

21A.00 Lives In Us

Before taking this class, I always believed that rituals were great demonstrations of cultural unity built upon decades of tradition and dedication. I never would have imagined that fifty students taking an introductory class could create a tangible and even successful model of community building between 21A.00 students while reimagining the classroom dynamic and abolishing the power hierarchy between students and professors.

The context of our ritual places an emphasis on getting unstuck from the intrinsic hierarchies imposed on students by the current lecture styles while creating a bonded community. Through our ritual, we reimagined the relationship between autonomy and structure by creating a sense of equality between the usual powerholder, the professor, and those on whom this power is imposed, the students. Although this is the main focus, we showcase many other ritual tools that we have witnessed in other cultures and contexts throughout the semester. We learned the importance of totems, of creating space for collective effervescence, and the power that stems from having a ritual incite an emotional change or understanding in outsiders. Thus, these concepts were carefully and craftily incorporated into our collective demonstration of the growth we have experienced and the lessons we have learned throughout the semester.

As previously mentioned, the aim of our ritual was to create a completely new classroom dynamic that fosters unity among class members and cements the ideas we have learned, immortalizing them within our minds forever. We see this from the very beginning when we remove our bags as we enter the classroom. To me, backpacks represent the burdens I faced before arriving to class, and the heaviness that accompanies

thinking of other classes and the many assignments associated with them. By removing this item, we create a sense of rebirth and cleanse our minds of anything not associated with the present, 21A.00, and the discussions happening on that day. We also create uniformity. Usually, students have their stuffed backpacks on hand during lectures, while professors carry smaller satchels or purses.¹ Separating ourselves from the large bags places students closer to the level of in-classroom possessions that professors exhibit, once again eliminating the power imbalance.

After everyone emerged free of burdens, scripts of the ritual and printouts of our treasured possessions were distributed to all students. This again emphasizes the sense of equality, everyone at this moment currently possesses the same materials. It is important to note that Professor Jones's submission was critical to this step, and I thank him for his cooperation. Not only did his submission provide a hilarious (terrifying to some) account of a knife-wielding child, but it also allowed him to be included in the next steps of the ritual, which was crucial to our eradication of power dynamics and the inclusion of every member of the class.

At this point, everyone was instructed to grab a shirt. This was a key moment for the materials group, and me personally, because it represented our determination and the culmination of our many hours of discussions in person and through text². During the ritual brainstorming process, the materials members all agreed that any great ritual needs

¹ In 21A.00, Professor Jones carries a backpack and interacts with it often, but since this part of the ritual is meant to change the traditional classroom dynamic, it can be used by any class. Thus, I am writing in a general sense that can be amplified and modified depending on the participants.)

² It is important to note that the events leading up to the final ritual also fostered a sense of community within the groups. Thus, the aims of the ritual were in place long before we had a final product. Students were socializing and sharing ideas to a greater extent due to the change in the class format (no lecturing) during our brainstorming sessions. I think this breakup into groups greatly influenced our final ritual, as we subconsciously noticed the rise in energy and participation when there were no power dynamics in play.

a totem, a symbol of our dedication to this class, and our pride in having been a part of it. Many ideas were thrown out such as pencils and rugs, but the obvious winner was the shirt. Pencils would have been too representative of the student's necessity of writing down information in professor-led lectures, and it would have been impossible for fifty students to equally share a rug. The shirt idea stood for everything our ritual meant, equality and community building. The next step was designing the shirt. Again, many ideas were tossed around but none could best the tremendous joy that stemmed from the possibility of wearing Professor Jones's face around campus. One of the first things the professor said at the start of the semester was that he preferred us to have the physical copy of *Dawn of Everything* because he enjoyed the thought of other students fearing the sheer size and loud colors of the book. I believe that our shirt did this idea justice. Outsiders see a professor's face on a shirt and may be surprised or scared, but the people on the inside, the 21A.00ers know that we are paying tribute to the great times we had in class and the amazing energy imbued within us all throughout the semester. I had the tremendous honor of drawing the professor's face and hope I did him and every student proud with my rendition.

This moment was also critical to me because it expanded my perception of Durkheim's ideas in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Durkheim wrote that totemic emblems and symbols are sacred and worshipped, leading to the sanctification of the animal or plant that the emblem takes shape from, placing these at a sacred level that is above that of man in the clan's hierarchy. Before creating our ritual and designing our shirt, I did not think much of this phenomenon. It was after realizing that we are implementing a totem into our egalitarian-based ritual that I began to think about

Durkheim's observations. His ideas not only imply that totems are part of intrinsically hierarchical societies, but they show that the beings in totems are automatically thought of as above the clan. This contradicts everything that our ritual stood for. Professor Jones was part of our totem due to our ever-growing respect and admiration for him, but this did not mean that we respected or admired him above every member of the class. We decided to put his face on our totem because he represents our shared experiences and the exchange of energies between all members throughout the semester, not as a symbol of his perceived higher influence. It seems like Durkheim failed to acknowledge that totems can exist in egalitarian settings, which could be a result of the specific clans he studied and their preference for hierarchies. I never would have gained insight into the versatility of totems and the preconceived notion that these are associated with class systems if I had not played a part in designing a totem for our clan.

The next steps in the ritual comprised the components of building what Durkheim referred to as collective effervescence. We began small discussions that included the handling and exchange of shirts. I believe this served to ease us into the social aspect of the ritual as well as make us interact with our totem, making us more comfortable touching our shirts and building a tangible connection to it. As the ritual progressed, we arranged ourselves in a circle and began to trade stories about our most treasured possessions. It was difficult not to sense the shift in the energy of the group. As Durkheim observed, we amplified our emotions by sharing our connections with our objects. People shared stories ranging from sentimental attachments to childhood toys to trophies and watches that represented their commitment to a certain sport. As we rejoiced in sharing our experiences, we were met with the same level of emotions from the people

we spoke to, creating a widespread sense of unity within the group. We were all sharing vulnerable aspects of ourselves and being met with open arms by great listeners, the energy in that circle was acting as glue, forever attaching pieces of ourselves to other individuals. Not only this, but because of the previous handling of our shirts and their presence in this circle, we also imbued some of this amplified energy into our totems. Every time we wear or see these shirts, we will be reminded of the collective effervescence we felt as we shared sincere aspects of ourselves with others. I think that this is my favorite part of the ritual, having an eternal physical copy of the community and emotions we experienced that day. As an artist, it is also incredibly humbling to think that one of my drawings is part of such an important representation of our treasured memories and represents such a beautiful moment in time.

As we wrapped up our ritual by putting on our shirts and participating in a symbolic burial, I could not help but think of James Shen. During our ritual practice, Shen made us think about how our ritual would leave an impact on those around us. He placed emphasis on the temporal and spatial aspects of our ritual, emphasizing the design of our classroom and the opportunities that our open windows granted us for leaving a mark on outsiders passing by. I remember that some of my friends passed by and saw our congregation, immediately texting me and asking why I seemed to have joined a cult of cream-colored shirt wearers. Later, I also noticed how people looked confused as to why we were standing on the ledges of the windows staring at a professor covered in books. Even the person that we asked to take our class picture was influenced by our ritual. I think it is safe to say that we successfully incorporated Shen's feedback and definitely left our mark on all of those who passed by building 66 that day. This makes the ritual all

the more special, the fact that only our class has knowledge of the intricacies and specifics of the events that happened that day. We created a sense of us, the clan members partaking in a sacred activity, and them, the outsiders living their profane lives while building a strong community and demonstrating the admirable results of modifying classroom dynamics.

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