives, drive_download.

The institution, however, has moved on from the founding and Civil War. Instead, they commemorate individuals for their fulfillment of administrative goals and procedures. They believe in the stability of the government and the nation and perhaps take for granted that the Civil War has already been fought and is long over.

The J6 community and the institution are intrinsically linked through their inheritance of American cultural memory and their abilities to act as carriers and creators of future cultural memory. However, they remain separate in their motivating beliefs, ideas of self, and ideas of the future of the nation. Through their actions, however much they try to delegitimize and ignore the other side, they reaffirm their existence and ability to contribute to the cultural memory of America. This suggests that *both* the insurrectionists and the people inhabiting the institutions that they view as illegitimate and evil co-create the possibilities of America's future.

They continually respond to each other: one stuck in the founding of America, one stuck in the legitimacy of its institution and party systems. Neither able to step into the possibilities of the future unburdened.

CH. 3: Flying the Coup—American Flag Apparel and the January 6th Insurrection

"The first spiritual want of a barbarous man is decoration."
Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus

A version of this chapter has been previously published in the Palgrave Handbook to Fashion and Politics (forthcoming Summer 2024).

Introduction

Whether it was a hat, a mask, or a cape, the American flag's many iterations made a stunning appearance at the insurrection (see Figure 7 below). The familiar sea of red and white stripes and white stars on blue signaled a thrash of patriotism emboldened by MAGA extremism and white supremacy. This isn't the first time the American flag has been caught up in controversy: when Vietnam veterans burned the flag or hung it upside down from the Statue of Liberty, or when Occupy Wall Street created flags with corporate logos instead of stars, for instance. For conservatives, these actions are disrespectful to the flag, the country, and their values. Political questions about the symbolism of the flag, its creation, and most importantly, its desecration are negotiated in courts (see *Texas v. Johnson* 491 U.S. 397), in the media, and in everyday conversations. Teachout (2010) writes the American flag "has stood, at different times, for radical democracy, opposition to immigration, the abolition of slavery, unregulated capitalism, segregation, integration, and a hawkish war policy, among many other things" (4). The flag is one of several cultural icons that provide the basis for the mythologies of American culture. It appears on t-shirts, wallets, keychains, pet collars, swimming suits, underwear, home décor, the list goes on... Some even get the flag tattooed on their bodies. It's a powerful symbol of American patriotism.



Figure 7. Snapchat from January 6th showing insurrectionists on scaffolding in American flag gear. Snapchat, stories, W7_EDIX

This chapter looks at the use of flags as apparel and costuming in the January 6th insurrection and the memory-building of insurrectionists. What does it mean to don the American flag while inciting a coup at the Capitol? Utilizing literature on collective memory, this chapter posits that the insurrectionists relied on a highly theatrical form of political flag culture that included the visual cues of costumes, e.g. wearing a flag as a cape, to reenact the founding as a form of mnemonic appropriation. Kidd (2007) writes, “Unlike many European nations, the United States lacks shared cultural symbols that help define national identity, such as a royal

family, a national religion, or an ethnic costume. The flag has filled that role, and become a sacred cultural symbol that establishes our national identity” (57). Draped in the flag, insurrectionists claimed an epochal shift in American history: a second founding, beholden to the values of Trump and his MAGA extremists. The insurrectionists relied on the symbolic power of the flag. Kidd (2007) states, “As symbols, flags create solidarity and unity, represent common interests and points of reference; flags are used by groups to release emotions important in developing nationalism. When apparel items use the flag as the dominant design motif, the apparel items also become symbols” (56). For American cultural memory, flags are indispensable tools.

The question of how the flag can mean opposing things at the same time, is that of cultural memory-making. There is no monolithic American culture. It ebbs and flows and varies region to region and community to community. The January 6th insurrection is an example of cultural memory-making that recreates and negotiates cultural memories and reduces them to mythic archetypes (Novick 1999). According to Novick (1999), the mythologization of events suspends them out of context, de-historicizes them and increases their affective persuasion, in order for them to become mythic, cultural memories. Crises like revolutionary wars or insurrections are formative cultural ruptures that spur on the clarification of old and the creation of new cultural memories (Schwartz 2000). The insurrection is not just a failed attempt to stop the count of electoral votes and keep Donald Trump as President. It is a key moment of memory-building for a particular sect of American culture that utilizes the flag as its rallying cry.

Political Flag Culture

The American flag has been political from its inception. Teachout (2010) writes, “the act of patriotic dissent began to foster a different kind of patriotic sentiment: a growing sense of ‘nation,’ a sense of community that could stand politically separate from Great Britain” (25). As the rebellion grew, so did the use of flags and liberty poles (tall ships’ masts placed in public spaces where colonists would gather, discuss the politics of the day, and often protest). Dozens of flag designs were used between 1765 and 1775 representing each colony and the burgeoning sense of union. For colonists, the use of a flag itself, regardless of design, symbolized defiance. Teachout continues to say that the US “developed its own iconography of protest,” and that the use of flags and liberty poles “expressed an emergent political flag culture” (25-6).

Teachout (2010) describes the creation of two separate types of patriotism connected to this flag culture. Humanitarian patriotism “represents an ideological commitment to democracy as a political and social system” and can be seen in the likes of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. (5). Nationalist patriotism, on the other hand, comes about in the early twentieth century. “It presupposed a citizenry defined not only by a political covenant but also by a shared cultural, social, economic, ethnic, and geographic heritage,” says Teachout. Those with nationalist patriotism are:

more likely to think in terms of duty... they were more willing to sacrifice the rights of individuals for what they perceived to be the good of the country, privileging loyalty above skepticism. Their patriotism reflected this deference, using songs, rituals, and symbols to create a culture of reverence. (6)

Nationalist and humanitarian patriotisms are not discreet categories: they intertwine and blend. However, for those who marched on the Capitol, their reverence for the flag and

America created a fervent nationalistic style of patriotism that is easily subsumed into authoritarianism because it prioritizes the myths of the founding and people like Thomas Jefferson over historical and scientific truths. Patriotism here means believing in a particular account of American cultural history and viewing other accounts as inherently threatening. When other subcultures of American cultural memory come to light or become more dominant, for these patriots, the only way that their cultural memory can remain true, is if all of these other accounts are discredited or destroyed. This is why who uses the flag, who is an American, and what American history is, is so controversial.

Those with nationalistic patriotism are also much more susceptible to white supremacist cultural narratives. Each surge of the KKK's membership and activity in history coincides with a surge in electoral power that destabilizes the existing power structure. Whether it was emancipation, the rise in parochial schooling in the 1920s, or school desegregation, the KKK utilized the opportunity to demonize particular groups in society. McVeigh and Estep (2019) write:

Native-born whites, who previously enjoyed these privileges all by themselves, saw these changes diluting their social status. So the Klan constructed narratives that depicted ascendant cultural groups—former slaves, Catholics, immigrants, Jews, or [Black] Americans—as culturally and morally inferior. (52)

Groups like the KKK utilized these moments that they understood to be crises to shore up their own cultural narratives of supremacy and recruit those who were also feeling destabilized.

When Donald Trump became president he took to the campaign trail and the White House with this same nationalistic brand of patriotism. The call to "Make America Great Again" pulled the flag out of its frozen symbolism of 9/11 and the War on Terror and imbued it once again with nationalistic patriotism. However, like the many flag designs used by colonists during

the revolution, the new flag designs are not just that of the old red, white, and blue. These designs contain the Trump-brand, MAGA-extremist designs, blue lives matter, white supremacist iconography, and recreations of flag designs from early colonists. These designs are made into hats, t-shirts, sweatshirts, coffee mugs, and so on, and they designate the wearer as a “true patriot.”

The History of Flags: From Ancient Nations to the American Colonies

The use of flags in militaries dates as far back as ancient Egypt (2,700-1,100 B.C.E). According to Diodorus of Sicily, an ancient Greek historian, ancient Egyptian soldiers “carried an animal at the end of a spear as their standard” (Preble 1872, 42). While not made of fabric, these carvings or sculptures represented the Pharaoh, a sacred person or object, an animal, or other emblematic device. These spears or poles were utilized by soldiers as rallying points in battle. This was a common practice in many ancient nations. Assyrians (2,600-1,600 B.C.E.) also utilized sculptures atop poles carried by charioteers. The Israelites in the time of Moses (1,350-1,000 B.C.E.), the book of Numbers says Moses directed his followers to “pitch their tents every man by his own camp, and every man by his own standard,” and later directs every man “to pitch his own standard of their father’s house far off about the tabernacle” (Numbers 1:52 and 2:2, KJV). Each tribe had their own symbol—an ox, a lion, an eagle—and each family had their own symbol as well—an ear of corn, a wolf, a sword, a snake, etc. Ancient Greeks (1,200-323 B.C.E.) would hoist a piece of armor up on a spear. Preble states, “The Athenians bore an owl, the emblem of Minerva, and the olive for a standard. Other nations [used] the effigies of their tutelary gods, or their particular symbols at the end of a spear” (1872, 43). The standard of ancient Persia (559-331 B.C.E) was a deeply sacred object. Originally made from the leather

apron of the blacksmith Kairah, “it was embroidered with gold, and enlarged from time to time with costly silk...and was decorated with gems of inestimable value. With this standard the fate of the kingdom was believed by superstitious Persians to be connected” (Preble 1872, 44).

It wasn’t until the Romans (625 B.C.E. to 476 C.E.) when cloth began to be used as standards, demarcating the tents of different persons of authority within their camps. When a general hoisted a red flag in camp, it meant to prepare for battle. Even in battle, however, the Romans still utilized sculptures atop spears. To bear the standard of the nation was a position of honor and valor and to lose the standard was a capital crime. Sometimes to energize the soldiers in battle, generals would throw their standard among the enemy. Later, in the time of the Prophet Muhammad (610-632 C.E.), his armies used flags made of cloth in battle. Imperial China (900-1800 C.E.) utilized silk flags, the imperial standard being a dragon on yellow silk.

Regardless of nation or era, flags and their precursors were emotionally charged symbols that carried with them the history and future of the nation. They were carried proudly into battle, defended from the enemy, destroyed or hidden in defeat, and placed outside temples and sacred spaces. Flags were utilized in ceremonies before battle and were seen as symbolizing the fate of the nation. To bear the flag was a position of honor and importance. With the increased availability of cloth, dyes, and workmanship, the use of flags by militaries and nations largely continued into the present moment.

The contemporary use of flags began as the use of small streamers and banners to differentiate military forces from one brigade and another, not unlike their ancient counterparts. When the use of naval forces became widespread, the flags (also called “colors” or “standards”) “worn at the mastheads of national vessels [marked] the rank or quality of the

person commanding a squadron or fleet” (Preble 1872, 12). The position of the flag on the ship (at the main, the fore, or mizzen mastheads) also communicated more characteristics about the authority of the ship and its place in the fleet.

In the early American colonies, most colonies utilized the flags of the King, though the politics in Britain were such that flags and sovereigns changed frequently. The Mayflower most likely hoisted the flag of the cross of St. George or the King’s colors. The use of red cross of St. George is documented as early as 1632, when, in Salem, a Mr. Endicott cut the flag bearing the red cross. This defacement of the flag was seen by the courts as possibly inciting a rebellion against the crown and they required that the flag bearer of Salem, Richard Davenport, appear in court and explain the matter. It was discovered that the flag had been cut not out of rebellion against England, but out of religious conservatism and superstition. Preble (1872) states, “the mutilation complained of was done not from disloyalty to the flag but from an entire conscientious conviction that it was idolatrous to allow it to remain, and that having been given to the king of England by the pope, it was a relic of the anti-Christ” (120). Endicott was banned from holding any public office for a year as punishment for his actions.

Salem wasn’t the only colony having misgivings about flying the standard bearing the red cross. After his time in court, Endicott joined other colonists in Boston to debate the lawfulness of bearing the cross of St. George. After two meetings of debate, the court could not reach an agreement about the flags. The entire case was referred to the next general court and the military commissioners ordered that until that court came to a decision, all flags bearing the cross of St. George should be taken down. Letters were written to England to help decide the matter. Preble (1872) writes, “in December, 1635, it is recorded that the military commissioners

‘appointed colors for every company,’ leaving out the cross on all of them and appointing that the king’s arms should be put into them, and in the colors of Castle Island, Boston” (1872, 121). While this may have appeased the religious colonists, several complaints were raised by sailors who charged their captains and fellow mates as traitors to the crown. Several authorities suggested that the king’s colors at least be flown at the fort at Castle Island, where ships pass by. Preble says of the fort, “so fearful were the authorities of tolerating a symbol of idolatry, they declined receiving the colors [sets of the king’s flags]” (121). It was eventually decided that the fort would fly the king’s colors *only* when a ship was passing, but that it was to be taken down if none were. The practice of flying the cross of St. George was discontinued in the rest of the colonies. Preble documents that the colonists’ belief that the red cross was idolatrous continued for at least another 60 years (127).

It wasn’t until 1686 that a flag was designed to represent the union of more than one colony. Preble (1872) writes, “The departure from the authorized English flag and assumption of standards of their own by the colonists evinces a growing feeling of independence among the colonies” (130). This is the beginning of the colonists’ own political flag culture that utilizes flags and their designs as mechanisms of rebellion.

Political Flag Culture in Early America

When the detested Stamp Act was repealed in 1766, the colonists celebrated by having bonfires, setting up liberty poles, and buying English goods (Preble 1872, 133). However, the repeal of the Stamp Act was a false promise of liberty. Preble writes that “citizens were seized by the British men of war in the harbor and made to serve in the crews. Fresh taxes were levied. The soldiers openly insulted the people, and in a few weeks cut down their liberty pole”

(134). Colonists quickly raised a new liberty pole, only for it to be cut down again by British soldiers the following Spring. The day after this second pole was cut down, the Sons of Liberty constructed a new liberty pole, this time with iron around its base to protect it. The flag flown at its height read “To his most gracious majesty George III, Mr. Pitt and liberty” (Preble 1872, 134). Even though British soldiers attacked this liberty pole on several occasions, it managed to stay put for the next three years. British soldiers finally cut it down in January of 1770. The Sons of Liberty were not deterred, however, by these continual affronts and this time bought a small plot of land next to the ruins of the previous liberty poles. Preble (1872) recounts:

They escorted their new mast, six horses, grey with ribbons, drawing it, a full band going before, and three flags flying free, inscribed *Liberty and Property*. They took the mast to the field, and dug a hole twelve feet deep in which they stepped the liberty pole, after girding it with iron two-thirds its length from the ground, defying the red coats to cut it down. On it they shipped a topmast twenty-two feet long on which was inscribed the word *Liberty*. This pole was cut down by the British in 1776. (134)

Often times, colonists would gather under trees and hoist flags up in their branches or attach poles to their trunks. These trees were called “liberty trees.” The Declaration of Independence was first read underneath the liberty tree in Charleston (Preble 1872, 135). The liberty trees in Boston, Charleston, and other cities were cut or burned down by the British. With each liberty tree and pole the British destroyed, the more disdain and resentment they triggered in the colonists. During the years leading up to the revolution, the use of flags became increasingly linked with ideas of liberty and defying the crown. Even though there were many different designs used by each colony, the use of flags themselves became a symbol of the union of the colonies and anti-British sentiment. One design that was able to be documented was a white flag with a green pine tree and the motto “an appeal to Heaven” (Preble 1872,

142). This flag was flown on various American privateers that were captured by the British. One Commodore wrote:

The first cruise I made was in Jan., 1776, in the schooner Franklin of 70 tons, equipped by order of Gen. Washington... my wife made the banner I fought under, the field of which was white, and the union green made therein in the figure of a pine tree, made of cloth of her own purchasing, at her own expense. (Preble 1872, 142)

The wives of many soldiers made flags and presented them to commanders. These flags were deeply valued, almost sacred, objects that were defended at all costs against British forces in battle. When struck by a bullet on October 9th, 1778, Sargent Jasper—the fourth man in the regiment to defend the flag to his death—said to his commander as he died, “Tell Mrs. Elliot I lost my life supporting the colors she gave our regiment” (Preble 1872, 144). When the Declaration of Independence was read by Major Elliot in Charleston in 1776, flags created by his wife, Mrs. Elliot, were hoisted from the liberty pole. When Charleston was surrendered to the British in 1780, the British collected the flags as trophies. 1776 is also the first documented use of a flag bearing the design of a snake on yellow reading “Don’t tread on me”—a still popular design among libertarians and conservatives. With each new iteration of flag designs that swept the colony, a stronger and more pointed sense of patriotism emerged, strengthening the sense of rebellion and union in the colonies.

The origin of the red and white striped flag with stars against blue in the upper left corner is somewhat muddled. Some suggest that the design was taken from Dutch colonists, while others say it was a simple transmutation of military rank stripes utilized by the continental army (Preble 1872, 157). The use of stripes, either alternating red and white or blue and white, became widespread before the addition of the patch of stars. These striped designs often had pine trees on them, various phrases, or rattlesnakes. One flag is documented as

having “a snake with thirteen rattles, the fourteenth budding” (Preble 1872, 166). Preble traces several historical accounts of men claiming that they were in fact the first to fly the original flag of the union (the red and white stripes and thirteen stars on blue), but with incisive details of letters and other historical documents, Preble finds these accounts to be nothing more than false rumors started by men trying to enhance their reputations. Preble (1872) writes:

The official legal origin of the grand union striped flag...is to this day involved in obscurity. It is singular that no mention of their official establishment can be found in the private diaries of the times, the official and private correspondence since made public of the prominent actors of the revolution, the newspapers of the times or the journals of the provincial or continental congresses. We simply know from a variety of testimony, that there was a striped continental flag, representing the majesty and authority of the thirteen *United Colonies*.(175)

It wasn't until June 14th, 1777, that the American congress resolved “that the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes alternate red and white: that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation” (Journals of Congress quotes in Preble 1872, 187). The use of the snake, though extremely popular during the revolution, was discarded due to its unsavory connotation in Christianity as the cause of Adam and Eve being cast out of the Garden of Eden and stars were substituted, most likely in reference to George Washington's personal flag. The first anniversary of independence, July 4th, 1777, was a boisterous celebration with displays of the flag on ships and cannon fire. Over the years, the political use and nature of flags remained firmly embedded in American culture.

History of the Flag as Apparel

The popularity of the American flag as apparel is hardly a long-held tradition. Prior to the Civil War, the flag was primarily a maritime device used to designate American ships at sea. Kidd (2007) finds that prior to the Spanish American War in 1898, American flag apparel was

few and far between, mostly seen in political cartoons or used in advertisements. The Spanish American War, however, was the first time that the US fought under one flag and manufacturers jumped onto the burgeoning sense of patriotism. The flag was suddenly used for many advertisements and other commercial uses. Seeing this popularity, Kidd (2007) writes:

Apparel manufacturers also followed suit and, unlike previous wars, produced and sold a wide range of flag-related clothing and accessory items: flag lapel pins, flag buttons, belt buckles, red-white-and-blue neckwear, hatbands, parasols, ribbons, garters, petticoats, and stockings. There was even an account of one of the most popular items of women's wear, the shirtwaist, designed specifically using the flag and flag motifs. (44)

While many had no problems wearing the flag, there was a growing flag protectionist movement that was against any kind of flag-based apparel. The Daughters of the American Revolution were at the helm of this movement. Kidd (2007) recounts "complaints were registered with them in the mid-1890s about the flag being used 'as a costume to bedeck stilt walkers, circus clowns, prize fighters, and variety players or gaiety girls'" (46). It wasn't until the late 1920s with textile worker strikes that the flag became a part of protest apparel. During this time, states also began to pass their own flag desecration statutes that addressed commercial and political uses of the flag. In 1942, the US Flag Code established rules for the display and care of the American flag that specified apparel for the first time. In Section 8 on "Respect for the Flag" it states:

- d. The flag should never be used as wearing apparel, bedding, or drapery....
- g. The flag should never have placed upon it, nor on any part of it, nor attached to it any mark, insignia, letter, word, figure, design, picture, or drawing of any nature...
- i. The flag should never be used for advertising purposes in any manner whatsoever...
- j. No part of the flag should ever be used as a costume or athletic uniform. (The Flag Code)

However, the flag code does not specify any penalties for violating its rules, nor is there any specified mechanism of enforcement. The flag code was more like guidelines, than actual rules.

It wasn't until the 1960s and the Vietnam War that American flag apparel found itself again in the midst of controversy. Kidd (2007) says:

Members of the establishment, the hawks, generally wore the flag in the form of a lapel pin or flag patches over their hearts or on their sleeves. Members of the anti-establishment, the doves, wore flag shirts and vests, used flags as shawls or blankets, and wore flag patches on their blue jeans, often over holes in the seat or knees... To members of the establishment, ultimate disrespect to the flag was its use as or on clothing, especially as a patch on blue jeans by young anti-establishment war protesters. (54)

By the late 1960s, most states had passed flag anti-desecration laws that were used primarily to arrest and charge anti-war protestors who burned the flag or wore flag patches on their apparel. One of the several cases brought under these statutes is *Hoffman v. United States* (1971). Hoffman was arrested in front of the Cannon Office Building on Capitol Hill, where he was responding to a subpoena to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Hoffman was playing with a yoyo when three Capitol police officers approached and arrested him in an apparent struggle. The shirt in question was ripped and police found that Hoffman had painted a Viet Cong flag on his back. Hoffman was arrested for violating the flag code by "knowingly [casting] contempt upon the flag of the United States by publicly mutilating, defacing and defiling" it (*Hoffman v. United States*, 445 F.2d 226, 227 D.C. Cir. 1971). The circuit court didn't have a strong case to condemn Hoffman, but stuck to the point that Hoffman had mutilated or defiled the flag by pinning two political buttons on his shirt. Hoffman was sentenced to 30 days in jail or a \$100 fine. In his defense, Hoffman said:

I had a shirt that resembled the American flag. I wore the shirt because I was going before the Un-American Activities Committee of the House of Representatives, and I don't particularly consider that committee American in the tradition as I understand it... and I wore the shirt to show that we were in the tradition of the founding fathers of this country, and that that committee wasn't. That's why I wore it. (*Hoffman v. United States*, 445 F.2d 226, 227 D.C. Cir. 1971)

Hoffman appealed his case. The D.C. Court of Appeals dismissed the case, stating that Hoffman's shirt merely *resembled* the flag and was not created from a flag. When Hoffman later appeared on *The Merv Griffin Show* in 1970, again wearing a American flag shirt, the network blacked out his shirt which sparked controversy (Jack Gould 1970).

The D.C. Court of Appeals was one of many venues that negotiated whether the use of the flag for apparel was desecration. It was a political question that had yet to be settled. Some courts upheld convictions and others did not. Kidd (2007) writes, "Court decisions appeared entirely subjective, with the most vocal protesters wearing flag-themed clothing receiving the harshest punishments" (55). Wearing the flag as a shirt, vest, or on a patch became an easy target to bring charges against anti-war protesters.

It didn't take long after the Vietnam War for US flag apparel, much like Hoffman's shirt, to increase in popularity. Patches, vest, or t-shirts that would have caused controversy in the 1960s became commonplace. While both liberal and conservative groups utilized the flag in their apparel in the 1960s, the dominant political group shifted from liberal to conservative after the 1960s. Kidd (2007) states, "As 'owners' of the symbol, the use of the flag in apparel items was culturally sanctioned, even endorsed, because flag-themed items represented their [conservative] political point of view" (56). Wearing US flag apparel was now in line with the conservative majority and endorsed by the institutions themselves. Charges against people wearing the flag stopped making their way to the courts and politicians were seen wearing flag apparel beyond just a pin in their lapel. "Today," Kidd states, "people most likely to be wearing flag-themed clothing tend to identify themselves as conservative, with a strong sense of nationalism and patriotism" (56). Kidd continues to argue that flag apparel becoming

increasingly commonplace is due to the consumer culture in the US, which has turned the flag into a commercial product “blurring the consideration of flag-themed apparel items as desecration” (57). Kidd continues, “Flag-themed apparel and other items are good business, and, as long as the demand is there, the supply will keep coming” (57).

White-Supremacy, Trump, and the Flag

Xenophobia and racism were the main elements of Trump’s campaign strategy, “America First.” When Donald Trump became president he took to the campaign trail and the white house with a nationalistic fervor. McVeigh and Estep (2019) write, “[Trump’s slogan] suggested he would fight for those who believed they were losing their country to racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; to women; to LGBTQ rights activists; and to a highly-educated coastal ‘liberal elite,’” (48). Trump’s presidential campaign followed the same formula that groups like the KKK had throughout history: capitalizing on white America’s destabilization and fear of losing their cultural and social supremacy. Whether all Trump voters were aware of the inherent racism in their politics, all were keenly aware of a sense that they were losing “their America,” not realizing that what made America theirs to begin with was white supremacy and the politics of exclusion. So while the Trump campaign leveraged white anxiety to their benefit, members of white supremacist groups like the Proud Boys, or the KKK, or the Three Percenters, gained a political ally that refused to condemn their beliefs and touted their rhetoric from behind the presidential seal.

When the Unite the Right rally took place in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, its organizing leader, Jason Kessler, was pictured carrying an American flag. Marching alongside Confederate battle flags, KKK and white supremacist symbols, and flags with Nazi iconography,

the American flag fit right in—a design among comrades. When people looked to then President Trump to condemn the actions of the white supremacists, Trump stood bold in the White House Press Room in front of a blue wall and four American flags. He wore a flag pin on his lapel. Trump said, “We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides, on many sides” (White House Press Pool Report, August 12, 2017). This remark, applicable to both the white supremacists and the counter protesters, sparked outrage. When questioned on this remark a couple days later, Trump flustered. This time standing in front of a marble wall in Trump Tower with one American flag and one bearing the presidential seal, and with the flag lapel pin still in place, Trump stated:

Okay, what about the alt-left that came charging at... as you say, the alt-right? Do they have any semblance of guilt? Let me ask you this: What about the fact that they came charging with clubs in their hands, swinging clubs? Do they have any problem? I think they do... you had a group on one side that was bad, and you had a group on the other side that was also very violent. And nobody wants to say that, but I’ll say it right now. You had a group -- you had a group on the other side that came charging in, without a permit, and they were very, very violent... *you had some very bad people in that group* (referring to the white supremacists), *but you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides*” (Trump August 15, 2017, emphasis added).

Racism and hate crimes surged under the Trump presidency, not solely due to Trump’s ascension, but because Trump’s ascension validated the beliefs and claims of white supremacists (Edwards and Rushin 2018). Now it was not just the flag, but the presidential seal and the iconography of America, all the grandiosity and splendor of the Capitol belonged to white supremacists.

“It’s 1776, baby!”: Re-Founding America on January 6th

When Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election, breaking precedent as he always did, Trump refused to concede. On January 4th, 2021, at a campaign

rally in Dalton, Georgia, Trump egged on the crowd and said, “Watch what happens over the next couple of weeks. You watch what’s going to come out. Watch what’s going to be revealed. You watch” (Trump 4 January 2021). The audio clip spread like wildfire through social media.

On January 5th, the night before Trump’s big speech and the march to the Capitol, many right-wing live streamers, white nationalists, and Trump loyalists rallied in D.C. There were guest speakers in Freedom Plaza and the gathering crowd was careful with their words about the following day. One man showed his American flag draped on a spear to Josh Fulfer and Jason Phillips of the alt-right news platform Oreo Express. Knowing glances were shared, but little was spoken (Parler, Night has fallen in DC!-X-skeeEkHlk).

When the clash finally began on the Capitol steps on January 6th, insurrectionists used carabiners to attach American flags to their outfits like capes. One insurrectionist stood on the front line handing miniature flags to Capitol police, but few interactions are as telling as one incident on the front lines when Capitol police took an insurrectionist’s weaponized flag. Amidst the yelling and pushing at the metal barriers on the Capitol steps, one insurrectionist used his American flag, wrapped around its pole, to beat Capitol police. This was a common sight during the insurrection. Flags tied to reinforced and weaponized hockey sticks, spears, and wooden flag poles were utilized to attack the Capitol police and gain entry to the building. When hit repeatedly by this particular pole, a Capitol police officer grabbed the weapon and threw it behind him onto a pile of confiscated items on the ground. The insurrectionist was enraged, shouting “Why would you not pick an American flag up? Pick the flag up. Pick the flag up. HEY COMMANDER PICK THE FLAG UP! PICK THE FLAG UP! COMMANDER PICK THE FLAG UP!” on

repeat until the commander picked the flag up off the ground and set it upright against the scaffolding set up for Biden's inauguration (Facebook 6486).

While the insurrectionist arguably mutilated and defiled the flag by turning it into makeshift weaponry, the anger he unleashed when he saw the flag on the ground—itsself a violation of the flag code—speaks to the meaning of the flag to insurrectionists. In their attempt to reclaim the nation and refound the country, the American flag became part of the insurrectionists' uniform—a piece of their body and armor. It signaled the repudiation of the black-out gear of Antifa and their alliance to Trump, MAGA extremism, and white supremacy. This is the true convergence of America's political flag culture where draping oneself in the flag, whether by cape, t-shirt, mask, hat, or hockey stick, is the performative reclamation of their country, their values, and their freedom and where white supremacy and patriotism are one and the same. Three Percenters fought alongside insurrectionists in "Stop the Steal" garb. (Figure 8 below). People wearing "1776" sweatshirts pushed back barricades alongside red Trump hats and KKK flags. January 6th is an account of a weaponized flag, so much so that it covers bodies and spears alike, to push, hit, crush, and break their way into the Capitol of their very own country.



Figure 8. Three Percenter flag and American Flags with insurrectionists on their phones. CC Image Curtesy of Brett Davis on Flickr.

Alternative-Histories

What has been labeled as rampant conspiracy theories, “alternate facts,” or a cultish reverence for Trump can all be considered extreme forms of collective memory formation that take processes of history-formation and detaches them from any semblance of objective facts.

Carl Becker (1958), discussing “What are Historical Facts?” writes:

The kind of history that has most influence upon the life of the community and the course of events is the history that common people carry around in their heads....Whether the general run of people read history books or not, they inevitably picture the past in some fashion or other, and this picture, however little it corresponds to the real past, helps determine their ideas about politics and society. (61)

Facts, however contradictory to their own mythos, would seemingly have to be accounted for and negotiated in the political community. But what has happened in the MAGA-

extremist subculture is that processes of cultural memory formation have been pushed beyond a simple interplay of history and memory. Put simply, the historical imagination of a MAGA-extremist is a form of cultural memory-making that substitutes performativity and mythos for *both* history and memory. It's a cultural memory of "truthful hyperbole" where repetition equals truth (Trump, 1987, 58). It's a culture of *"If you say it enough and keep saying it, they'll start to believe you"* (Trump speech July 3, 2021 in Sarasota, Florida).

The coalescence of MAGA extremism and the symbolism of the American flag is more than a tendency to rally around the flag during times of crisis (see Feinstein 2022). Instead, the seizure of the American flag by insurrectionists and the creation of multiplicitous flag designs signals a deep-seated desire to not only reforge American cultural memory to their liking, but to do so in a way that rekindles their very own sense of belonging to a nation that chooses them above others and possesses the same value system that they do. Without other national symbols like the same geographies, religions, or ethnic or racial makeups, the flag *is* the national symbol for American culture. It is linked to every piece of American cultural memory, good or bad. The insurrectionists who chanted "1776" and wore the flag on their bodies were making claims to the original rebellion against the British and subsuming it into their own myths and narratives. By utilizing their own political flag culture—which utilizes flag poles as weapons and their bodies as the mechanism of drapery—insurrectionists attempted to assert their own political and cultural memory over that of other contemporary groups. The January 6th uprising is more than a failed coup. It's the reclamation of a political flag culture that resigns history to a footnote in a Trump-addled mythos. It is an attempt to refound the country, draping oneself in

American flag designs as masks, hats, shirts, or capes, and weaponizing flag poles and bodies as a claim to “*my country ‘tis of thee.*”

Conclusion

This chapter looked at the importance of the flag in American cultural memory and the use of American flag apparel as a mechanism to assert one set of cultural memories above all others. Embodying the flag, with all its symbolic power, is a means of claiming legitimacy and the only “right” version of history. Assmann (2016) writes, “myth denotes the affective appropriation of one’s own history” (26). Wearing the flag is how the insurrectionists embodied the mythology of the founding and touted the virtues of the Declaration of Independence and in doing so, tried to delegitimize any other cultural memories that counter their beliefs. Storming the Capitol, on paper, was about throwing out election results, but this was ultimately a battle to revive and recreate the revolution and *re-found* America in their imagining, in their *own* cultural memory. It was a mnemonic battle to create a future that matches their mythologized past, where they retain their power and those who are opposed to them—women, Black Americans, Indigenous Peoples, LGBT2SIA+, Critical Race Theorists, disabled folx, and people of color—have no space for their own cultural histories and no legitimate claim to what it is to live as and be American. Embodying the flag becomes a mechanism of performance and memory-making—the statement piece of a nationalistic claim to country and history. After all, what is a tragedy without costume.

CH. 4: Pomp and Circumstance—Building the Inaugural Tradition

*Ritual and ceremony in their due times kept the
world under the sky and the stars in their courses.
It was astonishing what ceremony and ritual could do.*
Terry Pratchett, *Pyramids*

Introduction

Washington, D.C. is a revolving door of political guests. There's an elasticity in the city built on the ever-growing budget of its largest employer: the US government. Members of Congress, staffers, lobbyists, diplomats, tourists, and protestors all make their way in and out of the city in waves and despite the obvious political nature of its guests, there is an interest to keep to city somewhat apolitical: able to inspire the dreams of both the left and the right without taking direct sides. Nothing tested this elasticity more than January of 2021. In the span of two short weeks, the Capitol building went from the object of an insurrection to the grand stage of the inaugural ceremony for incoming President Biden. On the 6th, insurrectionists shouted "Stop the Steal" and livestreamed their climb of the unfinished scaffolding set up on the West Portico in preparation for Biden's inauguration, utilizing it as a tool to break in and wreak havoc in the Capitol building. By the 21st, the scaffolding had been covered with clean, white walls and the simple décor of American Inaugurations. The tradition of the ceremony eschewed any claims that the election was illegitimate and institutional members from both sides attended in support of the new president. De-emphasized in the coverage of the ceremony were the black fences, increased security for incoming President-Biden and Vice

President Harris, and a noticeable absence of celebratory crowds. Each a security measure added to prevent another violent attempt to secure Trump's illegitimate bid for a second term.

Biden's inauguration was a muted ceremony, bereft of the cheers and applause seen during Obama's first inauguration and without the erratic speech patterns of an off-script Trump. In many ways, Biden's inauguration was as boring as inaugurations are supposed to be: a long, drawn out ceremony with many steps to complete all in the name of tradition. As Hermoni and Lebel (2012) argue, "de-politicization is the main function of the national memory project, that contributes to national bereavement and memory as a model of solidarity, uninvolved in social and cultural fractures and 'sacred' in the public sphere" (471). In this way, the inaugural ceremony aspires to an apolitical nature, above the petty squabbles of Trump and his followers and arguments between congressmen. Ceremony and ritual are one of many different mechanisms that the state utilizes to create cultural memories and set boundaries on the nature of American history and heritage.

This chapter discusses the history of the inauguration ceremony in America and the histories that built up what we saw in Biden's inauguration in January of 2021. While the insurrectionists utilized the mechanisms of theatricality and protest to assert their own version of American cultural memory, the state utilized the historical strength of pomp and ritual held by the inauguration to do the same. Both the insurrectionists and the state (as represented in the inauguration) claimed to possess the legitimate heritage of the American tradition. I find that the use of presidential rhetoric, aesthetics, and the weight of the governing institutions and history behind the inauguration ceremony attempt to overwrite the histories of white supremacy and populism spurned on by Trump and his fans. This is complicated, however, by

the fact that Trump himself was a member of the institution and had his own inaugural ceremony. This points to one key weaknesses in a state-governed cultural memory: its attempt to de-politicize its mnemonical processes allow for anyone—representing anything up to and including fascism—to garner the support of the institutions and in doing so, weaken their legitimacy.

Literature Review: American Cultural Memory and the Presidency

American cultural memory struggles to be reflexive. The tendency to oversimplify events in order to assimilate them on the cultural level leads to a dualistic nature that only focuses on “triumphs and traumas” or, in other words, heroes and victims (Giesen 2004). For example, the attack on Pearl Harbor is often understood as a national trauma where America was an innocent victim and any precipitating incidents or Japanese justifications for the attack are sequestered away. On the west coast, the collective anger of the country at the Japanese manifested in Executive Order 9066: the forced removal of Americans of Japanese descent into detention centers or “relocation camps.” With the end WWII, America was quick to heroize itself as the strong, triumphant victor. Giesen (2004) writes, “Because they refer retrospectively to liminal horizons of the social community, triumph and trauma have to be imagined, renarrated, and visualized in myths, pictures, and figures. Thus, the triumphant and sovereign subjectivity is embodied in the figure of the hero, who lives beyond the rules and establishes a new order” (113-14). The new world order was at America’s beck and call and it was a time to celebrate. It took generations of Japanese-Americans and their careful preservation of their families’ histories to create a counter memory at the cultural level and it’s still ongoing today.

Similarly, 9/11 is another major trauma in American cultural memory that situates America as solely a victim and downplays any history America had with al-Qaeda or destabilization and subsequent rise of Islamist groups in the Middle East. In her book on the memorialization of 9/11, Bond (2015) critiques the American academy and the field of memory studies' for also perpetuating a "master narrative" of memory creation, stating that "this lack of reflexivity characterizes the phenomenon that I define as *transcendental memory*" (12). Bond (2015) continues:

Transcendental cultures of memory exhibit a superficial standardization of commemorative discourse... Transcendental memorial cultures tend to be intolerant of otherness; they acquire interpretive dominance by marginalizing interpretive perspectives, presenting an artificially homogenized reading of the past. (12)

Critiquing the very failure of American memory studies to recognize the inherent artificiality of American cultural memory, Bond introduces the concept of "montaged" mnemonic cultures. Montaged mnemonic cultures do not elevate one narrative above others and privilege "history over myth, individuals over nations, and reflexivity over redemption" (12). In this idealized mnemonic culture, montaged memories with "differing interpretations of events are held together in proximal relationship, connecting at two points of tension or accord" (12-3). American mnemonic culture is intolerant of tension and conflict within its mnemonic structures. It is exceedingly difficult for the American cultural memory to recognize differing perspectives of the past and be, as Bond hopes, reflexive. While social media has helped people locate and disseminate counter-hegemonic memories, American cultural memory is still largely mediated by the state through holidays, ceremonies like inaugurations (or the Presidential pardon of the Thanksgiving turkey), and the law aim to create a homogenized cultural memory that gives citizens a singular unifying purpose. Without a

unifying sameness such as racial or ethnic heritage, cultural heritage, or religion, American cultural memory seeks to create unity through symbols and a mythic plot structure of sameness. This sameness, however, originates from colonialism, white supremacy, and a particular mythologization of history that falls into the homogenized narratives of heroes and victims.

When marginalized perspectives are carried by people through their own living narratives, art, and social movements, it must take on the fight of the hegemonic American cultural memory. The process through which these memories become cultural often takes from them many of the characteristics that made them counter-hegemonic to begin with. They lose a lot of their details and elements of perspective that came from the individual. By the time these marginalized perspectives make it to the memorialization phase of state-based mnemonic culture, these memories are sanitized and stripped of their most contentious aspects. The state has an interest in containing and controlling all of the cultural memories in its domain since those are what uphold its sovereignty and the people's loyalty and obligations to the state. As such, when certain counter-memories become powerful enough, the state often tries to absorb those cultural memories and include them in the larger hegemonic cultural narrative. One example of this is the way that the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has been doctored and modified to fit the overarching narrative of the American state. Kevin Bruyneel (2014) writes:

The memory of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy and political identity are central signifiers that define the meaning and impact of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, and thus the status of race relations and race politics since that time. In the effort to define the past, present and future of U.S. race relations, the collective memory of Dr. King is a valuable "prize" in a discursive, political contest. (76)

The “winning sides,” Bruyneel argues, are the elite political actors, corporations, and the large portion of the population (majority white) that benefit from a version of Dr. King’s political legacy that is “totally devoid of the confrontational and radical politics that he pursued while he was alive” (76). When the memorial of Dr. King was built, various quotations were included from his works and speeches, but his most radical statements and sentiments from his political thoughts are absent. None of his speeches against the Vietnam War were included in his memorial, nor his critiques of American foreign policy or the state.

In recent years, there has been much contention on Martin Luther King Jr.’s national holiday where his “I have a dream” speech is misquoted, shared on social media, and mobilized by conservative politicians and white-washed corporate and nonprofit interests in celebration of the holiday. Rather than remembered for his work in the labor or anti-war movements, the holiday tends to remember the sanitized and politically acceptable version of Dr. King, where his image and ideals are used (or abused) by people, institutions, and politicians that Dr. King would have disliked or had worked against in his lifetime. Much like the use of MLK quotes on social media, Bruyneel also finds the limited quotations on his memorial create the same problem:

Without a sense of the wider context of King’s views on race and politics, quotations that implore twenty-first century readers to think of themselves as part of a ‘single garment of destiny,’ to ‘make a career of humanity,’ and ‘transcend race’ can easily foster an image of King as an advocate of post-racialist views. (2014, 84)

This also extends into the larger institutionalization of American cultural memory, where children, families, and adults memorialize Dr. King and remember his mythologized legacy through their educations, curricula, sponsored books, holidays, and field trips. Bruyneel states:

From kindergarten through college, almost all students in the United States celebrate the annual MLK holiday. Their sense of citizenship and its relationship to America's racial past and future is, in a meaningful way, produced and reproduced through the story of King's life and legacy, most often by means of the benign tropes of the haloed living myth with which we are familiar. (2014, 102)

Bruyneel finds that when Dr. King was alive, he had an approval rating of a mere 33%, while now he has near unanimous approval. The American cultural memory of Dr. King has become exactly what Bond (2015) critiques: a homogenous narrative of racial reparation that is split from historical specificity and belays any sense of criticism of current race relations. While the Black Lives Matter protests and larger movement in recent years has created a much stronger counter-narrative, American cultural memory is still very far from becoming a reflexive, montaged commemorative culture that can bear the tension of Dr. King's full political beliefs.

Similar to Dr. King, another sanitization of history occurred with the memorialization of Lincoln. Lincoln won the presidency with only 39.8 percent of the popular vote. Abolitionists found the emancipation proclamation a weak attempt at abolition and southerners balked at his northern politics in general. Schwartz (2000) finds that Lincoln was not popular when he was alive and that his critics became even *more* outspoken after his assassination. However, when Lincoln's body was loaded onto a train and taken city to city (over 440 stops throughout 7 states) for an extended set of funeral rites, many of the critiques Lincoln faced when he was alive began to melt away. The mantle of his legacy in American cultural memory was taken on, Schwartz finds, by several different storytellers. This was helped by the fact that Lincoln had already embraced the emerging medium of photographs when he was alive. After his death, there was a large demand for lithographs, prints, and engravings commemorating the President (Lowndes 2013). The cultural memory of Lincoln's legacy did not center around the

contentiousness of the man's politics, or his ineptitude at abolition and settling northern and southern tensions, but concretized around the interests of various storytellers utilizing his story to mobilize their causes during WWI and the Progressive Era. Schwartz finds that while the mourning rituals elevated Lincoln's reputation, it wasn't until WWI and the Progressive Era that Lincoln became the symbol that he is today. This is due in part to the different facets of the man himself and the fact that he was in many ways a blank slate. Southerners, women, socialists, immigrants, and African Americans all mobilized and mythologized the legacy of Lincoln for their causes. Memories of Lincoln were "externalized by storytellers" and "hardened into an objective reality transcending their own lives," Schwartz writes (2000, 187). While "the real Lincoln could not determine," how his legacy was utilized, the reality of the man did "limit, the range and quality of his representations" (187). Thus, while there is the development of a homogenous cultural memory of Lincoln that may split his legacy from its historical context in order to create a particularly favorable view of the man, his cultural memory began as a montaged set of legacies mobilized by different perspectives.

While we are still far from a truly montaged mnemonic culture, the fraying of American political culture and solidarity shows that the hegemony is fracturing. This leads to the question of whether or not a truly montaged mnemonic culture can co-exist with the state. January 6th is not an account of montaged memory. Instead, it is a real time example of how the state attempts to overwrite, include, and occlude counter-hegemonic cultural memories and narratives (like those of Trump and the insurrectionists). By looking closely at the cultural memory formation during the insurrection and during the inauguration, the mechanisms of American culture memory become more apparent.

Scaffolding America's Heroes: The History of the Inaugural Ceremony

The inauguration is one of the longest standing American traditions of pomp and circumstance. It began as a way to commemorate and celebrate incoming presidents in ceremonies akin to coronations. George Washington's inauguration took place on the balcony at Federal Hall in New York, the then Capitol of America, on April 30th, 1789. It was Washington who first took the oath written in Article II of the Constitution: "I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of the President of the United States and will, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." Washington began the tradition of Presidents giving an address and his first inaugural speech is still the shortest on record—a meager 135 words. William H. Harrison has the longest inaugural speech on record at 8,445 words. Harrison then attended three inaugural balls (a tradition started by James Madison), caught pneumonia, and died one month later. He was the first president to die in office. Most presidents are sworn in using Bibles—with the notable exception of John Quincy Adams who swore on a book of law (JCCIC 10th Inaugural Ceremonies).

Over time, the ceremony grew to include a more elaborate swearing-in ceremony (with music, prayers, and poetry readings), an honorary departure of the former President and his family, a signing ceremony, a luncheon, a parade, a ceremonial painting, and ceremonial gifts for the incoming President and Vice President. President Trump also gave gifts to the luncheon attendees. Andrew Jackson was the first President to be sworn in on the East Portico of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., though now, most Presidents are sworn in on the West Portico. President James Buchanan's Inauguration was the first to be photographed (see figure 9 below).



Figure 9. Photograph from the Inaugural Ceremony of James Buchanan on the East Portico of the Capitol Building on March 4th, 1857. Photograph by Montgomery Meigs, Library of Congress.

The United States Marine Band, called “The President’s Own” by Thomas Jefferson, traditionally opens the ceremony. They play a variety of patriotic arrangements: Washington’s Grand March, Liberty Fanfare by John Williams, “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “Hail, America!” among others. The only song that is required at every inauguration besides the national anthem is “Hail to the Chief.” This song was adapted from Sir Walter Scott’s poem “Lady of the Lake” and was originally written by English composer James Sanderson. It is said that the song was first performed to honor the president in 1829, when Andrew Jackson attended a ceremony for the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. The band played to signal when Jackson left the ceremony. Later, the song was requested used to announce the president’s arrival as well:

Julia Tyler, the wife of President John Tyler, asked the Marine Band to play “Hail to the Chief” to announce the President’s arrival. Sarah Polk, the wife of President James Polk,

also instructed the band to play the tune to announce the arrival of her husband at official functions... In 1954, the Department of Defense instituted an official policy to make “Hail to the Chief” the musical tribute for the President of the United States. (Ben’s Guide to the US Government, GPO)

The song was utilized by many presidents to increase the fanfare of their arrivals; however President Arthur felt the song was too undignified and asked the Marine Band Conductor to compose a new song. John Philip Sousa wrote “Presidential Polonaise” but President Cleveland, who succeeded Arthur, returned to “Hail to the Chief” (Ben’s Guide, GPO). When utilized during the inauguration ceremony, “Hail to the Chief” is preceded by four ruffles and flourishes, and is played twice. First, to announce the arrival of the sitting President; and second, to honor the newly inaugurated President-elect immediately after he takes the oath of office.

After the Marine Band opens the ceremony, there is a call to order and opening remarks. There is usually a prayer, followed by a musical guest, and the Vice-Presidential oath of office. After they are sworn in, there is usually another musical performance then the President-elect take his oath of office. Once he is sworn in, he delivers his inaugural address. This is followed by a poetry reading and prayer. The ceremony ends with the national anthem, sometimes performed by the Marine Band, other times by a guest (The Marine Band played it for Obama’s first inauguration and Beyoncé sang at his second).

The inaugural ceremony has been planned and executed by the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies (JCCIC) since the 20th Amendment was signed in 1901. This has provided some stabilization and rigidity to the elements of the ceremony, since prior inaugurations were planned by a committee appointed by the president-elect. The inaugural ceremony has a distinct iconography and progression of events that rarely change, regardless of

the president-elect, though some (like the parade) can change due to weather. This ceremony acts as a commemorative ritual that allows participants to “not only revive and affirm older memories of the past but also to modify them,” through renarrativization in elements like the President’s first address (Zerubavel 1995, 6). Zerubavel (1995) writes, “On a communal level each act of commemoration makes it possible to introduce new interpretations of the past, yet the recurrence of commemorative performance contributes to an overall sense of continuity of collective memory” (6). The inaugural ceremony provides a chance for the incoming President to reframe their role in American history by quoting and calling upon memories of previous Presidents and important events and reframe them for the current time and priorities of the new administration. This is the time, when encapsulated in ceremony, a President can start their Presidential legacy by claiming themselves as a legitimate inheritor and carrier of tradition and American collective memory.

Comparing Inaugurations: Obama’s First Inauguration

Each inaugural ceremony has its own program, theme, and special guests. When Obama had his first inaugural ceremony in 2009, it was mostly blue skies, a frigid 28 degrees and windy. Regardless, the air was abuzz and the crowd stretched down the national mall. When Trump had his first (and hopefully only) inaugural ceremony, it was slightly overcast, 48 degrees, and it began raining when he began his inaugural address. Newspapers were keen to compare Trump and Obamas’ inaugural speeches, the guests, and the crowd size, as if the quality of the musical guests and size of the crowd could speak to the quality of the President-elect and their comparative “greatness.” Figure 8 below is a popular comparison of Obama’s 2009 inaugural crowd and Trump’s 2017 crowd. Trump falsely tweeted that his inauguration

had pulled the largest crowd in history, but a later investigation found that the pictures first shared by the White House of the crowd size had been cropped to make the crowd seem larger than it actually was. Figure 10 shows the unedited image comparison of Trump (left) and Obama's (right) inaugural crowds. Many news outlets were quick to say that Obama's inauguration had pulled the largest crowd than ever before—including LBJ and Truman (an estimated 1.2 million and 1 million respectively).



Figure 10. Left: Trump 2017 uncropped photograph of inauguration crowd. Right: Obama 2009 inauguration crowd. Swain 2018.

With an estimated 1.8 million people anxiously awaiting the swearing-in of Obama, attendee Patrick Bragg said, “I’ve been sitting here thinking—it’s really beautiful. This is what I would consider the true representation of America. Obama gives everyone space at the table” (Levine et al 2009). Evadey Minott likewise stated, “This is America happening. It was prophesized by [Rev. Dr. Martin Luther] King that we would have a day when everyone would

come together. This is that day. I am excited. I am joyful. It brings tears to my eyes” (Levine et al 2009) There was a sense of excitement, of achievement, and that Obama’s inauguration was a big deal. The website for the JCCIC, which archives every inauguration, writes under “Facts, Firsts, and Precedents”:

Largest attendance of any event in the history of Washington, D.C.; Largest attendance of any Presidential Inauguration in U.S. History; First African American to hold the office of the President of the United States; First citizen born in Hawaii to hold the office; Highest viewership ever of the Swearing-In Ceremonies on the Internet; First woman, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, to emcee the Ceremony; First Inaugural webcast to include captioning; First Swearing-In Ceremony to include an audio description” (JCCIC 56th Inaugural Ceremonies).

Obama’s first presidential Inauguration ceremony had more “firsts” than most other inaugurations. For Aretha Franklin, however, singing at Obama’s inauguration would be her third time singing on the inaugural stage (she also sang at Jimmy Carter’s and Bill Clinton’s inaugurations). Franklin sang “My Country ‘tis of Thee” in a stunning bow-shaped hat studded with Swarovski crystals.

The theme of Obama’s first inauguration was “A New Birth of Freedom,” referencing Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. The inauguration took place just before Lincoln’s 200th birthday anniversary. Obama used The Lincoln Bible (the bible Lincoln himself used at his inauguration) to swear in. In his first presidential address, he spoke of the many challenges that America faced and said, “At these moments, America has carried on not simply because of the skill or vision of those in high office, but because we, the people, have remained faithful to the ideals of our forebears and true to our founding documents” (Phillips 2009). This was the larger point of his entire speech, the necessity of the American people to stick to the ideals and values of the founding fathers. He continued:

[T]he time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history... Our Founding Fathers, faced with perils that we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man—a charter expanded by the blood of generations... We are the keepers of this legacy... [T]hose values upon which our success depends—honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism—these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout history. What is demanded, then, is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world... This is the price and the promise of citizenship. (Phillips 2009)

The outdoor décor for the inaugural ceremony has largely remained the same since Reagan's first inauguration in 1981. Figure 11 below shows a photograph of the west front of the capital building. Unlike more recent inaugurations like Obamas, there is no scaffolding close to the President-Elect to elevate guest seating. The lower windows and doorways are visible from the crowd and there are people in military uniforms in the tunnel. There are two large flags behind the inaugural stage: the current 50-state flag on the left and a traditional Betsy Ross flag on the right. In between are flag-like curtains that match the curtains on the lower level of the west front, where the Marine band is set up. Figure 12 below is President Obama's 2009 inauguration décor. The fabric on the lower level is largely the same, a bold red and white with a starred-blue overtop. Rather than only utilizing two American flag designs on the outsides, there is instead a series of flags showing the progression of the design which changed to match America's developments as a nation. On the outsides is the Betsy Ross flag, red and white stripes, with a blue square in the upper left corner accompanied by a circle of 13 stars representing the 13 colonies. The next innermost set of flags is the 21-star flag, made when Illinois became a state, in reference to Obama's time as Illinois's senator. Finally, the center flag is the 50-star flag, the current American flag design.



Figure 11. Straight view of Reagan's First Inauguration in 1981. Architect of the Capitol.



Figure 12. Front view of Obama's 2009 inauguration ceremony. Architect of the Capitol.

Comparing Inaugurations: Trump

From the beginning, President-elect Trump's inauguration ceremony found itself bathed in controversy. Before details like musical guests or speakers were even confirmed, several news outlets posted that Trump was having trouble finding talent for the ceremony. Rumors circulated about whether or not certain artists would participate and many came forward and declined to perform at the ceremony whether or not they'd been asked (Celine Dion, Elton John, John Legend, Andrea Bocelli, and Elsa herself, Idina Menzel, to name a few). The Mormon Tabernacle Choir eventually signed on to sing "America, The Beautiful", though at least one member resigned in protest (Goodman 2016). Jackie Evancho from America's Got Talent sang the National Anthem. Evancho was 17 at the time, the youngest singer to ever perform at an inauguration. Though she stated her decision to perform at the inauguration was "apolitical,"

Evancho released an EP the same day as the inauguration titled “Together We Stand” composed of three patriotic songs—the “Star-Spangled Banner,” “America the Beautiful,” and “God Bless America”—the profits of which went to LGBTQ+ charities in solidarity with her transgender sister. In an interview in 2019, when asked if she learned anything from the inauguration controversy, she stated, “Yes. And that lesson for me was mainly if you have a bad gut feeling, and your team still pushes you to do something, don't give in, don't do it!” (Munson 2019). The Missouri State University Chorale, however, seemed to be very excited about their trip to D.C.—posting about their trip frequently on social media. They sang an arrangement titled, “Now we belong” which included lyrics like “keep faith, keep watch, take heart, take courage,” (Missouri State Blogs 2017).

Even the cake for one of Trump’s inaugural balls came under fire. It was an exact replica of the cake celebrity baker Duff Goldman created for Obama’s second inauguration in 2013, but Goldman didn’t make it. Apparently the JCCIC commissioned a local baker in D.C., called Buttercream Bakeshop, to create an exact replica of the cake for Trump’s inauguration. Understanding the controversy of their actions, the shop donated all the profits they received from creating the cake to the Human Rights Campaign. The shop posted, “Because basic human rights are something every man, woman and child~ straight, gay or the rainbow in between~ deserve!” (Buttercream Bake Shop 2017).

The décor for Trump’s inauguration was the same as Obama’s with one difference: the 21-star flag design utilized for Obama’s inauguration was swapped out for another 13-star flag design, in a 3-2-3-2-3 pattern instead of a circle like in the Betsy Ross flag. While there are wide shots of most previous inaugurations, the JCCIC archive has no wide shot of Trump’s

inauguration ceremony, except from behind (Figure 13). The picture the JCCIC uses for Trump's inaugural wide shot is actually from Obama's first inauguration. Other close up photographs are of Trump and his own ceremony. There is no explanation of the archive website indicating that it is the incorrect photo.



Figure 13. A wide shot of the Aftermath Trump's Inauguration Ceremony from behind. Trump 23 January 2017, Twitter.

The theme of Trump's inaugural ceremony was on theme, titled "Uniquely American," which is ironic considering it was almost entirely a copy of Obama's inauguration and ceremonies prior. While it may sound ironic post-insurrection, the main push of Trump's inaugural messaging was the uniqueness of America and its peaceful transition of power. The program for the inaugural ceremony states:

The theme of the 58th Presidential Inauguration, "Uniquely American," recognizes the symbolic importance of today's event. We may consider it routine, but the inaugural ceremony remains a uniquely American expression of our constitutional system. The peaceful transition between presidential administrations signals that we are united as a people behind an enduring republic. (6, JCCIC 2017)

Throughout the program for Trump's inauguration, the text referred to the industrialization of the country and the ability of the country to pull together and withstand difficult times. Quoting Reagan as its first presidential reference, Trump's Inaugural Program states, "The orderly transfer of authority as called for in the Constitution routinely takes place, as it has for almost two centuries, and few of us stop to think how unique we really are...In the eyes of many in the world, this every-four-year ceremony we accept as normal is nothing less than a miracle." (8, JCCIC 2017). "With each inauguration," it continues, "we embrace this uniquely American ceremony, seeing in this extraordinary ritual a reflection of the nation itself. In times of peace or war, of prosperity or crisis, inaugurations strengthen the national resolve to meet each new challenge," (11, JCCIC 2017).

When Trump began his inaugural address, he echoed the same words, "This American carnage stops right here, right now. From this day forward, a new vision will govern this land... We will face challenges. We will confront hardships. But we will get the job done. Every four years, we gather on these steps to carry out the orderly and peaceful transfer of power" (Trump 2017). He continued:

Today's ceremony, however, has very special meaning. Because today, we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one party to another. But we are transferring power from Washington, D.C., and giving it back to you, the people. For too long, a small group in our nation's capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost... That all changes starting right here and right now. Because this moment is your moment. It belongs to you....January 20th, 2017 will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again.... (Trump 2017)

Trump's calls to "drain the swamp" and return power to the people was a familiar appeal from his campaign trail. Positioning himself as one of the people and not one of the governmental or

liberal elite, Trump often spoke of himself and the people united, as one. In populist parlance, Trump represented each and every one of the people and the people supported their own. America, in Trump's vision, was a singularly unified populace behind him and his administration's goals. His inaugural address continued:

At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America and through our loyalty to our country, we will rediscover our loyalty to each other. When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice...The time for empty talk is over. Now arrives the hour of action... (Trump 2017)

Trump's speech echoed similar sentiments to that of Reagan and blamed all of America's problems on weak, liberal governance. In the crowd for the ceremony, 19-year-old Isaac Deal said, "I voted for him because I thought he was the best man for the job, but I'm not a Trump fanboy. I'll hold him to account," (Gambino and Saddiqui 2017). Another attendee, John D, said, "Both the Republican and Democratic establishment has let America down... Even though Donald Trump isn't a politician and we don't know what we're going to get out of him, at least it's going to be different... it may be good or it may be bad, but it's a change worth taking" (Gambino and Saddiqui 2017).

Four years later, however, when it came time for Trump to concede power during the 2020 election, all of his words about the importance of a peaceful transition of power went out the window. Instead of holding true to his words and ushering in the next President-elect, Trump refused to concede and began his "Stop the Steal" campaign. He claimed that the election was fraudulent and that it was a conspiracy to take to presidency from him and the people.

Comparing Inauguration: Biden



Figure 14. Straight shot of Biden's inauguration. JCCIC 59th Inaugural Ceremonies.

The décor from Biden's inaugural stage was the same as Trump's (Figure 14). The same flags were used in the background (the Betsy Ross flag, the alternate 13-star flag design, and the 50-star flag). While aesthetically, this inauguration was the same or similar to its predecessors, something was still amiss. It is tradition for the sitting president to attend the inauguration of his successor, but Trump and Melania did not attend the ceremony. Only Mike Pence and his wife were in attendance. The National Guard was mobilized to protect D.C.—though 12 out of the 25,000 mobilized members of the Guard were removed due to security concerns (Starr et al 2021). Whether or not this would turn out to be a peaceful transition of power was still up in the air. With COVID-19 protocols in place, it was a relatively small gathering of only 1,000 people—most of whom were members of Congress and their guests. Each person sat 6-feet apart, giving a barren look to the elevated seating. Most members of

Congress dressed up and wore black wool coats overtop. Some democratic members of Congress wore body armor under their coats and there was speculation that Lady Gaga and Kamala Harris wore armor as well. Bernie Sanders went viral for wearing his same brown workman's coat, hand-knitted gloves, and a blue surgical mask: the frugal, grumpy uncle sitting in the January cold, mid-pandemic. There were black barriers up past the capitol seating and increased security. The Mayor urged people not to come to D.C. for the inauguration and for agencies to let their employees work remotely. All AirBnB reservations were cancelled. Train lines were modified or shut down. Four bridges connected Virginia to D.C. were closed and the section of the Potomac was closed to marine traffic. In D.C., even more roads were closed and USPS locked or removed all public post boxes, and suspended service. The national mall, which is where non-ticketed attendees usually watched the inauguration, was closed to the public. There were still fears of more violence after the insurrection. Biden, however, refused to move the ceremony indoors (the last indoor inaugural ceremony was Reagan's second in 1985, which was relocated due to weather). The show must go on, albeit with extra precautions in place.

The theme of Biden's inaugural ceremony was "Our Determined Democracy: Forging a More Perfect Union." The program for Biden's inauguration states:

On April 30, 1789, at Federal Hall in New York City, George Washington took the oath of office to become the nation's first President. Since that time, every four years our nation has continued the tradition of an inaugural ceremony to mark the commencement of a new presidential term or to transition to a new presidential administration. This great American ritual has occurred in times of peace, in times of turmoil, in times of prosperity, and in times of adversity. (JCCIC 59th Inaugural Ceremonies)

The Marine Band played a prelude program, ending with Irving Berlin's "God Bless America."

Amy Klobuchar emceed the ceremony, giving the opening remarks and the call to order. The

Marine Band played throughout, favoring American composer John Philip Sousa. In 1868, at

only 13 years old, Sousa enlisted in the Marines Corps as an apprentice musician. He composed mostly marches, which are used routinely in inauguration or other American ceremonies and celebrations. Lady Gaga sang the national anthem accompanied by the Marine Band. Kamala Harris then took the vice-presidential oath. Harris used two bibles: one from a family friend that Harris previously used to take the oaths for attorney general and senator. The second bible was from Thurgood Marshall. When Biden swore-in, he used his family bible. Biden has used the same bible for every swearing-in ceremony in his political career and had every date of every swearing-in ceremony inscribed inside.

Biden opened his inaugural address strongly, stating, “This is America’s day. This is democracy’s day. A day of history and hope...Through a crucible for the ages, America has been tested anew and America has risen to the challenge” (The White House 2021b). He lacked the pomposity of Trump and the persuasion of Obama, nevertheless he strove to depoliticize his win as less partisan: “Today, we celebrate the triumph not of a candidate, but of a cause, the cause of democracy.” He was quick to address the insurrection on the 6th, but it was muted. Rather than fan the flames of derision and partisanship, Biden urged the nation to come together as one. “So now, on this hallowed ground where just days ago violence sought to shake this Capitol’s very foundation, we come together as one nation, under God, indivisible, to carry out the peaceful transfer of power as we have for more than two centuries.” Much like the theme of Trump’s inauguration, Biden also emphasized the inauguration’s historical importance as a ceremony marking a smooth transition of power behind “an enduring Republic.” Biden thanked President Carter and referenced Washington as the first to take the sacred oath written in the Constitution. Biden incorporated many historical references in his

speech to remind the nation of its times of struggle and emphasized that the only way that we, as the nation, can continue and succeed is by coming together. He continued:

In another January in Washington, on New Year's Day 1863, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. When he put pen to paper, the President said, "If my name ever goes down into history it will be for this act and my whole soul is in it." ...Today, on this January day, my whole soul is in this: Bringing America together. Uniting our people. And uniting our nation...Through the Civil War, the Great Depression, World War, 9/11, through struggle, sacrifice, and setbacks, our "better angels" have always prevailed. In each of these moments, enough of us came together to carry all of us forward. And, we can do so now... (The White House 2021b)

This is the first explicit reference to the Emancipation Proclamation in an inaugural address.

While many incoming presidents utilize the power of Lincoln's historical mythologies, the Emancipation Proclamation itself was very controversial and a sweeping use of Presidential power, but also fell short of the goals of abolitionists at the time. Biden anchored his speech in the history of Washington, D.C. and the many great, historical events that occurred there. He attempted to solidify the January 6th insurrection and America's current struggles as another one of those great struggles and that this was the moment when America as one nation can succeed again. He said:

Here we stand, in the shadow of a Capitol dome that was completed amid the Civil War, when the Union itself hung in the balance. Yet we endured and we prevailed. Here we stand looking out to the great Mall where Dr. King spoke of his dream. Here we stand, where 108 years ago at another inaugural, thousands of protestors tried to block brave women from marching for the right to vote...And here we stand, just days after a riotous mob thought they could use violence to silence the will of the people, to stop the work of our democracy, and to drive us from this sacred ground. That did not happen. It will never happen. (The White House 2021b)

Towards the end of his speech, Biden had a moment of silent prayer for the 400,000 lost in the previous year to COVID-19. He quoted a song, "American Anthem," reciting, "The work and prayers of centuries have brought us to this day. What shall be our legacy? What will our

children say?... Let me know in my heart. When my days are through. America .America. I gave my best to you” (The White House 2021b). It was a solemn speech and said what was needed in the current political moment. Biden’s speech fell to second place, however, when poet Amanda Gorman recited her poem, “The Hill We Climb.” The ceremony ended with a benediction from Rev. Dr. Silvester Beaman, a Bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and family friend of the Bidens. The general impression of Biden’s inauguration was that it was “just fine.”

Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband then escorted the Pences out of the east front of the Capitol. Usually the new President and First Spouse escort the former president as part of the ceremonial departure, but as Trump did not attend, the Bidens did not participate in this part of the ceremony, but instead went forward into the signing ceremony, where the new President signs his first executive orders, nominations, or memorandums. President Biden signed his first executive order declaring January 20th a “National Day of Unity.” President Biden placed a “call upon the people of our Nation to join together and write the next story of our democracy—an American story of decency and dignity, of love and of healing, and of greatness and of goodness” (The White House 2021a). Due to the pandemic, there was no traditional luncheon. Instead, a small ceremony in the rotunda encompassed the traditional elements of the luncheon: the presentation of the presidential and vice-presidential gifts, the presentation of the inaugural painting, the presentation of the flags, and the presentation of the inaugural photo.

Ceremonial Legitimacy: Anchoring the Present in the Past

In Halbwachs’ work on the locations and life of Christ in Christianity, Halbwachs concludes that “if, as we believe, collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past, if

it adapts the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present, then a knowledge of the origin of these facts must be secondary, if not altogether useless" (1941, 7). This suggests then that there are no objective facts or events and that all of history is at the mercy of present beliefs. Schwartz (1982) tries to find a middle ground between "an absolutist theory, which locates the significance of events in the nature of the events themselves, or a relativistic theory, which locates the significance of events in the standpoint of the observer" (376). In trying to find a theory of collective memory and history, Schwartz studies the U.S. Capitol building and contends that *chronicling* is how society preserves what is historically real, whereas *commemoration* preserves the ideals and is less attached to historical facts such as time and place. "Commemoration," he writes, "is in this sense a register of sacred history," (377).

The Inauguration Ceremony is a part of these commemorations. It brings to life the same selective processes that govern the creation of a national cultural memory utilizing artwork and commemorations in the Capitol. The post-Civil War presidents relied on the continuity of their office and the stability of their government and emphasized this in their inaugural speeches. Trump himself, though speaking of the dismal state of America, also primarily relied on the idea of an "enduring Republic" and the peaceful transition of power than granted him the use of the highest office in the nation. Trump was bathed in the same dull, patriotic staging as previous presidents. None of the garish décor of Trump tower was included on the inaugural stage and his speech was, for him, dulled down. The inaugural ceremony is all about depoliticizing the office of the president in order to build on the same history that

Scwartz finds in the artwork of the Capitol: the bureaucratic leader and its ensured institutional stability.

The rigidity of the inaugural ceremony, especially after the JCCIC took over planning in 1901, emphasizes both the aesthetic and procedural sameness of American history. It provides a sense of continuity to the cultural memory of the nation as it envelops a new leader. Large curtains of white and red with blue and stars overtop, historical flag designs above. The presidential seal centered by the podium. While inaugural speeches reference specific policy platforms and candidates campaign promises, they are much less impassioned than speeches on the campaign trail. Rather than emphasizing the greatness of the candidate, the inauguration ceremony is all about the continuity of the republic and how much this new president will uphold the traditions of the nation. This means that Trump, Obama, and Biden can all reference the founding fathers and seemingly, the founding fathers would have supported them all. More modern presidents, like Reagan or Carter for example, have a more partisan ideology attached to them. Trump was the only one to reference Reagan and both Obama and Biden referenced Carter. Both Biden and Obama mentioned Lincoln. The inaugural ceremony is the time the new president to situate themselves fully in the American tradition and claim the legitimacy of their position.

When discussing the commemoration and national memory, Hermoni and Lebel (2012) write that national memory is “contingent on the willingness of cultural agents to support it and place the appropriate discourse according to hegemonic interpretation at the center of the stage and relegate any doubts to the private sphere... This is how a-political memory... is shaped” (471). For the millions of Americans who watch the inauguration every 4 years, either

in-person or virtually, inaugurations are entirely about de-politicizing the presidential candidate (and candidates engage in the political out of necessity to get nominated in the first place) and placing them within the institutional legacy of America. The commonalities between presidential speeches is a symptom of this. There are rarely explicit mentions of policies (although many second-term presidents will do this in their second inaugural speech).

Inaugurations are moments for “we” and “us” and unity. A time to pull together as a nation and face the many challenges ahead or take on the work of generations before us. It is a time to call upon the legacy of the founding fathers and reframe them for the ideals of the times and the incoming president, all the while situating oneself in the legitimacy of the state. Schwartz (1982) writes, “America’s originating events and early leaders are not symbols of national unity because of their priority and factual importance but because this priority and this importance have become and remained convenient objects of consensus among later generations” (396).

This is why Trump, Obama, and Biden can all reference the founding fathers and the founding documents of America and believe that their interpretation of the past is correct. It is the institutional bureaucratic processes of commemorations that do more for a president’s legacy and hand at sculpting the national, cultural memory of America than references to specific presidents or the founding. It is, when bathed in ceremony, that the new leaders of the country can assert their legitimacy in participating in this history. Trump did not attend Biden’s inauguration (and refused to even speak his name in his speech congratulating the “new administration”) and did not participate in the honorary departure. Trump continually

eschewed the ceremonial and ritualistic elements of his position of power, breaking the continuity of American cultural memory, and undermining the legitimacy of his own position.

Trump's hand to participate in the presidential and institutional memory-creation for American cultural memory may be small, but his influence on the larger mnemonic culture extends beyond his limited participation in institutional legitimacy. Through the cleavages of American cultural memory, Trump amassed a following of folx who felt like they were left behind or forgotten in the politics of their day. This is not because there is something in Trump himself that is great enough to pull together these factions—he's no George Washington or Abraham Lincoln (then again, neither were they when they were alive). It's because Trump has taken advantage of a precarious moment in American history: the failure of our mnemonical processes to address our current reality.

CH. 5: Speaking of Failures and Conclusions

Introduction

This dissertation traced the deployment of cultural memory in the January 6th insurrection and by the American government after the fact. I have argued that what is at play in American politics and American culture is not partisan squabbles, nor is it limited to the rhetorical histories and accounts. Instead, the community now known as “J6ers” is a prime example of how memory is at play in bodies and in spaces, how memory is affected by feelings and emotions, and how memory separates the moment from the movement of time.

This chapter covers some of the larger conclusions from the preceding chapters, highlighting the mechanisms of memory at work, and discusses the broader implications of these chapters read together.

The Failure of American Cultural Memory

When the J6ers rushed the Capitol, fueled by Trump and his promises of a renewed republic, they did so carrying the flags and memories of the founding of America. Shouting “1776 baby!” they reclaimed their Capitol from those they viewed as illegitimate, corrupt institutional representatives and elites. Far from the heroes of the founding, the Members of Congress inside the building, their security details, and Capitol police, were part of the sludge in the swamp that Trump promised to drain away.

When Ashli Babbitt died, she became “the first victim of the second civil war.” A new hero for the continued fight for their country. Beholden to the mnemonic traditions of the founding fathers and antebellum period, the J6ers engage in shrines and memorials to Babbitt and their incarcerated members.

Though they touted the laws of this country during the insurrection and with their trials after the fact, J6ers still utilize the law to seek restitution (by suing the government itself). When the American government responded to the insurrection, they did so by holding tight to tradition and ceremony. They utilized the institutions themselves to address the event and followed bureaucratic procedures to bring insurrectionists to justice and showcased their investigation into the 6th as a marker of institutional legitimacy. They utilized the law as the means by which justice was sought.

The 6th, however, is no mere instance of lawlessness and a forswearing of American tradition. Instead, the J6 community upholds to the laws they see as just and right in *their* American tradition. They still see the law as a legitimate carrier of authority and framer of the cultural memory of America. They support the likes of Ron DeSantis and other Republicans who ban discussions of race or gender and sexuality in schools and textbooks. They still believe in their 2nd Amendment rights and the rightness of the Constitution. The institution and Members of Congress *also* believe in the rightness of the Constitution and the utility of law and its authority. How can this be? If two opposing factions who almost went to war with each other in their own Capitol building can still uphold the laws of the same country and view their institutions as legitimate, what does the revolutionary faction look like?

This is the failure of American cultural memory. We have come so far from the founding and the Civil War, however, our institutions have failed at incorporating new cultural memories into the fold. We still revere our founders as the best of men. When Schwartz (1982) discusses the selective commemoration of the heroes and events prior to the Civil War, I would suggest that we as a culture have moved beyond “selective” and into a mnemonical culture of

obsession. There is an inability to let go of the founders and their goodness and grapple with the realities that they were enslaving Black people while at the same time touting liberty and justice for all.

A healthy family is one that is reflexive. A family where members can pause, look inward, and analyze their actions, emotions, and motivations, and be able to process their own responses to events without projecting them onto other members of their family. My father projected every piece of anger and frustration he felt onto me, his fears about poverty, his fears about the future of our country, his fears around his own failure as a father. He projected all of this onto me and turned me into the fault, the reason everything was bad. This is what we do with American cultural memory. We've built into our laws, our schools, our culture, a reverence for the founding fathers, their constitution, and their institutions and we strive to keep them good, despite evidence to the contrary.

The J6 community, however, can be reflexive. The man wearing the Ashli Babbitt shirt during the televised hearings is Gary McBride, a proud J6er, freelance journalist, with his own news network. McBride has appeared on Freedom Corner, a YouTube live channel with interviews, discussions, and debates for J6ers and similarly aligned people. However, after allegations of abuse, Freedom Corner hosted McBride's recent ex-wife, Valerie, to give her a platform to speak out against him. Valerie spoke about enduring his abuse for 28 years and that now that she has moved for a divorce she has gotten lots of support from people who are not J6ers and don't believe like she and her sons do. She says she is speaking out in #FreedomCorner so that she can gain the support of her J6 community as well. She talked about how McBride trashed their family home when he had to vacate the premises and give it

up to Valerie and her sons. Freedom Corner shared to GoFundMe link so people can help repair the home.

The J6 community is very prone to the “great man” narrativization, from the founding fathers, to trump, to small time heroes like McBride. However, when allegations of abuse came forward, they gave his ex-wife a platform to tell her story and support her. While they still support McBride’s writings and endeavors in the J6 community, he is now known as an abusive narcissist and the community has rallied around Valerie and their sons. McBride isn’t ostracized from the community, but Valerie remains protected, the community acting as a buffer between them.

When it comes to the founding fathers and the cultural memory of America, we fail to do the same thing. We utilize the law, our institutions, commemorations, holidays, songs, textbooks, the education of our children to continue the tale of great men and the selective cultural memories prior to the Civil War. Then we continue to uphold the glory and rightness of the office of the President and the structure of our institutions. Even when we have had our reservations about the electoral college, we still don’t abolish it or change the system. We erect new monuments and create a day of recognition for the vast traumas in America’s past but refuse to change the hegemonic cultural memories. We add footnotes when we really need to delete the paragraph and start writing from the beginning.

Ironically, the ones who have stormed the Capitol, have a model for how cultural memory can move forward: by utilizing the community as the buffer between two opposing sides. Just as Weber (2004) in the Peking Opera, when he writes:

But the fascination of the scene—in which Chen finds the Boatman, boards the ferry, and makes her way across the river to its distant shore—derives, not from the notion of

a journey that might be completed, for instance, with the reuniting of lovers, but rather from the deployment of a different kind of *desire*, involving separation rather than fulfillment. “Autumn River” stages one of the ways in which separation is experienced, traversed, negotiated—but never simply overcome or forgotten. (26-7, emphasis in original)

For a reflexive cultural memory, Chen and the Boatman represent two opposing accounts of the same history, two antagonistic memories, linked by their separation and the reciprocity of the community between them. Rather than a culture of obsession and inherent goodness, to move forward without continual crises like January 6th, we must embrace the separation and recognize the reciprocity of our actions and that even my father and I, separate in all things, are linked: co-creators of the cultural memory of America.

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