

Religion & Memorializing the State Show Notes

Question 1: Brief thoughts on the inauguration, what you saw and thought, and how your research interests come into play.

Elaine Peña: thinking about yesterday and today, thinking about the book I just published, Viva George!: Celebrating Washington's Birthday at the US-Mexico Border. Looking at transnational cooperation and migration. I saw a lot of overlap between my research and the inauguration and events of January 6th. I also saw a lot of sanctification of space going on. There were remarks about sanctifying the Capitol after the events of January 6th. The words, site and timing were done in a way to draw our attention to certain things. It calibrates U.S religion to bring in diversity that was shown on that stage.

Nichole R. Phillips: One of my areas of interest is race religion and the us nation. When i thought about yesterday in relation to January 6h, I was thinking about rites of intensification. Rites of intensification are rites of passage and ceremonies that reaffirm identity and authority, morals, ideologies, values, commitments, but the inauguration was exceptional. It reminded us of our group's allegiances. The inauguration reminded us that we are “we the people”. We had a mix of races and ethnicities. It was about group consensus.

Kristina Horn Sheeler: My book looks at the 2008 campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin and how rhetoric around post feminism shaped the campaigns. Even with the swearing in of VP, we still see the way people try to dismiss her as a woman and through white supremacy. My word of caution is that we have not moved past a need for gender justice any more than how Obama or Harris reflect a post racial culture. I cannot see a time besides the Civil War and WWII where presidential rhetoric has mattered more. The day was about restoring the soul of our nation and democracy. I was most moved by Amanda Gorman’s poem, the unity and hopefulness.

Question 2: Looking at the themes, space, people and rhetoric of restoration. It feels optimistic. Can you tell us more about the tension between civil religion and what is around the idea of American exceptionalism and gets associated with civil religion.

Elaine Peña: American Civil religion flattens intra group difference and that is why it is hard to back up. But what we saw yesterday did not solve that problem; it can help us pivot on how we use religion.

Nichole R. Phillips: I will add to that, inherent to civil religion are two components. It is reflective of our democracy that we practice. We are a civic republic, but we are also a liberal democracy. Both are true at the same time. Same thing with American civil religion. There is a prophetic strand pointing out what we have done wrong, then there is the priestly type that celebrates but doesn’t investigate where we have gone wrong. Thinking about Langston Hughes’, Let America Be America Again, he points to the un-exceptionalisms of America. We have to look at both at the same time.

Kristina Horn Sheeler: I wonder about the “more perfect union” notion helps us resolve these challenges or competing perspectives. The notion that we messed up and we move to fix it. The acknowledgment of error and the movement towards a new good.

Question 3: Did Amanda Gorman give us something that the president could not? Was she better at holding up a mirror for all Americans and if so, why?

Elaine Peña: She pointed out that when we think about America, we should think about America as a work in progress. She set us on a path to look at the work, investments, and self-reflection that goes into the work in progress. She is also not the president, so her words function differently.

Nichole R. Phillips: I agree; what also made her exceptional is that she told her story. She was able to match the language of the president, but her story is different. White privilege and white guilt often shroud white American stories. They both told stories that work to show the diversity in this country and how it benefits us to connect.

Question 4: Civil religion also implies plenty of people who are not often included, or actively excluded, and inaugural addresses usually try to answer the “who are we”. So, who are we after yesterday?

Kristina Horn Sheeler: We are a people of values, committed to democracy, and moving this country forward. Biden made space for not only those who agree but also those who don’t, while calling out the untruths and anger. No unification without division.

Nichole R. Phillips: I would say that we are still a city on a hill. Meaning being responsible for the common good, against despotism you’re always going to have democracy, dreaming, and people who are working towards a common good.

Elaine Peña: We know from the speeches that we still like the city on a hill idea. I wonder if this could have been more effective if January 6th hadn't happened. Do we need January 6th to talk about the inauguration in the way we are talking about it?

Kristina Horn Sheeler: I think January 6th gave us a flashpoint and something to focus on. It was emblematic of the last four years and the discourse we heard from the former president. The language that we heard for the last four years was violent and how it can be weaponized.

Elaine Peña: In my mind January 6th and where that happened made the inauguration different and possible. I think the event and site empowered people.

Question 5: One of the most surprising things to me is that we have heard rhetoric around anti-Washington and anti-government for so long, but the site that was being defended both on January 6th and on inauguration day was the capital. Did the violence on January 6th, ceremonies for COVID deaths, did those help us embrace something that had been denigrated for a long time?

Nichole R. Phillips: Sacrificial death is one of the components or constituencies of an American civil religion. But the assassination of President Lincoln was a touch stone for having martyrdom be part of how we understand ourselves as a nation. Not all deaths are sacrificial deaths; there has to be some will on the part of those who are making the sacrifice.

Question from audience: How does civil religion relate to making a people sacred, rather than a particular person?

Nichole R. Phillips: We use political figures because civil religion is a public faith or the faith of the public or political square. So how we understand ourselves in terms of greatness and being American we lift up political leaders because it is in that sphere of culture.

Question from audience: What did the ceremony of signing executive orders reflect in the day's events and as a sacred ceremony?

Elaine Peña: It was strategically televised to be evidence of the remarks made during the inauguration and all the other ideas being put out. Evidence of inclusiveness and diversity put action behind the words.

Kristina Horn Sheeler: What allowed that to move so quickly is that there were no inaugural balls, and there used to be no action on day one, but now we see presidents acting on day one.