



Real-time rituals of elite male privilege #Kavanaugh

written by Sara Shneiderman
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The late September 2018 public testimony of Christine Blasey Ford and Brett Kavanaugh before the US Senate Judiciary Committee gave the world an opportunity to observe the real-time production of elite white male privilege within the highly ritualized context that is the US political system. As an anthropologist whose work has focused on the relationship between ritual and politics, watching the video footage was analytically illuminating yet personally wrenching. The gendered hierarchies on display felt eerily familiar: I happen to



have attended high school in Bethesda, Maryland (like both Ford and Kavanaugh) and taught at Yale University (where Kavanaugh continued on to college and law school).

Conducting ethnographic research in fractious political contexts where many competing realities vie for attention has taught me that watching what people actually do, how they behave in relation with others, and how they say what they say tells us much more than the written word can—whether in legal documents, media accounts, or otherwise. Watching Ford and Kavanaugh speak and act *in the ritual context* of the hearing itself gave me that kind of visceral knowledge not only of these two individuals, but of the hierarchies that structure the shared reality they inhabit. While some commentators talked about the incommensurability of their worlds (she said she was 100% sure and so did he), to me it's clear that they are bound up in a mutually constituted sociopolitical structure [which relies upon the devaluation of women's experiences to produce male privilege.](#)

Their worlds are not incommensurable, precisely because Kavanaugh's reality cannot exist without Ford's.

Men like him (not all men, but insecure men who feel entitled to positions of power) cannot get to the high places to which they aspire without demonstrating that they belong to a certain elite 'fraternity' (in the general as well as specific sense, in Kavanaugh's case), [one of whose rites of entry is to objectify and devalue women.](#)

That is what Kavanaugh was doing when he was 17, and it is what he is still doing now. This is what was happening in my own late 1980s Grade 9 science class—in a Montgomery County, Maryland public high school adjacent to the Columbia Country Club of which Ford spoke in her testimony—when the male teacher addressed all female students as “bimbo” when calling on them. I and several other uncomfortable female students complained to the female principal with our parents; she heard us out, but then told us that the teacher in question was a



popular coach of one of the boys' sports teams and loved by those students. A note was placed in the teacher's file but no action was taken. (I should also mention that there were many other wonderful teachers who supported our complaint, gave us strategies to cope with such everyday structural challenges, and even more, tools to think towards transforming the system.)

This is what some of my Yale students in Anthropology of Religion wrote about when they turned their emergent ethnographic sensibilities to the university's secret societies and fraternities, such as the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity to which Kavanaugh belonged - whose members were sanctioned during my first year on the Yale faculty in 2011 [for chanting the horrific slogan, "No means yes, yes means anal!"](#) This is what was in plain view in Kavanaugh's testimony completely aside from the specific allegations or denials. He never directly faced his accuser; but in his [badgering of female Senators Dianne Feinstein and Amy Klobuchar](#), Kavanaugh was [demonstrating to all of the other men in the room that he was man enough](#) to advance to his desired seat at the pinnacle of the system.





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One of the key insights of anthropological work on ‘rites of passage’, a concept coined by Arnold van Gennep and popularized by Victor Turner, is that rituals are never only about changing the status of their apparent subject. In this case, it is Kavanaugh’s proposed elevation from US Circuit Judge to Supreme Court Justice that is the status transformation at hand. The political process is aptly called ‘confirmation’. Rather, such rituals are about maintaining the hierarchies that enable an entire social structure to function, by pointing out the differences in status between various ritual participants and encoding those inequalities through a specific set of actions that must be carried out by those wishing to move up a notch.

Concomitantly, it is not only those in dominant positions who maintain the system as a whole; rather all participants are implicated.

This is why it is a mistake to see the testimony as ‘he said, she said’, or to paint the episode in the oppositional terms of ‘male against female’. Women are also an essential part of the system, just as are the many men who may wish to transform it. When we observe closely, we can see that such political rituals are so powerful in part because their pageantry can obscure the disjunctures between the particularities of ‘the real’, as embodied in the individual high status participants who enact them (Brett Kavanaugh, the heavy drinking youthful abuser of women to whom truth is irrelevant in the process of ascending to the status to which he believes he is entitled), and the imagined generalities of ‘the ideal’ that those participants’ actions are intended to reproduce (a liberal democratic system in which all citizens are equal, which holds truth and justice as core values). Yet rituals also contain within themselves the potential for their own transformation when those in structurally subjugated positions refuse to accept the abstract vision of the ideal, instead holding those above them accountable for the real effects of their actions.



Towards this end, Ford's testimony provided an alternative way of envisioning the world, one in which these fixed hierarchies might not be simply reproduced endlessly, but actually upended by a female voice seeking to change the terms of engagement in the system itself. Her action was particularly powerful because Ford [broke ranks with her own social milieu](#) to follow through on what she called her 'civic duty'. Further change will require many, many more brave women and men to acknowledge their roles in perpetuating these structures and commit to transforming them.

I think of my son, who just started high school this year. I hope that he and his peers will have the maturity and self-consciousness to dismantle this system by creating new rituals—in the classroom, on the sports field, in governance—that help everyone do the hard work of growing up without requiring so many to suffer for the privileged benefit of a few.

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