

VOTING, VOTIVE, DEVOTION

“I Voted” Stickers and Ritualization at Susan B. Anthony’s Grave

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This article considers the popular custom of depositing “I Voted” stickers at the grave of Susan B. Anthony. Focusing mainly on the 2016 election, this article treats Anthony’s grave as the locus of a ritualized social process, and suggests that the stickers can and ought to be understood as ritual votive objects, or “ex-votos,” from the Latin *ex voto*—meaning “from a vow.” Drawing on the connections among votives, voting, and devotion, Conley demonstrates how the stickers are elucidated by theories of materiality (particularly the contributions of so-called new materialisms scholars)—scholarship that is shaped by feminist approaches. Relatedly, in raising questions regarding what constitutes a votive, and about the gendered dimensions of devotional practices more broadly, the article explores the agentive role of the stickers, with their social and material entanglements, in the construction and destabilization of cultural memory related to the women’s suffrage movement.

Keywords: new materialisms, ritual, suffrage, votives

Since at least 2014, individuals—mostly female-identifying—have been depositing their “I Voted” stickers at the grave of Susan B. Anthony, located at Mount Hope Cemetery in Rochester, New York.¹ On the day of the 2016 presidential election, the practice intensified, with the site drawing as many as ten thousand people—some of whom waited for hours in a line that stretched over a

¹ The category of “women” is, of course, unstable, as well as historically and socially contingent. In attending to gendered modes of devotion and the role of women in ritual practices, I am by no means assuming a “natural” category or imposing a binary definition.

mile long.² Images of the headstone covered in stickers went viral, and media outlets from *Washington Post* to *BuzzFeed* ran pieces detailing what they deemed to be a spontaneous performance of remembrance, gratitude, and celebration (see fig. 1).³ Indeed, the spectacle was framed as representative of the apotheosis of the women's rights movement that was expected that day, as voters prepared to cast their votes for Hillary Rodham Clinton and against Donald Trump, a candidate known for his misogyny, whose supporters had recently called for a repeal of the Nineteenth Amendment.⁴

The resonances between Clinton's campaign and the woman's suffrage movement were cultivated throughout both the Democratic primary and the general election, with Clinton actively situating herself within a broader ideological struggle. For example, she donned an all-white pantsuit in July 2016 when she accepted the Democratic nomination and again during the third general election debate—white being one of the official colors adopted by the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage (a suffragist organization formed in 1913 by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns).⁵ Clinton also drew on Anthony herself, posting about her on Facebook in the days leading up to the election. Indeed, there was a certain poignancy in invoking Anthony in the context of the 2016 election, 110 years after her death. Born in 1820 to an activist Quaker family in Adams, Massachusetts, Anthony campaigned for the abolition of slavery and the right for women to own property and retain their earnings. Together with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, she founded the American Equal Rights Association in 1866; in 1872, she was arrested in Rochester for voting. Anthony became president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1892, and appeared before Congress nearly every year until her death to advocate for the passage of a suffrage amendment.⁶ Not until fourteen years after her death, however, were all American women granted the right to vote with the Nineteenth Amendment, also known as the “Susan B. Anthony Amendment.”⁷

² In response to the crowds, the city installed floodlights and kept the cemetery open late into the evening. Cleve Wootson, “Susan B. Anthony's Tombstone Covered in ‘I Voted’ Stickers,” *Washington Post*, November 8, 2016.

³ Ryan Broderick, “People Are Lining Up at Susan B. Anthony's Grave to Show Her Their ‘I Voted Stickers,’” *BuzzFeed News*, November 8, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatesthis/people-are-lining-up-at-susan-b-anthonys-grave-to-show-her-t>.

⁴ See Colleen Shalby, “A Brief History of the Trump Campaign's Controversies with Women,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 2016; and Hannah Wise, “Trump Supporters Denounce Women's Right to Vote With #RepealThe19th,” *Dallas News*, October 12, 2016.

⁵ Clinton revealed that she also intended to wear white when she thanked the country for electing her. See Hillary Clinton, *What Happened* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 18.

⁶ Ellen Carol DuBois, ed., *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton-Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writings, Speeches* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992).

⁷ On the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, see Suzanne M. Marilley, *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). Also helpful is the online database and resource site “Women's Suffrage and



Fig. 1: The grave of Susan B. Anthony covered with “I Voted” stickers left by voters in the 2016 presidential election, at Mount Hope Cemetery in Rochester, New York. Source: Reuters.

In this article, I show how the practices surrounding Anthony’s grave can be illuminated by appeals to religious studies. As I argue, the “I Voted” stickers are not merely symbolic, and depositing the stickers at Anthony’s grave is not simply a tribute. Instead, the stickers are central to questions of devotion and remembrance, as well as attempts to reconcile the specificity of the 2016 election to the larger history of women’s suffrage and the broader trajectory of women’s rights movements. Specifically, while much of the media coverage concerning Anthony’s grave drew on the familiar rhetoric of “pilgrimage,” few commentators (scholarly or otherwise) treated the outpouring as one with more defined ritualized roots or the grave site as the locus of a ritualized social process. Such an omission reflects the fact, as feminist theologian Teresa Berger has observed, that “gender has been marked as marginal—if only through silence—for what is deemed central to the history of ritual practice, namely the development of rites, institutions, and ritual texts.”⁸ In this sense, Anthony’s

the Media,” hosted by New York University’s Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute, <http://suffrag-andthemedias.org/>. This open-access site curates both primary and secondary sources concerning “media-related suffrage content.”

⁸ Teresa Berger, “Feminist Ritual Practice,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 525–43, quotation on 525.

grave bears marked similarities to other female-driven sites of devotion—such as the domestic altars (*altaristas*) created by Mexican American Catholic women—that are often regarded as derivative of or even antithetical to the formal altars found in churches.⁹ That is, even though ritual sites and practices shape and are shaped by performances of gender, women’s participation tends to be absent from “official” textual and material records, and the ritual aspects of sites like Anthony’s grave are neglected on account of the demographic makeup of participants, lack of liturgical setting, and less-than-obvious religious resonances.¹⁰

In my use of “ritual,” I draw primarily on the work of Catherine Bell, who has focused on the performative aspects of ritual and its potential for social action. Bell argues that ritual practices do not simply symbolize or communicate meaning, but rather enact it.¹¹ In addition, I am influenced by Robert Orsi’s work on American Catholics and their urban shrines, in which he highlighted how devotional practices cannot be neatly categorized as religious or secular, ritual or mundane.¹² Against this backdrop of ritual studies, and with attention to the gendered politics of popular religiosity, I suggest, first, that the 2016 election-day activities surrounding Anthony’s grave constitute a ritualized votive practice. Consequently, these activities are illuminated by both the wide-ranging work in votive studies, as well as theories of materiality/new materialisms—two prongs of scholarship that are shaped by feminist approaches and political investments. Second, in drawing on both theories of materiality and feminist approaches, I consider the agentic role of “I Voted” stickers, with their social and material entanglements, in the construction of cultural identity and collective memory.

⁹ See Kay Turner, “*Voces de Fe: Mexican American Altaristas in Texas*,” in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, ed. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 180–205.

¹⁰ Though beyond the scope of this article, it should also be noted that Anthony is part of a broader group of social activists or “secular saints” whose lives and legacies inspire pilgrimages and evoke a certain religiosity. For a discussion of devotional practices related to another complicated figure, see Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, “Holy Activist, Secular Saint: Religion and the Social Activism of César Chávez,” in Espinosa and García, *Mexican American Religions*, 106–49.

¹¹ See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Moreover, on the importance of place in the construction of ritual, see J. Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), particularly where he argues that “ritual is not an expression of or a response to ‘The Sacred’; rather something or someone is made sacred by ritual,” 105. This article also derives insights from Victor Turner’s work on ritual processes and his focus on ritual space as an arena for power negotiations, as in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969).

¹² Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

This Miracle Cost Me an Arm and a Leg!: Votives in Antiquity and Beyond

“I Voted” stickers can and ought to be understood as ritual votive objects, or “ex-votos,” from the Latin *ex voto*—meaning “from a vow.”¹³ From antiquity until today, votives have littered sites as varied as ancient Mediterranean healing temples, medieval saints’ shrines, and modern-day war memorials.¹⁴ Traditional scholarly approaches to votives hold that they stand either as thanks offerings to divine intercessors, or else as material markers of gratitude, devotion, or supplication. The capacious category of “votive” includes but is not limited to figurines of humans, gods, animals, and so on; representations of body parts; exuvial or personal items such as hair clippings, crutches, or handwritten notes; paintings or other images; inscriptions documenting both requests *for* and records *of* cures; and everyday items such as confections, liquor, and toys. Moreover, while votive objects reflect a range of sizes and degrees of quality and personalization, they also tend to be mass-produced. In general, the label “votive” (or “ex-voto”) tends to serve as something of a catchall for apparent excess at sanctuaries, shrines, and tombs, as well as a default label for any item of unclear or imprecise function found at a ritual site.

Much of the evidence concerning ancient votive practices comes from sanctuaries dedicated to the Greek god of healing, Asklepios, which existed throughout Greece and Asia Minor from around the fourth century BCE until the second century CE. Healing methods practiced by the cult of Asklepios were wide-ranging and included not only miracle healings but also medico-religious treatments such as ritual bathing and exercise.¹⁵ As central to the material culture surrounding the

¹³ In addition, scholars employ a number of related terms for such objects—including *votive offerings*, *votive images*, *thanks offerings*, and simply, *votives*.

¹⁴ In antiquity, the commission and dedication of votives served as a common feature at Greek, Etruscan, and Roman temples and healing sanctuaries, and their usage continued in the Middle Ages at Christian saints’ shrines throughout the Mediterranean and in Europe. Today, votives remain operative at Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox sites in Europe and North and South America. For ancient votives, see Gary Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 71–78. For studies of contemporary votives, see Frank Graziano, *Miraculous Images and Votive Offerings in Mexico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Lindsey C. King, “Pilgrimage, Promises, and Ex-Votos: Ingredients for Healing in Northwest Brazil,” in *Pilgrimage and Healing*, ed. J. Dubisch, and Michael Winkelmann (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005), 49–68. See also “The Votives Project: Offerings to the Gods from Antiquity to the Present,” an online network of “people from different backgrounds who study, create, or use votive offerings or other related ways of communicating with the divine,” accessed August 9, 2019, <https://thevotivesproject.org/>. On war memorials as ritual sites, see, for example, Marita Sturken, “The Wall, the Screen, and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” *Representations* 35, no. 1 (1991): 118–42.

¹⁵ On the cult of Asklepios, see Emma J. Edelstein and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press,



Fig. 2: Anatomical Votive Reliefs from Corinth. Courtesy HolyLandPhotos.org.

cult of Asklepios, votives were available for purchase and dedication at the sites, wherein they would have been hung from tree branches within the sanctuaries, deposited before representations of Asklepios, or else suspended from ceilings or positioned upon shelves within the various buildings (temples, incubation rooms, and so on). Such objects both attested to the presence and efficacy of a divine entity at a site and contributed to the visual dynamics of the space. Moreover, regardless of how specifically the votives were displayed, they would have profoundly affected the ways in which visitors experienced the sights and navigated the sanctuary.¹⁶ Though votives varied in appearance, the most well-known are anatomical representations of body parts, which take the form of extremities (arms, legs, feet, fingers), eyes and ears, genitalia, breasts, various organs (intestines, stomachs, uteruses), and heads, as well as other body parts (fig. 2).¹⁷

1945). According to textual and epigraphic accounts, Asklepios provided cures for infertility, lengthy pregnancies, paralysis, battle wounds, baldness, blindness, and many other ailments.

¹⁶ Archaeological evidence from the Asklepieion at Pergamon indicates that votive objects were displayed for sale at the shops or market stalls that lined the *Via Tecta*, or the Sacred Way—the street that linked the Asklepieion to the rest of the city. For a full catalog of the items and their relative placements and dating, see Gioia de Luca, *Das Asklepieion, 4. Teil: Via Tecta und Hallenstrasse, die Funde, vol. XI, 2, 4, Altertümer von Pergamon* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984).

¹⁷ Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 75.

Despite their ritual significance, the fact that votives are often mass-produced and/or crudely constructed seems to contribute to the notion that they are (and were) of less value and interest, and that their meanings are somehow self-evident.¹⁸ For example, scholars often assume that anatomical replicas represent corresponding afflicted (and then divinely healed) parts of supplicants' bodies.¹⁹ As Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis suggests in her excellent analysis of the spatial and visual dynamics of ancient Asklepieia, the anatomical dedication would be "frozen in a permanent state of healed transformation in the sanctuary."²⁰ According to this perspective, the anatomical votive is intended to ensure the lasting cure and continued protection of the divine entity, and indeed, it is possible that many anatomical representations *do* refer to specific afflictions or body parts, with votive eyes indicating that the supplicant suffered from ocular disease or blindness, and votive legs representing an ambulatory impairment.

Assuming or imposing a one-to-one correlation between the affliction or intention and the material representation can be reductive, however, and recently, the *materia* of devotional culture, including votives, has been subjected to greater theoretical analysis.²¹ Emma-Jayne Graham, for instance, argues that second-century anatomical votives "provided the tangible material reference point for the contractual relationship established between mortal and divine," and explores how they not only sustained but also produced religious knowledge, identities, and communities.²² Graham's work, along with that of Jane Draycott and Jessica Hughes, pushes us to move beyond purely symbolic or representational approaches to votive objects.²³ In this endeavor they are aided by the theoretic-

¹⁸ For instance, in his book, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), David Freedberg took care to distinguish between high and "low" votive forms, and attends mainly to the "higher" forms.

¹⁹ As F. T. Van Straten posited, the "representation would refer to the desired effect: it would have been used to commend the infected part of the body to the attention of the healing deity" ("Gifts for the Gods," in *Faith, Hope and Worship: Aspects of Religious Mentality in the Ancient World*, ed. H. S. Versnel [Leiden: Brill, 1981], 65–151, quotation on 103).

²⁰ Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis, "The Body in Space: Visual Dynamics in Graeco-Roman Healing Pilgrimage," in *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods*, ed. Jas Elsner and Ian Rutherford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 183–218, quotation on 215.

²¹ See Steven M. Oberhelman, "Anatomical Votive Reliefs as Evidence for Specialization at Healing Sanctuaries in the Ancient Mediterranean World," *Athens Journal of Health* 1, no. 1 (2014): 47–62; and Robert M. Bruce-Chwatt, "Anatomical Ex-Voto—A Half-Remembered Art," *British Homeopathic Journal* 74, no. 1 (1985): 52–55, esp. 52. Both authors suggest that anatomical representations ought not necessarily be taken as a direct pathological index.

²² Emma-Jayne Graham, "Partible Humans and Permeable Gods: Anatomical Votives and Personhood," in *Bodies of Evidence: Ancient Anatomical Votives Past, Present and Future*, ed. Jane Draycott (London: Routledge, 2017), 45–62, quotations on 47 and 59.

²³ In addition to Draycott's contributions to *Bodies of Evidence*, see Jessica Hughes, *Votive Body Parts in Greek and Roman Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Moreover, for nuanced approaches to the ontology and agency of votives, see Ittai Weinryb, *Agents of Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

cal contributions of new materialisms scholars like Jane Bennett, who advances a more robust theory of the capacity of “things” to act as “quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”²⁴ In attending to the agency and social lives of objects, Bennett uses Bruno Latour’s term *actants* to refer to sources of action that can be either human or nonhuman.²⁵ Moreover, she notes that the efficacy or agency of an actant always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces.²⁶ According to her framework, which is doggedly anti-anthropocentric, as well as explicitly political and consciously ethical, *things* are not latent by-products of human dispositions, but are actually part of a shifting and vibrant political ecology in which agency is distributed across human and nonhuman actants of all varieties.

As such a theoretical intervention suggests, the operative question ought not be What do votives *signify*? but rather What do they *do*? Take, as a case study, a set of votive eyes, dating from sixth- or seventh-century Syria (fig. 3). From one perspective, the object could indicate the supplicant’s affliction—blindness, perhaps. Or it could refer to the eyes of a divine entity (in this case, a saint). Or more abstractly, to something “seen.” The lack of specificity concerning the referential subject or experience grants the object an ambiguity that stands in contrast to its visual immediacy. That is, the eyes invite visual interaction, but it is not necessarily clear with what, or whom, one is interacting. The object is expressive without being fully communicative. Though attesting to presence, the eyes are also disembodied and displaced and hence suggest the straddling of different realms. The object draws together the saint, the supplicant, and the experience into one ritual object that then serves not only as public testimony, but also as a means of extending or even compelling the divine-human relationship. In this sense, the object is not only representative but also transformative. Georges Didi-Huberman suggests that such an object is “capable of *giving form*—an organic form—to psychic time,” in that though its representational value is fundamental, it does not necessarily “reveal the stakes, the final cause, the very necessity of the figurative effort.”²⁷

²⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), viii. In attending to the agency and social lives of objects, she notes that their efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces. As Elizabeth Stephens has noted, however, there is no consensus about what the term “new materialism” refers to, and Bennett does not identify herself as a “new materialist.” See Stephens, “Feminism and New Materialism: The Matter of Fluidity,” *InterAlia: A Journal of Queer Studies* 9 (2014): 186–202, esp. 186.

²⁵ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁶ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 21.

²⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, “Ex-Voto: Image, Organ, Time,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 47, no. 3 (2007): 7–16, quotation on 9.



Fig. 3: Votive plaque with eyes (sixth or seventh century, Syria). Source: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (57. 1865. 563).

The ambiguity of the eyes is, I suggest, an affordance of votives themselves. The purchase or commission and then dedication of a votive allows it to become ritually associated with the subject and their reason for frequenting the sanctuary. This process transforms the neutral item into an efficacious object with the capacity to mediate social agency in that depositing the object at a ritual site ensures the continued attention and protection of the divine entity.²⁸ Moreover, through its public display, a votive operates as part of an assemblage and hence functions on not merely an individual level but also a collective and “social” level.²⁹ Visual and physical encounters with the material assemblage of votives within a ritual space inform the way visitors interact with the space and invite them to participate materially by adding their own pieces to the collection. Acquiring and then adding

²⁸ Van Straten, “Gifts for the Gods,” 80.

²⁹ Following Bennett, I deploy the term *assemblage* to refer to “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts,” *Vibrant Matter*, 23.

a votive to an existing assemblage allows the object to become ritually associated with the supplicant and their reason for frequenting the site while also allowing the supplicant to remain “present” at the site even after departing. In this way, the objects on display serve as visual representations of previous visitors’ experiences and hence attest to the existence of a broader social “body” of subjects connected to the site. And yet, even as an individual votive stands for a specific person or event, once that person leaves, the full details of their specific circumstances are inaccessible to later visitors or viewers—granting the objects an additional ambiguity and anonymity as well as reifying their agency as objects that operate independently or semi-independently of their human interlocutors.

Objects of Resistance: *Materia* and Feminist Inquires

Though vast, the material evidence associated with the votive tradition largely remains poorly documented and inadequately theorized (with the exceptions noted above), at least in part due to a lingering discomfort regarding the precise status, significance, and function of votives, as well as questions regarding *which* people are dedicating such objects, and according to whose authority. That is, despite their widespread use, the multifaceted status of votives has been and remains complicated, as demonstrated, for example, by a 587 CE prohibition the church Council of Auxerre issued against the construction of “feet or images of men out wood.” The council suggested instead that “whoever has a vow, let him keep vigil in the church and fulfill his vow [by giving] to the servants of the church or to the poor.”³⁰ This prohibition both reflects an ecclesiastical uneasiness regarding a practice with decidedly pre-Christian roots and attempts to reframe the nature of the “exchange” that takes place between humans and saints, suggesting that reciprocal efforts should take the form of prayer or charitable acts rather than material objects.

More recently, votive practices at the Marian shrine in Lourdes in southern France—a site long associated with miraculous healings—have caused tension between site officials and individual devotees.³¹ As Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans noted in an article detailing devotional materiality at the shrine, “official” attitudes toward miracles have shifted over the course of the site’s history, with implications for the use of ritual objects. As they suggested, votives at the Lourdes shrine serve as a vital part of the material culture of pilgrimage by extending and reinforcing the “relationships between the devotee and the saint” and rendering

³⁰ Quoted in J. N. Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism, 350–750: The Conversion of Western Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 103.

³¹ The shrine dates to the mid-nineteenth century and attracts six million pilgrims every year from all over the world. For a full history, see Willy Jansen and Catrien Notermans, “Ex-Votos in Lourdes: Contested Materiality of Miraculous Healings,” *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects* 7, no. 2 (2011): 168–92.

the “drama expressed by the ex-voto” a matter of public display and recognition.³² Throughout much of the shrine’s history, pilgrims whose healing was understood as authentic were invited to provide written accounts of their experiences, which were then transformed into records for preservation and display at the shrine as well as official reports for widespread distribution. Jansen and Notermans explained that site officials encouraged literary practices because the “miracle stories represented a devotional genre that was accepted, even shaped, and controlled by the clerics who used the stories for their own political purposes.”³³ In contrast, the practice of leaving (as well as taking) material objects attracted both unofficial and official resistance, in part because material objects were more difficult to use as propaganda and invited, rather than imposed, narrative interpretations.³⁴ Indeed, material expressions of devotion at Lourdes were, and continue to be, subject to quick removal—causing pilgrims to become increasingly creative in their efforts. Jansen and Notermans describe visitors leaving objects in unexpected or unnoticed places—pushing them into cracks in the grotto wall, for example, or sliding them under altar cloths and tucking them discreetly into the grass surrounding the bases of statues outside the grotto.³⁵ Despite official efforts, the *materia* of devotion overflows at Lourdes and actively resists routinization.

Treating the Lourdes votives as actants demonstrates how the study of votives across time and space has benefited greatly from the “material turn” in religious studies and academia more broadly—wherein from the 1970s, “significant theoretical and practical research has been directed toward understanding what it means to live in a world made up not only of ideas but of things,” as noted by Colleen McDannell.³⁶ Materiality studies, and especially scholars advocating new materialisms, argue that the agency of materials is self-evident: “they can move as well as act and have a life of their own, challenging an anthropocentric post-Enlightenment intellectual tradition.”³⁷ Often overlooked, however, in the application of such theoretical lenses, are the distinctly *feminist* roots of materialist inquiries. To begin, attention to materials and materiality emerged as a means of “recovering” or reconstructing the experiences and

³² Jansen and Notermans, “Ex-Votos in Lourdes,” 171.

³³ Jansen and Notermans, 176.

³⁴ Jansen and Notermans, 178. Not all Catholic shrines are or have been subject to the same types of regulations concerning the use of material objects. This piece serves as but one case study, albeit one that raises broader questions about the role of ritual objects in contestations of power.

³⁵ Jansen and Notermans, 181. Even literary votives in the form of written requests or healing narratives came to be restricted in 2000 when individuals were encouraged to send prayers via email, thus further thwarting opportunities for individualized material exchanges.

³⁶ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 2. Additionally, see Colleen McDannell, “Interpreting Things: Material Culture Studies and American Religion,” *Religion* 21 (1991): 371–87.

³⁷ Petra Lange-Berndt, “Introduction//How to Be Complicit with Materials,” in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 12–23, quotation on 16.

presence of those whose lives and subjective experiences are far less likely to be reflected in textual and historical records, such as women, children, slaves, and subjugated persons in general. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost suggest in the introduction to their edited volume *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, there has been a “neglect of . . . material phenomena and processes” in fields that privilege “language, discourse, culture, and values” over the material.³⁸ Moreover, attending to *things* (particularly small or “everyday” things) both directs attention toward the physical, sensual, and corporeal world and also challenges mind/body, form/material, and sacred/profane dualisms.³⁹ For feminist scholars, the study of material culture emerged across many disciplines and subdisciplines as one means of challenging distinctly malestream approaches.⁴⁰

Stickers and Stickiness: Votives, Voting, Devotion⁴¹

The terms *vote* and *votive* both stem from the Latin *votum*—“a vow, wish, promise to a god, solemn pledge, dedication.” Without necessarily placing ancient votives and modern “I Voted” stickers in a direct historical continuum, I find it productive to place dedicatory objects from different locations and time periods in conversation with one another. According to this broader material and theoretical landscape, we now return to the notion of “I Voted” stickers as both votives

³⁸ Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3. This approach, however, can conflict with yet another feminist approach—one that resists positivistic approaches to history or meaning.

³⁹ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 5. Similarly, Monika Wagner points out that “feminist critique has raised fundamental objections to traditional imaginations of material as a pairing for form, initiating a challenge to the ideology behind the history of this form-material dualism, with its gendered implications,” in “Material//2001,” in Lange-Berndt, *Materiality*, 26–30, esp. 29.

⁴⁰ On malestream theories and theologies, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999). Of course, feminist receptions of the work of new materialisms scholars are more complicated than I’ve portrayed here. On the one hand, taking *things* seriously can be a feminist enterprise, and decentering humanity is central to certain scholar-activist agendas—such as those related to the environment. On the other hand, approaches that blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman entities can be fraught on account of the human legacy of treating people *as* things—of either eliding the difference between subject and objects or else sliding back into a certain biological essentialism, which feminist critics have long resisted. For more on this subject, see Samantha Frost, “The Implications of New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology,” in *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, ed. Heidi E. Grasswick (New York: Springer, 2011), 69–83.

⁴¹ On “stickiness,” see Sara Ahmed, who explores how objects “become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension” (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014], 11).

and actants.⁴² In suggesting that contemporary voters and their stickers can be located within a broader tradition, I recognize the stickers as votives, which allows a more nuanced understanding of the ritualized dimensions of casting and commemorating votes.

The version of the sticker with which contemporary readers are likely familiar—a small oval with an image of a flag waving in the wind (fig. 4)—was designed in 1987 by Janet Boudreau, who has explained that she introduced the sticker to combat a perceived ambivalence toward election day that she found dismaying, particularly coming out of the political activism of the sixties and seventies.⁴³ The ambivalence she sensed is perhaps in part attributable to changes made to voting processes and procedures over the last two hundred years. In the nineteenth century, voting was a public, communal activity, with eligible men attending polling places to collect ballots from party agents and then handing the ticket of their choice to an election judge. Although such a system allowed for coercion and retaliation, it also contributed to the overall festive or *occasional* nature of Election Day. Since the introduction of the secret ballot in the late nineteenth century, and the more recent proliferation of opportunities to vote early and/or by mail-in ballots, voting has become more of a solitary and solemn act (albeit a safer and more egalitarian one, even accounting for modern efforts to restrict voting access via gerrymandering, poll closures, and photo identification laws).⁴⁴

The affordances of the stickers render them simultaneously anonymous and intimate, generic and yet capable of personalization. Cheap, mass-produced, and portable, they are affixed to human subjects but also assume social “lives” that set them apart from their intended referents as they are featured in selfies, transferred to journals and subway seats, disposed of, and saved.⁴⁵ As they travel beyond their rolls, beyond the polling places, they both come together in various assemblages of material and human actants and yet also remain in a network with one another.

⁴² As Didi-Huberman suggests, it is not that the “ex-voto” has no history, but rather that it appears in innumerable “mutations in devotional culture” and hence any historical treatment must give an account of a *different temporality* that, within it, insists and resists every day chronology of evolution or ‘progress’ (“Ex-Voto: Image, Organ, Time,” 7).

⁴³ Olivia B. Waxman, “This Is the Story behind Your ‘I Voted’ Sticker,” *Time*, November 7, 2016 (updated November 6, 2018), <http://time.com/4541760/i-voted-sticker-history-origins/>.

⁴⁴ For a comprehensive treatment of suffrage in the United States, see Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic, 2009). On voter suppression, see Tova Andrea Wang, *The Politics of Voter Suppression: Defending and Expanding Americans’ Right to Vote* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); and Carol Anderson and Richard J. Durbin, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression Is Destroying Our Democracy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018). On systematic racial oppression and the significance of physical space and symbolic place, see Barbara Harris Combs, “Black (and Brown) Bodies out of Place: Towards a Theoretical Understanding of Systematic Voter Suppression in the United States,” *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4–5 (2016): 535–49.

⁴⁵ On the social lives of objects, see Bill Brown, *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).



Fig. 4: “I Voted” sticker.

In an era where the most ubiquitous forms of political engagement take place within the realm of social media, the near-constant implorations to vote, and the *affective* pull of the sticker (in combination with its literal stickiness)—remind us that voting is, in fact, *material*. After submitting one’s vote, however, one is left grasping. Our votes cease to be entirely ours as they leave our hands, and yet paradoxically, they *only* become fully ours upon being cast and counted. Acquisition of the “I Voted” sticker is contingent upon physically casting a vote. It reflects an act rather than a stance, a fulfillment rather than an intention. It marks the transformation of a potential voter into *one who has voted*. It is a memento, yes, but also a continuation of the vote and/or the state of voting. In this sense, the sticker serves both to overcome the ever-widening distance between our votes and ourselves and to identify us as members of a broader community of voters.

Graham has suggested that ancient anatomical votives both denote *and* embody.⁴⁶ Moreover, while anatomical votives are *offerings*, they are also a means of recognizing affliction and enacting healing—on the level of both the individual and the communal. Interestingly, the 2016 “I Voted” stickers demonstrated a similarly dual focus as both devotional offerings but also markers of affliction and appeals for healing or restoration in the midst of an election season that was

⁴⁶ Graham, “Partible Humans,” 53.

considered painfully regressive and irreparably divisive in so many ways. Depositing one's sticker served as a means of spanning a wide temporal distance—between the past, the fraught current moment, and the improved and redemptive future that was anticipated. The contribution of a ritual object (the sticker) to the material assemblage of the devotional site (the grave of Susan B. Anthony) offered a means of interacting with a broader community of social actants, both dead and alive, present and absent, human and nonhuman. In an individualized sense, it allowed for the assertion of one's relationship to the space and served as a means of ensuring one's continued *presence* at both the physical site and at that particular moment in the broader historical trajectory. Moreover, the stickers did not operate in isolation but in relation to one another—deriving efficacy and meaning from the legitimacy and legibility of the greater totality of the site and its constant flow of visitors (and stickers).

Hence, the stickers ought not be reduced to individualized expressions of a psychological desire to give thanks to Anthony and other leaders of the woman's suffrage movement. Instead, the stickers, as votives, are transformative and interactive actants that facilitate "presence" across time and space and act as visual and material mediators of social relationships and collective memory. Each sticker positions the individual supplicant (voter) within a larger social group and serves as a means of reconciling individual bodies with the greater body politic. In this age of secret ballots, physically affixing the sticker to the headstone allows for a public declaration of allegiance—you hadn't simply "voted," you had voted for *someone*; for *something*.

As the interventions of new materialisms scholars demonstrate, however, we ought not neglect the material object itself in favor of the "vow." The "I Voted" sticker is not secondary, not a mere by-product or physical symbol of an elevated exchange. Likewise, when deposited at the grave site, the stickers are not simply external, material expressions of internal states—of need, perhaps, or of longing, gratitude, or recognition. Focusing solely on the symbolism of the stickers privileges the interiority of the subjects who dedicate them, limits considerations of the potentiality and efficacy of the stickers themselves, and reifies malestream models of religiosity and materiality.

In truth, though subject to varying degrees of personalization and specification, the stickers also remain elusive, even as they mediate presence and exert agency. Like the votive eyes from antiquity, each sticker connects to one person, yes, but once transferred to the grave, it refers to any person, to every person, and to no person, and hence complicates the relationship between the individual and the collective, the part and the whole, the personalized and the anonymous.⁴⁷ Since the physical and syntactic properties of the sticker grant it the capacity to connect separate times, locations, subjects, and experiences, dedicating a sticker

⁴⁷ The stickers, in this context, stand for both entities and events, and as parts, they imply the wholeness of their dedicators, but invite interactive and imaginative approaches to filling in the "gaps."

at the grave highlights the object's functional flexibility in that the "I" is a particular, if anonymous, voter, but the placement of the sticker on the headstone also connects the "I" with Anthony herself. "I Voted," she affirms from the grave, as of course she did—once, illegally, during her lifetime, and retroactively, many times, via the votes of all the women for whom she fought.

Whose Votes? Votives as Modes of Remembrance

For which women *did* Anthony fight, though? Considering the stickers as agentive and ambivalent ritual objects not only complicates our understanding of what constitutes a votive and pushes us beyond symbolic interpretations of the objects but also raises important questions about the role of these votives in the perpetuation of certain perceptions of the past. As McDannell notes, memory is active and constructive, and "through memory we try to recapture an authentic past. However, since the past is changed through remembering, we cannot truly remember it." Hence, we turn to "spaces, gestures, images, and objects to embody memory."⁴⁸ In this sense, the stickers speak to the complexities of feminist modes of remembrance in popular culture by raising specific questions about representation and marginalization. The ritual and material affordances of the stickers—in which their meaning and context is never stable—reminds us of the ways in which matter is not only formed by the forces of language, culture, and politics but also formative. *Things*, to refer back to Bennett, are not trivial, but deeply entrenched in the political ecology of the moment.⁴⁹ Likewise, the grave of Anthony, like other ritual sites, serves as a space of social performance and power negotiations, and its devotional elements participate in a highly selective process wherein past events and entities are remembered and reordered. The "spaces, gestures, images, and objects" of Anthony's grave site actively constitute collective memories—particularly those connected to past and current iterations of feminism—and thus are illuminated by the application of an intersectional lens.⁵⁰

In the lead-up to the 2016 Election Day, several analysts published critiques of the Susan B. Anthony votive practice, drawing attention to the well-documented racist dimensions of the woman's suffrage movement in general and Anthony's positions in particular.⁵¹ They also pointed out the connections between

⁴⁸ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 39.

⁴⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 94–109.

⁵⁰ Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785–810, quotation on 785.

⁵¹ In this endeavor, they drew on a broader body of work. Activists and scholars of African American history have long sought to illuminate the racism of the women's suffrage movement. See, for instance, Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981); and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African-American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850–1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

that legacy and the demographic makeup of the crowds at the grave site. Pieces from the now-defunct *Mic*, among other online publications, pointed out that Anthony, though an abolitionist and one-time friend of Frederick Douglass, stood firmly against passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted Black men the right to vote after the Civil War.⁵² The amendment became a source of division in the suffrage movement and brought Anthony's alliance with Douglass to an end.⁵³ Defenders of her legacy are quick to argue that Anthony did not oppose granting Black men the vote but objected to the passage of the amendment while women—regardless of their race—were specifically denied it.⁵⁴ Even in accounting for historical contingencies, however, it is clear that Anthony, whatever her ultimate goals, was focused on first securing the vote for *white* women. In fact, Anthony, along with Stanton, not only refused to support the Fifteenth Amendment, but actively courted the support of racist white contingencies who opposed Black men's voting rights. In doing so, they relied on discourses of white supremacy and racist tropes—repeatedly portraying Black men as sexual offenders in their newspaper editorials, for example.⁵⁵

In 2016, many commentators encouraged voters to instead visit the graves of Black suffragist leaders, including Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and Sojourner Truth. Such redirection also served to highlight the important work of the most-neglected demographic of the nineteenth-century suffrage struggles: Black women, especially those who, according to historian Faye Dudden, “made the pragmatic tactical decision to support black (male) suffrage and the Fifteenth Amendment before white audiences but to argue for women suffrage inside the black community.”⁵⁶ Though such efforts to extend or shift the devotional space were moderately successful, Anthony's site remained (and remains) central to the various modes of remembrance enacted on Election Day.⁵⁷ Moreover, the attention drawn by and granted to the site, and to Anthony's legacy, not only emerged out of traditional narratives but also served to strengthen them. That is, the presence of so many devotees, and of so many *votives*, both reflected and reinforced Anthony's consummate status and her position in cultural memory as the piv-

⁵² Claire Lampen, “Before You Put an ‘I Voted’ Sticker on Susan B. Anthony's Grave, Remember She Was a Racist,” *Mic*, November 8, 2016, <https://mic.com/articles/158856/before-you-put-an-i-voted-sticker-on-susan-b-anthony-s-grave-remember-she-was-a-racist#.JXoBVWpj6>.

⁵³ She also suggested that gender inequality was a more pressing issue than racial injustice. For a full overview of Anthony's positions, see Faye E. Dudden, *Fighting Chance: The Struggle over Women Suffrage and Black Suffrage in Reconstruction America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵⁴ For example, see a blog post published by the National Susan B. Anthony Museum and House: Victoria Brzustowicz, “Interpreting Susan B. Anthony for Our Times,” *Susan B. Anthony Museum and House*, blog, March 21, 2018, <https://susanbanthonyhouse.org/blog/interpreting-susan-b-anthony-for-our-times/>.

⁵⁵ See Dudden's discussion of Stanton and Anthony's editorializing in their newspaper, *Revolution*, in *Fighting Chance*, 168.

⁵⁶ Dudden, *Fighting Chance*, 185.

⁵⁷ The grave site attracted devotional attention again in the 2018 midterm elections.

otal figure of the woman's suffrage movement. That is, her grave does not merely participate in cultural, collective memory, but in fact, actively constitutes it.⁵⁸

In the aftermath of the 2016 election, critiques of Anthony developed an additional valence in light of statistics showing that over 50 percent of white women had, in fact, voted for Trump.⁵⁹ Moreover, national debates concerning "identity politics," and attitudes toward disenfranchised white, male voters are both anticipated by and a continuation of the same issues that divided the woman's suffrage movement.⁶⁰ The dissonance concerning the legacy of Anthony speaks to larger questions about politically engaged modes of historical inquiry and devotional practice. As participants in a curated, material expression of heritage, the stickers draw on past utterances and in this way, not only reveal but also erase. They facilitate devotion and presence, yes, but also attest to exclusion and absence. "I Voted," they assert, but this begs the questions: *Who* voted? *Who did not* vote? *Who could not* vote? The stickers, as votives, perpetuate a nostalgia for an uncomplicated, teleological women's rights movement, even while they provide an occasion for applying "intersectional prisms" in order to "excavate and expose multilayered structures of power and domination," as Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall note in a discussion of intersectional knowledge production.⁶¹

Having worked to complicate our understanding of votive objects, including "I Voted" stickers, I also suggest that the stickers are capable of destabilizing teleological narratives precisely *because* they are not mere extensions of human desires, or symbols of collective memory but instead actants themselves. Who, or—rather, what—speaks? In this sense, the "I" of the stickers has the curious effect of decentering the subject and hence complicating the relationship between political actants of all varieties—human and material.⁶² If *materia* first struck feminist scholars as a means of "recovering" the lives of women, then the stickers evoke a different sense of "recovery." Their stickiness—both affective and

⁵⁸ As J. Z. Smith observes, "human beings are not placed, they bring place into being . . . place is best understood as a locus of meaning (*To Take Place*, 28).

⁵⁹ Katie Rogers, "White Women Helped Elect Donald Trump," *New York Times*, November 9, 2016.

⁶⁰ Considerable disagreement exists regarding whether and how Democrats should work to appease the racially inflected anxieties of white male (and female) voters who supported Trump in 2016. See Olga Khazan, "People Voted for Trump Because They Were Anxious, Not Poor," *The Atlantic*, April 23, 2018.

⁶¹ Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies," 804.

⁶² In this sense, the stickers affirm Karen Barad's observation that "matter is neither fixed and given nor the mere end result of different processes. Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative" ("Meeting the Universe Halfway//2007," in Lange-Berndt, *Materiality*, 213–15, quotation on 214). The stickers also, however, resist Barad's reliance on language-matter dualities. While Barad's point that "language has been granted too much power," which causes "every 'thing'—even materiality" to be "turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation" is central to theories of materiality, it is also the case that the linguistic and syntactic aspects of the stickers are in fact central to their ambiguity and agency.

literal—renders them able to adhere to different surfaces and narratives but also to redistribute and re-cover.⁶³ Like the votives at Lourdes, the stickers *resist*. In 2016, and then again in 2018, Anthony's grave attracted so many visitors that the identifying features of her tombstone were gradually subsumed by layers of stickers (fig. 4). The votives highlighted but also transformed the space; amplified but also obscured Anthony's name. In short, the stickers matter, and demonstrate how cultural memory is assembled not just discursively, but materially and spatially as well. No individual actant—human or otherwise—gets the final say.

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⁶³ See Didi-Huberman for a similar discussion of the properties of wax as a “material that is insensitive to the contradictions of its material qualities” (“The Order of Material: Plasticities, Malaises, Survivals,” in Lange-Berndt, *Materiality*, 42–53, quotation on 46).

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