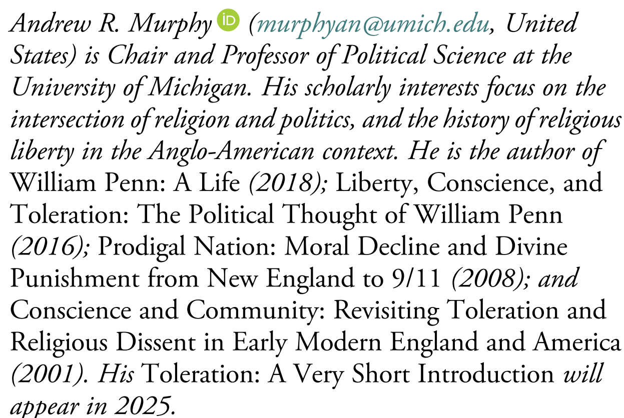
The Deaths and Afterlives of George Floyd and Ashli Babbitt: Political Martyrs, Political Movements, and the Politics of Memory

Andrew R. Murphy

In this paper, I explore how two recent politically charged deaths—those of George Floyd and Ashli Babbitt—illuminate the broader dynamics inherent in the concept of political martyrdom and its relationship to American democracy. *Political* martyrdom (as distinct from that associated with religious communities) offers martyrs a life beyond the grave, not by promising eternal life or paradise, but by ensuring them a role in a community's collective memory. It involves three components: *death*, in what we might call "unnatural" circumstances, generally connected to an individual's identity (or identities) or political commitments; *consecration* of that death, embedding it in a community's collective memory and ascribing to it transcendent meaning; and *transmission*, the passing down of martyrdom narratives over time through media, ritual, and commemorative practices. The paper uses the examples of Floyd and Babbitt to illustrate the value of this conceptual category, one that focuses less on the personal qualities of individuals and more on communities' narrations of their lives and deaths; highlights such narratives' capacity to build collective identities over time, often in contexts far removed from the martyrs' own lives and deaths; and offers new interpretive lenses for considering twenty-first-century issues of systemic violence and structural injustice.

George Floyd and Ashli Babbitt died just over seven months apart. They each met their fate at the hands of state actors: Floyd in a fatal encounter with Minneapolis Police Department officers at the corner of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in late May 2020, Babbitt by an agent of the United States Capitol Police as she attempted to enter the Speaker's Lobby during the January 6, 2021 assault on the US Capitol. Their respective deaths reverberated across the nation in powerful ways, with viral images and contentious commentary circulating almost instantly; social movements proclaimed broader meanings in their deaths and mobilized around them. Many participants in these discussions invoked the imagery of martyrdom in framing the events' larger significance, variously presenting Floyd and Babbitt as martyrs whose deaths offered profound and disturbing insights into contemporary American politics and society.

In this paper, I explore how these two politically charged deaths illuminate broader dynamics inherent in the concept of political martyrdom and its relationship to American democracy. Claims and counterclaims about martyrdom in the cases of Floyd and Babbitt, not surprisingly, reflect the nation's broader political polarization, and shed light on the intersections of death, politics, religion, and memory at this pivotal moment in American history. Floyd has been called both an "unintentional martyr" and a "perfect martyr" whose death "shows us racism in its most raw, gruesome, brutal, and arrogant form" (Green 2020; Karikari-Yawson 2020). But attempts to connect Floyd's death to broader questions of white supremacy and racial bias also drew swift pushback. "I do not support … the media depiction of [Floyd] as a martyr for black America," conservative commentator Candace



Andrew R. Murphy (murphyan@umich.edu, United States) is Chair and Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan. His scholarly interests focus on the intersection of religion and politics, and the history of religious liberty in the Anglo-American context. He is the author of William Penn: A Life *(2018);* Liberty, Conscience, and Toleration: The Political Thought of William Penn *(2016);* Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11 *(2008); and* Conscience and Community: Revisiting Toleration and Religious Dissent in Early Modern England and America *(2001). His* Toleration: A Very Short Introduction *will appear in 2025.*

doi:10.1017/S1537592724001774

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of American Political Science Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Owens remarked in June 2020. Stressing Floyd's "long and dangerous … rap sheet" and describing him as "a violent criminal his entire life," Owens flatly stated: "George Floyd was not an amazing person" (Watts 2020).[1] At the other end of the political spectrum, in the aftermath of January 6, many right-wing groups instantly hailed Babbitt as a martyr. Within days of her death, social media users began circulating images of the so-called Babbitt flag featuring a blood-red Capitol, and her image adorned calls for a "Million Martyr March" on Inauguration Day later that month.[2] Yet the posthumous attention on Babbitt also attracted criticism. As the one-year anniversary of the storming of the Capitol approached, journalists probed Babbitt's personal history, uncovering marital infidelity, promotion of conspiracy theories, vehicular assault, and social media rants. The Associated Press invoked Babbitt's biography to undercut her martyr status: "Ashli Babbitt a martyr? Her past tells a more complex story," read the headline (Biesecker 2022).

I am hardly the first to point out parallels between Floyd and Babbitt. The Anti-Defamation League (2021a) reported online references to Babbitt as "the white man's George Floyd," and in the *Independent*, Io Dodds (2022) asserted that "[p]ro-Trump activists have found their George Floyd" in Ashli Babbitt. "If this country can demand justice for someone like George Floyd," Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) told Newsmax, "then we can certainly demand justice for Ashli Babbitt" (Schwartzman and Dawsey 2021). Babbitt's supporters promoted the hashtag #SayHerName on social media, though that hashtag had previously been used to memorialize Breonna Taylor, a Black woman shot and killed by Louisville police in 2020. Moreover, before Taylor, #SayHerName had attempted to focus attention more broadly on "Black women's experiences of police violence in an effort to support a gender-inclusive approach to racial justice that centers all Black lives equally" (Crenshaw et al. 2015).[3]

Floyd's and Babbitt's deaths are useful to consider in tandem for several reasons. They were close enough in temporal terms, occupying a broadly parallel political context, to allow for a sound comparison, yet the uses to which they were put were politically divergent enough to show the protean nature of political martyrdom, of the way that groups across the political spectrum claim the mantle of martyr for those whose deaths they consider to embody their cause or identity in some important way. In addition, each death intersected with ongoing political disputes and controversies—in Floyd's case, the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic; in Babbitt's, the backdrop of then president Donald Trump's efforts to remain in office following the 2020 presidential election—and each produced an aftermath of significant political magnitude. The aftermath of Floyd's death manifested itself in an outpouring of protest and activism not only in the US but around the world; Babbitt's death became part of the foundational lore of the MAGA movement as it developed in the aftermath of Donald Trump's first presidential term.

In this paper, I consider how the deaths of George Floyd and Ashli Babbitt, and their respective afterlives, enable us to see the dynamics of *political martyrdom* formation in real time, as it were. Political martyrdom shares a family resemblance with the traditional, more narrowly ecclesiastical concept, but can be articulated distinctly from the faith traditions out of which it emerged. The term, to be sure, risks redundancy; martyrdom has always been political, and has always illustrated the inseparability of the religious and the political. I use the dual term to shift our attention from its Christian and Islamic origins and toward a greater focus on struggles over symbolic power within political communities. Political martyrdom illuminates the various ways by which communities consecrate deaths and enshrine them in their collective memories.

More specifically, I use the examples of Floyd and Babbitt to make several claims about the concept of political martyrdom. First, the close historical and etymological connection between martyrdom and witness provides insights into the rival political causes that lay claim to these two individuals' deaths and afterlives, and the notion of witnessing itself. Such witnessing, I argue, depends neither on the degree of intentionality involved in a given martyr's death (i.e., did the martyr actually intend to die, or voluntarily risk death?) nor whether the martyr embraced particular political causes prior to death. The real "work" of martyrdom takes place *after* death, by community members who frame and interpret that death, a process that transfers the death's symbolic power from an immediate and particular context into the service of concrete political causes over time. Second, the framework of political martyrdom that I advance in this paper, with its injection of death and memory into the political realm, illuminates the cultural conflict at the heart of contemporary American politics in ways that are markedly different from the political rhetoric of, say, an impending presidential election, or legislative and judicial contention over partisan political agendas. Finally, claims about political martyrdom in the cases of Floyd and Babbitt bring home a broader point: that symbolic and transcendent symbols and rhetoric continue to exert power even in purportedly secular contexts.[4]

Witnessing, Religion, and Politics: From Martyrdom to Political Martyrdom

Any attempt to articulate a notion of political martyrdom depends upon reconsidering two important and related terms: "religion" and "politics." Fortunately, the idea that religion and politics denote clearly distinct phenomena no longer commands widespread allegiance. Once a pillar of secularization and modernization theories, such a view has given way to a far more nuanced understanding of the two

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

concepts as closely intertwined, highlighting different aspects of humans' search for individual and collective meaning. The term "religion" itself, after all, arose in a particular context, for particular reasons having to do with the exercise of hegemonic and colonial power; and many now view it as a concept to be problematized rather than simply deployed as if its meaning were obvious (Allen and Allen 2016; Asad 1982; Lincoln 2008; W. Smith 1963). In other words, religion and politics are not distinct fields, but rather interrelated "spaces for the circulation, exchange, and transfer of meanings" (Catoggio 2013, 713).

Martyrdom has always been a religious *and* political phenomenon, challenging the status quo in the societies where it appears. It has energized and mobilized those who experience it (both as martyrs and as observers) from its emergence in the early Christian tradition (which reworked preexisting tropes of noble death; see Droge and Tabor [1992]; Van Henten and Avemarie [2002]) to its more recent appearance in debates about the politicized deaths of George Floyd and Ashli Babbitt. The term originated in the Greek *martys*, or "witness." Paul calls Stephen a *martyros* in Acts 22:20; in Acts 5:32, Peter says to the Sanhedrin, "We are witnesses [*martyres*] of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." Parallel terms like *shahid* in Islam of course have their own distinct etymology and conceptual history, but scholars often use the terms more or less interchangeably (Afsaruddin 2014; Cook 2007; Hatina 2014).

In the early Christian context that did so much to shape subsequent understandings of martyrdom, "witness" evokes a number of different images, both *legal* (i.e., witness in a courtroom, an association bolstered by the fact that many martyrdom accounts featured dramatic confrontations between Christians and Roman authorities) and *embodied* (i.e., the idea of one's life as a witness to the Truth). In all these cases, a witness is one who bears testimony, who attests to something known by experience. "The martyr's witness points beyond the martyr to a larger truth [and] involves the subsuming of the person witnessing into the truth witnessed" (Fruchtman 2019). In emphasizing the importance of witnessing, accounts of martyrdom pay particular attention to the ways that martyrs seek to direct their audience's attention to the thing to which they are witnesses and thus to testify to something beyond themselves.

Like the traditional concept of martyrdom, *political martyrdom* offers martyrs a life beyond the grave. It does so in a different manner, however: by providing a cultural or political immortality, enshrining the martyr within a community's collective memory. The referent shifts, in other words, yet the process—individual death as a means of witnessing to something larger than itself—remains broadly parallel. Although political martyrdom includes a broader swath of the politicized dead than those whose sacrifice invokes a national interest, Baldassare Scolari's (2017, 100) account of "state martyrdom" helpfully traces the distinction between the conventional account of martyrdom and the political understanding I am advancing here: "What in the … context of Christianity was represented as an act of witness to faith in God, in the context of secular modernity becomes an act of witness to faith in the values and principles at the core of the modern nation-state." In Scolari's words, "church martyrs and state martyrs seem to function almost the same way; what changes is the truth instance to which they refer" (100). The notion of political martyrdom presented here includes not only those who die in the service of the state, but also those whose deaths are claimed by community members for a variety of political causes; the larger point, however, about the migration of the thing witnessed from divine to historical registers, remains.[5]

Martyrdom is an essentially collective phenomenon, a process in which many people participate at various points in time, since witnessing implies not only a thing witnessed, but also an audience toward which that witness is directed. There is no martyrdom without martyrdom narratives, stories, and representations about some individuals, told by others, with the aim of inducing certain dispositions, values, commitments, or behaviors in still others. All accounts of the early church emphasize the active role of the Christian community in constituting martyrs by sanctifying their deaths and preserving their memory after death (Castelli 2004; Perkins 1995; Riddle 1931). Political martyrdom is no different, although the community of reference is no longer confined to the ecclesiastical.

Political martyrdom involves three components, and it is only when these three elements are present, at least to a degree, that we can speak of a political martyrdom as having been established:

1. *Death* in circumstances somehow connected to an individual's identity (or identities) or political commitments, often involving acts of violence committed by state authorities, community members, or even martyrs themselves.[6] Many scholars insist that a martyr's death must involve an intentional choice of some sort, but restricting ourselves to such cases will lead us to overlook important aspects of the cultural power of politicized death. The circumstances of individual deaths, I argue, matter far less than their posthumous consecration and the transmission of memory across time.[7]
2. The *consecration* of that death, ascribing to it transcendent meaning and setting it apart from the countless other deaths that happen each day. Consecration invests a death with broader symbolic and political meaning, framing the martyr's death as pointing to something larger than itself (recall the term's origin in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the notion of "witnessing"), be it as an act of conscience and self-sacrifice central to communal identity or as part of a community's struggle for recognition (see the cases in Fierke [2012]; Outram and Laybourn [2018]). The consecration of political martyrs endows those dead individuals with sacred meaning, and "[a] martyrdom is created when a narrative about a death is told in a particular way" (Middleton 2014, 130). Consecration charges the death with powerful cultural and political resonances, and places the death within narratives that attribute it sacred significance. (As we shall see below, such meanings need not imply traditionally religious notions of sacrality.)

3. The *transmission* of the martyr's memory across time. To be successful, consecrated martyrdom narratives and the politicized memories of those they memorialize must be both embedded in a community's collective memory and transmitted over time and across generations, through media, ritual, and commemorative practices. Each of these avenues, and the variety of media that accomplish such purposes, will highlight certain aspects of the martyr's life and career, and de-emphasize others. The martyr's legacy represents a continuing locus of mobilization for members of the community, and motivates further commitment either to the cause that the martyr espoused or to the community's fundamental values more generally. "Adherents, by claiming the martyr as one of their own, announc[e] an identity" (Outram and Laybourn 2018, 20).

Although the final stage of the martyrdom process is still very much ongoing in these two cases, a closer examination of the cases of George Floyd and Ashli Babbitt can help scholars to articulate this new vocabulary of political martyrdom, one that focuses less on the personal qualities of individuals and more on communities' narrations of their lives and deaths—supplementing attention to individual martyrs with analyses of the ways that communities consecrate and commemorate their memories after death. Claiming martyrdom enables communities to reject the label of victimhood and to elevate their dead into cultural and political exemplars. For example, Maria Soledad Catoggio (2013, 696) has explored the ways in which Argentine political actors drew on the rhetoric of martyrdom to "reconcile the apparently mutually exclusive figures of the hero and the victim," to "draw on the political power of the religious figure of the martyr in order to invoke a legitimate and heroic victim of political violence." In addition, attention to political martyrdom highlights such narratives' capacity to build collective identities over time, often in contexts far removed from the martyrs' lives and deaths, and offers new interpretive lenses for considering twenty-first-century issues of systemic violence and structural injustice.

Political and Politicized Death: Beyond Individual Intentions, toward Collective Meanings

One of the most long-standing (and, I will argue, unhelpful) elements of the literature on martyrdom—both historical and contemporary—insists that, in order to be properly considered a martyr, an individual must make an intentional decision to court death by acting on a firm adherence to principle. Droge and Tabor's *A Noble Death* (1992, 1, 2), for example, opens with the martyrdom account of Perpetua and her companions, describing "how some early Christians *chose death* rather than compromise their religious convictions" and characterizing the Christians in this account as "embrac[ing] death *willingly*" (emphasis added). They focus on "voluntary death," defined as "the act resulting from an individual's *intentional decision* to die" (3, 4, emphasis added); though, to be sure, how enthusiastically potential martyrs ought to embrace, or even seek out, death has given rise to a contentious scholarly debate.[8] Introducing their anthology of classical, Jewish, and Christian texts, Van Henten and Avemarie (2002, 3) propose that a martyr is someone who "in an extremely hostile situation *prefers* a violent death to compliance with a demand of the … authorities" (emphasis added). Other accounts use terms like "elective deaths" (Kitts 2018, 1, 3), or view martyrdom as "a considered choice" in which an "otherwise ordinary person [is] *willing to* accept death and extraordinary pain" (DeSoucey et al. 2008, 101, emphasis added). The continuing resonance of the language of individual choice—epitomized by words like "will," "intention," "decision," or "preference"—reflects a widespread emphasis on the precipitating factors that surround martyrs' deaths. In all these cases, the notion of individual preferences dictating a course of action that culminates in death is taken to be central to the phenomenon of martyrdom.

This conventional view that martyrs make intentional choices to die remains deeply entrenched in much of the scholarship, and it figured heavily in the discourse surrounding George Floyd and Ashli Babbitt. A number of observers declined to call Floyd a martyr due to the lack of an intentional decision leading to his death. Juliet Hooker (2023, 89) insisted that Floyd "was not an activist" and that he "was not a willing political martyr in the cause of US racial progress." Ernest Owens (2021), editor at large of *Philadelphia* magazine, starkly distinguished martyrdom from murder: Floyd was not "a martyr who was killed for his belief in racial justice," but rather "a man who'd been murdered by a police officer." As evidence that Floyd was no martyr but rather a murder victim, Owens offered the lack of Floyd's "deliberate choice" to lie down and be killed; he was not "killed for his belief in racial justice," and "didn't wake up that morning to sacrifice himself" (in other words: no deliberate choice, no

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

martyrdom). Britni Danielle (2021), writing in the immediate aftermath of Derek Chauvin's conviction for Floyd's murder, also dissented from those (e.g., Nancy Pelosi, in an embarrassingly ham-handed remark) who called Floyd's death a "noble sacrifice" or a martyrdom. Such a formulation, she argued, "downplays what actually happened—George Floyd was murdered." Danielle tied her argument against viewing Floyd as a martyr to a lack of intentionality on his part: "He didn't set out to make a point … he was simply going about his day … a murder victim who wanted to live" (in other words: no attempt to make a point, no martyrdom).[9] Sophia Moskalenko (2020) also focused on the lack of intentionality in Floyd's death: "George Floyd was not a martyr—he was a victim, unable to escape a fate he didn't choose" (in other words: if a victim, then not a martyr). Portraying Floyd in such terms emphasizes concepts—deliberate choice, killed for a belief, sacrifice—that have long unduly narrowed our understanding of what martyrdom is, how it comes about, and how it shapes communities over time.

Yet despite these demurrals, we do see inklings of the broader understanding of martyrdom that I am suggesting in other commentary on Floyd's death, where observers proclaimed him a martyr even while acknowledging the lack of intentionality surrounding his death. On such accounts, Floyd's status as a martyr hinged on the ways that activists and observers understood his death as witnessing to larger issues beyond itself. Ellen Amster (2021, 64) invoked the notion of witness explicitly: "If the Constitution 'constitutes' the polity, then Floyd witnesses its violation by the state." Writing in *The Afro*, Micha Green (2020) called Floyd "an unintentional martyr." Distinguishing Floyd from those on the front lines of civil rights and social justice movements, who "knew their lives were in danger and, in a way, prepared to die in their fights for justice," she continued, Floyd "didn't have his 'Mountaintop' moment." Notwithstanding the unintentional nature of his death, Floyd's (and Eric Garner's) final words, "I can't breathe," became a catchphrase, and his death served as "a wake-up call in the fight for justice." Similarly, Saul Williams (2016) has directed our attention to "unwilling martyrs," who "become symbolic representations of a cause"; he specifically includes victims of police violence in this category.[10] Green's and Williams's terms—acknowledging that martyrdom can be unintentional, even unwilling—require us to prise apart individuals' posthumous careers from their personal intentions during life. It allows for a more capacious understanding of the complex relationship between politics, death, and memory.

The question of intentionality is clearer, perhaps, with regard to Babbitt, who after all had taken part in the storming of the Capitol and was "a willing and enthusiastic participant in the Capitol riot" who "voluntarily joined the attack" (Mandziuk 2022, 151, 150), attempting to enter a forbidden area in pursuit of a concrete political goal. Her brother, Roger Witthoeft, clearly saw her as a martyr, and connected her death to an intentional decision to join the crowd storming the Capitol. "My sister died for a bigger picture, a bigger cause" (Schwartzman and Dawsey 2021). Then again, was she actively seeking death? Although Babbitt's decision to enter the Capitol unlawfully put her at risk of arrest, injury, and ultimately death, this is not to say that she sought death or chose to die; what she intended to do, most likely, was to prevent the certification of the Electoral College results. Such questions notwithstanding, at a New York event, Trump supporter Cara Castronuova of Citizens Against Political Persecution promised the audience that "insurrectionist is no longer going to come up" when they "Google Ashli Babbitt's name in five years." "She's a martyr, okay?" (Schwartzman and Dawsey 2021).

Why is this discussion of motives and intentions significant? Seeing George Floyd and Ashli Babbit as martyrs requires letting go of the notion that individuals control the meanings of their own deaths, that the term "martyr" applies only to those who make intentional sacrifices in service of a cause, and that what defines martyrdom lies primarily in the concrete circumstances of individual deaths and the psychological orientations of those individuals toward their own demise. Doing so enables us to highlight the political contexts and dynamics that lead communities to find meaning in such deaths, without the need to know individual motivations or subjective states. In doing so, this framework pushes back against broader depoliticizing contemporary discourses such as "responsibilization" (Brown 2015) and the related neoliberal emphasis on individual actors and actions. It returns an attention to politics—symbolic and otherwise—in the consideration of death, and acknowledges that individuals do not control the narratives surrounding their own deaths once those deaths have happened.

Thus, any death becomes a potential martyrdom, capable of being conscripted into uses far beyond those that the individual actor might have contemplated, given a community prepared to consecrate that death and actors prepared to transmit its memory through time in furtherance of their identities or interests. Moving away from an emphasis on intentionality also helpfully undercuts another dichotomy that has characterized the scholarship on martyrdom: that between "active" martyrs, who "precipitate their own deaths and sometimes even bring about the deaths of others," and "passive" martyrs, who "accept their deaths without resistance or violence" (Mitchell 2014, 274). The language here—distinguishing between "precipitating" and merely "accepting"—simply does not capture the complexity and the inescapably political context within which judgments about martyrs are formed. Did Floyd and Babbit "precipitate" their own deaths? That depends, of course, on one's assessment of the conditions

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

under which they died, an assessment that is itself inescapably political. (It is even more difficult to see how one could view either of them as "accepting" their deaths.)

Such a prospect might unnerve those who object to the use of individual deaths for purposes that diverge from those intended by the individual while alive, or who view such divergences as evidence of the "hijacking" of a death by those with other agendas (Barkun 2007, 119).[11] I address this issue to some extent in the next section on Floyd's and Babbitt's consecration, but here I simply note the importance of Alasdair Macintyre's ([1981] 1984, 213) famous observation that "we are never more (and sometimes less) that the co-authors of our own narratives." Focusing on the communities that perpetuate martyrdom emphasizes the fact that martyrs do not make themselves; they are made. And it facilitates a move away from viewing martyrdom as bestowing supernatural rewards and toward a recognition of its historical, or rather transhistorical, power as an expression of communal regard.

Such issues become even clearer when we move to the second phase of the political martyrdom process: consecration. Here we see most explicitly the ways in which communities, or rather specific and motivated actors within communities (what DeSoucey et al. [2008] call "reputational entrepreneurs"), construct and proclaim the significance of individual deaths, in ways that may or may not neatly line up with what the individual martyr thought during life. If, as Amster (2021, 64) puts it, "martyrs have a social function," that social function becomes clear in the process of consecration.

Consecration: George Floyd's "Crucifixion" and Ashli Babbitt's Veneration

When applied to cases of martyrdom, consecration involves the removal of a death from the sphere of the mundane, investing it with sacred meaning. It thus emphasizes the ways in which communities imbue aspects of their collective experience with transcendent or transhistorical value. As such, and as mentioned above, consecration involves the claiming of an individual death by a community, and thus introduces the potential for a wide range of narratives and interpretations around that death, a transfer of the symbolic power of the dead individual from more immediate relationships like family and friends to broader ones like those involving social and political movements and communities.

While much of the literature in this area has its roots in the analysis of religious communities—the Temple in the Jewish tradition (2 Chronicles 7) or the Prana Pratishtha rituals in Hinduism; we could add further examples from the Islamic and Christian traditions—and presents theological accounts of consecration (see, e.g., DeSilva 2015; Farouk-Alli 2002; Scott and Simpson-Housley 1991), political martyrdom operates within an immanent frame, and thus we need to clarify the notion of *political consecration* that lies at its heart. The foundational analysis offered by Durkheim, for example, viewed the distinction between sacred and profane as lying at the heart of human social organization and experience. Society creates the sacred, infusing everyday objects and experiences with transcendent meaning: "[W]e see society constantly creating sacred things out of ordinary ones" (Durkheim [1912] 1965, 243). Although such sacred things have generally been understood under the rubric of "religion," their power originates in their status as signifiers of communal expressions of value. Durkheim understood the sacred to encompass both traditional religious observances and sociopolitical ones:

> What essential difference is there between an assembly of Christians celebrating the principal dates of the life of Christ, or of Jews remembering the exodus from Egypt or the promulgation of the Decalogue, and a reunion of citizens commemorating the promulgation of a new moral or legal system or some great event in the national life? ([1912] 1965, 475)

So the sacred need not be traditionally religious in form, but is present in a community's collective rituals and memories.

In recent years, psychologists of religion have elaborated a related phenomenon: sanctification. Sanctification refers to "the ways in which individuals interpret aspects of life as having sacred qualities and/or as being a manifestation of their particular image(s) of God/higher powers" (Pomerleau, Pargament, and Mahoney 2016, 37–38); such objects or activities point "beyond themselves" and highlight the various ways in which individuals make aspects of their everyday lives sacred. "Sacred matters are interwoven into the fabric of life experience, and, in the process, the experience takes on a special character" (Pargament and Mahoney 2005, 182, 196, 180). Detaching the notion of sanctification from traditional religious contexts and connecting it with psychological processes that infuse meaning into everyday life makes possible a richer understanding of its functioning in concrete social and political affairs.

In contemporary scholarship, consecration is probably most closely associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who employed the term to explore processes of legitimation among intellectuals, broadly defined. The power to consecrate "objects … or persons," Bourdieu (1980, 262) wrote, is "a form of cultural power." More recently, Želinský (2020) has offered an explicitly political approach that views consecration as a multifaceted struggle over communal identity.

> Consecration is a social process [that involves] explicit or implicit interpretation and re-interpretation of the life of a particular figure in the light of currently available symbolic resources and narratives, *resulting in the symbolic elevation of the figure to proximity to the sacred symbols of the community.* This is achieved

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by directly or indirectly affording these figures a place in the community's central narratives. (2020, 374, emphasis added)

Želinský focuses on the importance of narrative to the process of consecration, emphasizing the ceremonial, performative, aesthetic, institutional, and interactional ways in which some individuals come to occupy culturally central positions in the life of a society, while others do not.

In sum, then, we need not confine the notion of consecration to traditionally religious forms and spaces. A more capacious understanding of the ways that societies generate value and assign that value to particular lives and deaths will go a long way toward understanding the power of political martyrdom as an expression of communal regard and reverence.

In practical terms, consecration generally begins shortly after death, often with a funeral, memorial service, or other ritual of laying a body to rest.[12] Collective expressions of grief provide evidence that some subset of a community ascribes powerful meanings to this particular death. In George Floyd's case, a funeral and two memorial services —in Houston, where he grew up; in North Carolina, where he was born; and in Minneapolis, where he died— as well as national and worldwide protests, testified to his death's profound national impact. Although the Black Lives Matter movement dates back to the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin, and in the intervening years the campaign had memorialized "a cloud of witnesses testifying to American injustice" (Ployd 2020, 41)—again, the notion of witnessing—Floyd's death catalyzed and reenergized supporters, who saw in his fate the larger legacy of American white supremacy and anti-Black police violence. At the Minneapolis memorial service, the Rev. Al Sharpton (2020) insisted that "George Floyd's story has been the story of black folks because ever since 401 years ago, the reason we could never be who we wanted and dreamed to being is you kept your knee on our neck." Across the nation, marches and protests linked Floyd's death to larger and long-standing struggles for racial justice, the unfulfilled promise of American democracy, and continuing issues of race, policing, and mass incarceration.

One need not go as far as to label Floyd's death a "crucifixion" on a "street-corner Golgotha" (Rhodeen 2020)—with all the messianic overtones implied by such a claim—to acknowledge the profound import with which Black communities in the United States, as well as broader audiences, invested Floyd's death in its immediate aftermath.[13] Ellen Amster (2021) has described an "American Spring," not unlike the Arab Spring of 2011, with Floyd a kind of American analog to Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation set off a string of protests that spread across the region. Although the two uprisings "emerged from very different politics, actors, ideologies, and contexts … each crystallized around a secular martyr. … Secular martyrs like Floyd render the abstraction of political injustice visible and visceral; their life stories and bodily suffering inspire others to political action" (2021, 63). (That the concrete outcomes of each "Spring" have fallen short of the high hopes of many of the participants does not negate the power of what took place, nor their long-term significance as episodes of political mobilization.)

Public mourning of the type seen for George Floyd was not available to Ashli Babbitt's supporters; the charged atmosphere following the January 6 assault on the Capitol led the federal government to retain custody of her body and ultimately cremate it in accordance with her wishes (engendering additional conspiracy theories in the process). Her family subsequently scattered the ashes in the Pacific Ocean. Almost immediately after her death, however, Babbitt's image began to proliferate online, with the appearance of a banner depicting Babbitt framed by a blood-red Capitol building, her neck displaying a drop of blood.[14] Within days of her death, calls for further action proliferated, including a proposed "Million Martyr March" and "Million Militia March," both planned for January 20, Inauguration Day (Anti-Defamation League 2021b). (Neither one materialized.) Commentators reported on the ways in which Babbitt "has become a martyr to many of Mr. Trump's followers, praised and venerated" by the former president himself, who reportedly still regrets not lowering flags at the White House to half-staff in her honor in the wake of January 6 (Meyer 2021). In the months that followed, her death "inspired vigils, rallies, rap lyrics, social media hashtags … T-shirts … as well as an article in *The American Conservative* comparing her fate to that of George Floyd" (Schwartzman and Dawsey 2021).[15]

The details laid out above illustrate, in the specific cases of Floyd and Babbitt, some of the broader features of consecration as it operates in cases of political martyrdom. Three aspects of such political consecration are particularly worth noting: its immanence, its legitimation-conferring quality, and its conflictual nature. An immanent understanding of consecration directs our attention to its human dimension: the elevation and veneration of particular deaths as opposed to others, and the infusion of cultural and symbolic power into narratives around their significance. The consecration process confers legitimacy by providing evidence that the individual or individuals occupy a place of cultural centrality, embodying core tenets of the communal ethos or identity. Finally, consecration processes are inherently conflictual because they involve struggles over social control and competition for both symbolic and material resources *within* a community as well as *between* communities. The cliché "One's martyr is another's terrorist" (or vice versa) nonetheless contains a grain of truth about the fundamentally conflictual nature of political martyrdom, and the ways that competing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

communal values and commitments show up in processes of cultural valorization.

Transmission: Beginnings

I shall say relatively little here about the third component of political martyrdom—transmission—primarily because it refers to the perpetuation and commemoration of the martyr's memory over time and thus, although we have seen the beginnings of this process for both Floyd and Babbitt, it is still very much in progress. As a key element of this third stage of martyrdom, commemoration rituals further fuse the martyr's legacy with a movement or community's identity and/or values. Certainly, "[i]f martyr rhetoric is to be a vital and lifegiving force [for a given community], it must be embodied with practices of remembrance and resistance" (Ployd 2020, 43); or, as Amster (2021, 74) has put it, "Martyrs are ephemeral and disappear without institutional memory." Such practices of remembrance, and the creation of collective memory, lie at the heart of these nascent processes of transmission in each case.

Even in the brief time since the deaths of George Floyd and Ashli Babbitt, we can see the beginnings of the process taking shape. A film version of Floyd's life is being planned, and a biography of Floyd, which presented his story as "encapsulat[ing] many of the compounding and relentless traumas that have characterized the Black experience for four hundred years," won a Pulitzer Prize in 2023 (Samuels and Olorunnipa 2022, introduction). Minneapolis-area efforts to mark the spot where Floyd died led to the creation of George Floyd Square and the George Floyd Global Memorial, which seeks to link Floyd's death to "stories of resistance to racial injustice" by "curat[ing] spaces for all people to grieve, pay respect, and be a voice for justice." Regular vigils and weekly music performances continue to take place at the site, which also offers pilgrimage journeys guided by members of the community (Cobb et al. 2024).[16] An annual "Day of Remembrance" sponsored by Minneapolis-area nonprofit organizations takes place at George Floyd Square. Other commemorations have linked Floyd's memory with the issue of police violence, most recently in "Twin Flames," a collaboration between Rise & Remember, which operates the George Floyd Global Memorial, and the Arizona State University Art Museum (Mumphrey 2024). All of these events and practices connect Floyd's life and death to broader issues of racial inequality in the United States, and seek to keep Floyd's memory and the causes espoused by the memorial alive for those who will come after.

Of course, the link between the creation of martyrs and concrete political change is anything but linear and direct, and supporters' hopes for swift political action against police violence in the wake of Floyd's death have gone largely unfulfilled. Both President Joe Biden and Minnesota governor (and, later, vice-presidential candidate) Tim Walz have marked the anniversary of Floyd's death with renewed calls to pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act and to continue the work of undoing racism in law enforcement specifically and American society generally, but the prospects for real change remain uncertain, to say the least.

The transmission of Ashli Babbitt's consecrated memory has been aided by former president Donald Trump himself; the former president recorded a video homage on what would have been Babbitt's birthday, and frequently invokes her name when accusing his opponents of stealing the 2020 election and misrepresenting the events of January 6 in an attempt to discredit him or his supporters. A website (4ashli.com) continues to commemorate Babbitt, and offers merchandise for purchase as well as a running list of events nationwide. Roseann Mandziuk (2022, 163) has traced the process of martyr making in Babbitt's case, paying particular attention to the ways in which a wide range of media in the "conservative memory community" (social media; artistic, musical, and video productions; conservative TV and cable stations; and merchandising outlets) have reconstructed Babbitt's biography and linked her death to the purportedly stolen election, emphasizing her military service as a way of combating charges of seditious behavior made by critics. The emphasis on Babbitt's military service continues to shape much of this commemorative effort: As part of a 2024 Memorial Day rally in memory of Babbitt and in solidarity with the "January 6 hostages" (those imprisoned on charges relating to the January 6 storming of the Capitol), supporters attempted to deliver an "Ashli Babbitt Memorial Stone" to Arlington National Cemetery. (They were turned away at the gate.) And the transmission process continues in a variety of more localized rallies and rituals, often below the radar (such as the one explored in Sharlet [2023]), performed by people for whom Babbitt represents a willingness to stand up to an oppressive government and protect endangered liberties. Indeed, Babbitt's mother, Micki Witthoeft, relocated to the Washington, DC area after her daughter's death, and has been part of a daily prayer vigil at the jail holding those facing charges in the January 6 attack.

In both of these cases, particular individuals and groups have shaped and managed the process of transmission: most notably (but by no means exclusively) the organizers of the George Floyd Global Memorial and the "conservative memory community" referenced above by Mandziuk (2022). Such actors have sought to pass down a particular understanding of the death in question: I mentioned DeSoucey and colleagues' (2008) notion of "reputational entrepreneurs" earlier, but the concept bears repeating in this context. As DeSoucey and colleagues (2008, 100) put it, these agents "leverage the martyr's story" after death, thus "mak[ing] tangible the values and beliefs reputational entrepreneurs seek to promote." In short, "[i]t is the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reputational entrepreneur, not the martyr, who transforms the bodily image" into a powerful cultural product (100); the product, an "embodied reputation" (110), is then available to be evoked in future political contexts as a way of ensuring long-term visibility for the martyr. All of these efforts aim to ensure that Floyd or Babbitt will live on in the collective memory of a given community, and in doing so they illustrate the truth of a basic observation about memory: "Recollection of the past is an active, constructive process, not a simple matter of retrieving information" (Schwartz 1982, 374). That active, constructive process continues to this day.

Martyrdom, Witness, and American Democracy

The transmission stage is closely related to the process of witnessing so central to the creation of political martyrdom. Such witnessing is nothing new in American history, of course: from Mary Dyer and the Quaker martyrs of 1660 to Crispus Attucks, whom Mitch Kachun (2017) has called the "first martyr" of American liberty, and from the assassinated president Abraham Lincoln (whom one contemporary declared "Our Martyred President" [Johnson 1865]) to Martin Luther King Jr., memorialized as a twentieth-century martyr at Westminster Abbey, agents of transmission have shaped (and, in the process, kept alive) the memories of political martyrs. Attending to George Floyd and Ashli Babbitt reinforces the timeliness and relevance of political martyrdom as a constitutive element of American democracy.

Many of those who drew connections between George Floyd's death and notions of political martyrdom pointed to the events as witnessing to the nation's failure to live up to its vaunted rhetoric about equality, and the persistence of a toxic combination of white supremacy and police brutality against members of minoritized communities. The effective witness of Floyd's death inhered not in the way that he died (which was, to say the very least, unintentional), but in what his death illuminated about race and American society. Ama Karikari-Yawson (2020) called Floyd "a perfect martyr" whose death "show[ed] us racism in its most raw, gruesome, brutal, and arrogant form." In fact, Karikawa-Yawson argued, Floyd's life offers a valuable opportunity to put the "politics of respectability" behind us and to affirm the inherent dignity of all Black lives. Ja'han Jones (2021) made a similar argument on *The ReidOut* blog, describing Floyd's murder as issuing "an urgent call for police reform" and reform of the criminal justice system more broadly. Of course, the ways in which Floyd's witness transpired clearly differs markedly from other iconic "martyrs for civil rights" like Martin Luther King or Medgar Evers (Naveh 1990; M. Williams 2011), who, even if they did not seek out death per se, clearly chose repeatedly to put themselves in danger in pursuit of political change. Yet these and other observers insist that Floyd's death points to something beyond itself as well, that it witnesses to a larger point about American society, culture, and politics.

The notion of Black death as political martyrdom, of course, is not without controversy. Juliet Hooker (2023) has powerfully argued that framing deaths like Floyd's as martyrdoms can romanticize social movements and create narratives that ultimately aim to redeem Black death in the service of racial progress, as part of a strategy that instrumentalizes Black grief in service of white purposes (note King's "unearned suffering is redemptive," from his "I Have a Dream" speech). As Hooker (2023, 185) notes, "[G]rieving Black families do not uniformly accept" such strategies, and "some push back against the instrumentalization of Black grief and refuse the expectation that their suffering will become a form of martyrdom." (Brett Krutzsch [2019] has made a parallel argument about gay martyrs in American society, and the way that martyrdom rhetoric can domesticate gay experiences in service of an appeal for mainstream legitimacy.) That said, though some surely do reject the martyrdom framework, others, as we have seen, have embraced it as shedding light on the profound injustices perpetrated against Black Americans.

If George Floyd's death bore witness to the continuing phenomena of police brutality and systemic racism, Ashli Babbitt's death is inseparable from the events that led up to the January 6 assault on the Capitol: claims about a stolen election, unsuccessful efforts to challenge the results in court, and, ultimately, a violent attempt to prevent the certification of that election's outcome and the peaceful transfer of political power. To *Time*'s Vera Bergengruen (2021), Babbitt's death "became a rallying cry that united the maze of factions and ideologies that converged for the Capitol riot. Many of them cite her death as evidence of what they say brought them to DC in the first place: a corrupt US government occupied by nefarious forces seeking to suppress and destroy Trump supporters." For anti-government activists, Babbitt became "a patriot who was fighting against government tyranny in order to free the American people when she was executed by government agents" (Fischer, Flack, and Wilson 2021). Such claims were reinforced by frequent invocations of Babbitt's service in the armed forces, in an attempt to cement her status as a patriotic defender of American freedoms (see Mandziuk 2022, 156–57).

But in addition to the general pro-Trump dimension of the January 6 rally and its aftermath, critics also noted a more specific racialized and gendered narrative undergirding much of the discussion around Babbitt. On this account, Babbitt was not just a martyr for the pro-Trump political movement, her death symbolic of patriotic struggle against a tyrannical "deep state"; she also served a powerful symbolic role for a broader political ecosystem including "White Power movements, National Socialist, Accelerationists, Boogaloo movements, Militias, Neo-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nazis, and others seeking to supplant the federal government" (Argentino and Raja 2021). Argentino and Raja (2021) further connected Babbitt with the wider world of ideologically motivated violent extremist (IVE) groups, drawing links between Babbitt and Dylan Roof, Timothy McVeigh, Anders Breivik, and other partisans of white supremacy. Others sought to cement her legacy by linking her with Vicki Weaver, wife of Randy Weaver who was killed at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992, thus bringing together racialized and gendered narratives of endangered whites and the need to avenge dishonored white women (Mandziuk 2022, 157–58).

Such efforts did not lack for critics, of course, in either Floyd's or Babbitt's case. Many observers drew parallels between pro-Trump lionization of Ashli Babbitt and the Nazis' use of Horst Wessel's murder in 1930 to stoke division and rally their supporters, recalling "a dark path made infamous by the Nazi propaganda machine" (Burns 2021; see also Rozsa 2021). Writing on *Vox*, Aaron Rupar (2021) drew an explicit connection between Babbitt's martyrdom and a refusal to admit the results of a democratic election: "Turning Babbitt into the MAGA version of Horst Wessel has become a central theme of Trump's return to public life. And her ascension to martyr status symbolizes how, now more than ever, Trumpism stands in opposition to free and fair elections."[17] With regard to Floyd, critics offered scathing critiques of his personal history, which involved drug use and a criminal record, or attempted to discredit the movement for racial justice by pointing to protests that turned violent and led to injury and property destruction.

In each case, the meanings of the death do not inhere in the specific actions that took place in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, or in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021. Rather, individuals and communities asserted such larger meanings, in complex acts of cultural construction. Such consecration rests upon an act of communal and commemorative assertion: that this death means more than its individual components, more than the fateful interactions between Derek Chauvin and George Floyd, and between Lieutenant Michael Byrd and Ashli Babbitt; and that it provides insight into the ongoing political struggles onto which those deaths are brought to bear.

Conclusion: Floyd/Babbitt, BLM/MAGA, and Contemporary Political Martyrdom

In this paper, I have explored the ways in which the deaths of George Floyd and Ashli Babbit, and their aftermaths, illuminate broader aspects of contemporary American political, cultural, and religious conflict, and simultaneously reflect long-standing dynamics associated with martyrdom understood in an explicitly political register. I have offered a (brief) overview of the concept of political martyrdom, and suggested that a continuing focus on intentionality as a defining feature of martyrdom unhelpfully constrains our ability to see the broader political dynamics at play in the processes by which communities infuse such deaths with meaning. Those broader meanings reflect the active construction of martyrdoms by communities after their death more so than any specific actions of Floyd or Babbitt themselves during their lives.

Political martyrdom operates in an environment characterized by conflict and violence, one in which political communities and subcommunities make meaning out of death and use the cultural and symbolic resources available to them to elevate martyrs from within the ranks of their dead. Focusing on the deaths and afterlives of George Floyd and Ashli Babbitt provides a case study in some of its contemporary manifestations. It thus illuminates the fact that debates over martyr making illustrate broader political tensions—often violent ones—both within and between communities, and reminds us of the conflictual and contentious nature of martyrdom at all three stages laid out above.

Martyrdom, of course, has always been simultaneously political and religious, and arguments over who can be properly classified as martyrs long predate our own time. Like their Augustinian precursors—for whom the righteousness of the cause, and not the mere fact of punishment, made an individual a proper martyr (Augustine's noted formulation *non poena sed causa*)—many contemporary observers expend a great deal of effort in policing the boundaries of martyrdom, of taking it upon themselves to declare who is, and who is not, a "real" martyr. Conservative critics who highlight Floyd's struggle with drugs or his convictions for petty crimes as a way of besmirching his character and undermining the political significance of his death engage in such ideological gatekeeping. But the same can be said for efforts to delegitimize Ashli Babbitt's death. For example, Mia Bloom and Sophia Moskalenko (2021) call Babbitt both a "manufactured" and a "fake" martyr. Unlike true martyrs, who engage in "noble individual self-sacrifice for the greater good," "fake martyrdoms" like Babbitt's—which in reality represents merely an "unfortunate death"—follow in the footsteps of Nazi mastermind Joseph Goebbels and "a long list of propagandists" in their efforts to "construct and weaponize fake martyrs."[18] On this view, "Babbitt is the object of an unprincipled attempt to create an emotionally resonant and characteristically conspiracist rallying cry for Trump's base, and to build a complete parallel narrative for the events of January 6th, from insurrection to stymied resurrection."

But central to the analysis I have been putting forward here is an insistence that *all* martyrs are, in fact, "manufactured martyrs." Martyrdom is a collective process of cultural construction, of manufacturing a sacred phenomenon from a mundane occurrence. The claim—either explicitly, or implied—that Babbitt is not a "real

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

martyr," or that her martyrdom is "manufactured" or "unprincipled," fails to do justice to the common processes of consecration and commemoration that characterize *all* martyr narratives. The creation of martyrdom narratives is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for any martyrdom (such narratives must be transmitted throughout the community, and take hold at some level), and not merely a "tactic particularly suited to the rhetoric of fascism and the radical right" (Mandziuk 2022, 153). The idea of martyrdom being manufactured is hardly unique to pro-Trump forces' embrace of Ashli Babbitt or to Black Lives Matter lifting up George Floyd's memory: it equally explains how we still know about such iconic early Christian martyrs as Perpetua and Felicitas. In other words, the idea of one's martyrdom being manufactured by others does not distinguish Babbitt from other martyrs: rather, it constitutes what martyrdom *is.* Bloom and Moskalenko's one-dimensional understanding of martyrs—as pure vessels for high-minded activism, personally upright and morally blameless—oversimplifies the complex reality that *all* martyrs are constructed by movements.

The difference between the deaths and posthumous consecrations of George Floyd and Ashli Babbitt lies not in the fact that one is noble and the other is unprincipled, but rather in the respective causes to which their deaths bore witness, as refracted through the experiences and actions of the communities that claimed them: between the historical legacy of American racism and state violence against communities of color on the one hand, and Trump's calls to "Stop the Steal" and discredit the 2020 election results on the other. The processes of infusing deaths with transcendent significance extending far beyond their particular circumstances, of keeping those politicized memories alive, and of continuing to tell stories about those deaths that serve communal purposes are common to both. In each case, communities create martyrs in an effort to embody, quite literally, what they take to be their central values and commitments. "The abstraction of political injustice is personalized by [political] martyrs," writes Amster (2021, 66).[19]

In other words, martyrdom remains alive and well in the contemporary United States. In one of the few extended treatments of political martyrdom, Eyal Naveh (1990, 168) argued that the "significance [of martyrdom] declined in the modern culture of the twentieth century." Similarly, Lacey Baldwin Smith (1997, 307) has called twentieth-century martyrs "an endangered species." Yet such claims overlook the ways in which death and memory continue to permeate American political discourse. Martyrdom has not disappeared in twenty-first-century society. It is everywhere—in our politics, in our culture, in our literature (Akbar 2024; Oates 2017)—and continues to place individual deaths within broader frames of meaning and to inspire political movements long after the martyr has left the stage. If we want to contest the valorization of a particular martyr, we will do better to engage with the substantive political causes to which their memories are being put to use than to attempt to police the conceptual and definitional boundaries of martyrdom itself.

Much of the focus in this essay has been on American democracy and politics, but a much broader set of concerns animates my inquiry into political martyrdom. A broadened understanding of political martyrdom's capacity to connect an individual (or individualized) death with a community's collective memory offers new perspectives on the timeless phenomena of death, politics, and memory, and helps us to think more capaciously about the ways in which memories of death and conflict extend well beyond the confines of the world's religious traditions. Emphasizing the notion of witnessing in martyrdom, in the words of Fruchtman (2019), "helps us foreground the communicative and communal aspects of martyrdom, and to ask what values and what truths are being encoded and endorsed in the choice and representation of a martyr." In the cases of George Floyd and Ashli Babbitt, those values and truths lie at the heart of the public dimensions of their respective deaths, and tell widely divergent stories about the contemporary state of American democracy and prospects for its future.

Acknowledgments

This paper has benefited from the careful, constructive commentary offered by audiences at the University of Michigan; at gatherings of the Association for Political Theory, the Political Theology Network, and the American Academy of Religion; as well as at the Elske v.P. Smith Lecture at Virginia Commonwealth University. I am also indebted to George Shulman and Menaka Philips, who provided cogent and incisive feedback at APT sessions, as well as to Aaron Weinstein and David Gutterman for helpful conversations on the topic. The conceptual framework that I use to explore Floyd and Babbitt in this paper is laid out in greater detail in Murphy (2023).

Notes

1. Donald Trump and other prominent conservatives amplified Owens's comments; see Porter (2020). See also Richardson (2020), which contrasted Floyd the "martyr [and] catalyst for social justice" with a starkly different view, emphasizing Floyd's criminal history and struggles with addiction.
2. Argentino and Raja (2021); see also Anti-Defamation League (2021b). For images of the Babbitt flag, see Fischer, Flack, and Wilson (2021).
3. For the "Say her name!" chants at rallies, see Schwartzman and Dawsey (2021).
4. Scholarly attention to the persistence of the sacred in contemporary "secular" society, of course, precedes

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), but the powerful impact of that work—and the immense literature it produced—has ensured that the questions remain timely and relevant across a range of disciplines.

5 The phrase "Those who die in the service of the state" suggests an obvious comparison: soldiers. From Pericles's Funeral Oration to Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, soldiers' deaths have figured prominently in political rhetoric, going to the heart of communal identity. Yet often, celebrations of war dead (think, for example, of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, or Pericles's Funeral Oration) focus less on particular individuals than do martyrdom narratives, which tend to direct their audience's attention to the deaths of noteworthy individuals or small groups. Martyrdom thus seems less appropriate for describing large-scale carnage like American slavery, the Holocaust, or the Rwandan genocide—although communities certainly might elevate particular individuals to martyr status depending on the circumstances of their deaths and/or their perceived utility in community building, maintenance, or mobilization. There is much more to be said on this point, to be sure. For example, "Unto every person there is a name," associated with Yad Vashem and the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day, aims to "perpetuate their memory as individuals and restore their identity and dignity, through the public recitation of their names on Yom Hashoah" (Embassy of Israel to the United States n.d.).

6 Of course, the term "martyr" has a vernacular or commonplace usage as well, denoting a person who seeks sympathy from others, or referring to people who gain satisfaction from suffering or from complaining about their suffering (AKA a "martyr complex"). More generally, it can be used to describe someone suffering adverse consequences for a decision, as in "making a martyr out of someone" where death is not involved. Shortly after the events of January 6, in opposing the impeachment of then president Trump, Rep. Andy Biggs (R-AZ) predicted those in favor of impeaching Trump "will have made him a martyr." Biggs's sentiments were echoed by Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), who said that the impeachment effort "threatens to make [Trump] a martyr" (Pipitone 2021). In 1993, the *Washington Post* described Nelson Mandela, then still very much alive, as "in turn … activist, prisoner, martyr, statesman and conciliator" (P. Taylor 1993).

I do not deny these widespread usages of the term, but in keeping with most of the scholarship on the topic I restrict myself to martyrdoms that begin with death in order to maintain the conceptual clarity necessary to draw fruitfully on the traditional notion even as I seek to expand it to the political realm. I also leave aside Fruchtman's (2023) provocative argument about "living martyrs" in early Christianity. I find Fruchtman's historical claims largely persuasive, but her attention is restricted to the early Christian community, with only a brief discussion at the end of her book about more general issues of martyrdom. Thus it is less germane to the issues under consideration in this paper.

7 I will elaborate this claim at greater length as this paper proceeds. It emphasizes a point that reaches back to the Christian origins of martyrdom. For example, Candida Moss (2013) has argued, persuasively, that the idea of constant persecution inflicted on the early Christian community is largely a myth. Yet Moss's historical claim sheds less light on the enduring cultural and rhetorical power of martyrdom as a phenomenon, since the circumstances of individual deaths represent only the beginning of the powerful processes of meaning making and identity formation associated with martyrdom.

8 Some early Christian thinkers cautioned against too eager an embrace of death (see Clement of Alexandria's criticism of Ignatius of Antioch in *Stromata* 4), and the notion of "voluntary martyrdom"—"those who provoked authorities to arrest them" and thus actively abetted their own deaths—continues to divide early church historians (Middleton 2013, 559; Moss 2012). For a helpful and concise overview of the topic, see Bowersock (1995).

9 In fact, Danielle suggests that even such well-known and frequently cited martyrs of the civil rights movement—King, Evers, Malcom X—who "kept pushing for equal rights … in spite of the very real and present threats to their lives," even these individuals, "did not want to die. They did not want to be martyrs for a movement." Such a formulation even further narrows the parameters of whom we might consider as martyrs, down to the immediate circumstances of their deaths.

10 I thank Rob Mickey for bringing Williams's comments to my attention.

11 To clarify, I agree with Barkun's (2007, 120) more general claim that the process of creating martyrs "places significantly more power in the hands of martyrologists than merely the power to record and transmit stories." My objection is to the term "hijacking," which implies a kind of intentional misrepresentation, in this case of Branch Davidians by other right-wing groups, which I find unhelpful in understanding the complex processes by which deaths are politicized across a broad range of cases. For a more contemporary example, see Abdulrahim and Yazbek (2022).

12 Or even, in some cases, if there is not a body. In early 2002, supporters held a symbolic funeral for Wafa Idris, the first Palestinian woman to engage in a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

martyrdom operation (AKA "suicide bombing"). Several thousand mourners marched behind an empty coffin, which was covered with a Palestinian flag and pictures of the martyr.

13 Also relevant here is "Mama," Kelly Latimore's controversial take on Michelangelo's Pieta, which features a Black man who evokes George Floyd.

14 See this and other images at https://www.adl.org/blog/far-right-extremists-memorialize-martyr-ashli-babbitt.

15 Max Burns (2021) used the term "canonization," noting Babbitt's "canonization as a right-wing martyr" (mixing metaphors of sainthood and martyrdom); Bergengruen (2021) noted that Babbitt's "canonization" began shortly after her death.

16 See also https://riseandremember.org/george-floyd-square-pilgrimage-journeys.

17 On the Horst Wessel martyrdom itself, and how it epitomized the Nazi concept of martyrdom, see Casquete (2009).

18 This idea of labeling some martyrs as "fake" is in keeping with Moskalenko's coauthored book with Clark McCauley (2019), and also with the argument of Lankford (2013).

19 Amster uses the term "secular" martyrs. The two terms are not identical, but they are interchangeable for the purposes at hand.

References

Abdulrahim, Raja, and Hiba Yazbek. 2022. "For Palestinians, a Rush to Claim 'Martyrs' Killed by Israel." *New York Times*, December 31. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/31/world/middleeast/palestinian-martyrs-israel.html.

Afsaruddin, Asma. 2014. "Martyrdom in Islamic Thought and Praxis: A Historical Survey." In *Martyrdom and Terrorism: Pre-Modern to Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Dominic Janes and Alex Houen, 40–58. New York: Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199959853.003.0003.

Akbar, Kaveh. 2024. *Martyr!* New York: Penguin.

Allen, Ira, and Saul Allen. 2016. "God Terms and Activity Systems: A Definition of Religion for Political Science." *Political Research Quarterly* 69 (3): 557–70. DOI: 10.1177/1065912916654014.

Amster, Ellen. 2021. "George Floyd and the 'American Spring:' Secular Martyrs, Democratic Uprisings, and the Radical Religion of Trumpist Fascism." *International Journal of Interreligious and Intercultural Studies* 32: 63–75.

Anti-Defamation League. 2021a. "Far-Right Extremists Memorialize 'Martyr' Ashli Babbitt." *Blog article*, January 15. New York: Anti-Defamation League. https://www.adl.org/blog/far-right-extremists-memorialize-martyr-ashli-babbitt. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

——. 2021b. "Furious Extremists Call for More Violence around Inauguration Day." *Blog article*, January 13. New York: Anti-Defamation League. https://www.adl.org/blog/furious-extremists-call-for-more-violence-around-inauguration-day. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Argentino, Marc-André, and Adnan Raja. 2021. "Ashli Babbitt: A Far-Right Martyr of the Insurrection." *Insights*, January 13. London: Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET). https://gnet-research.org/2021/01/13/ashli-babbitt-a-far-right-martyr-of-the-insurrection. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Asad, Talal. 1982. "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category." In *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline of Religion and Power in Christianity and Islam*, 27–54. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Barkun, Michael. 2007. "Appropriated Martyrs: The Branch Davidians and the Radical Right." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 (1): 117–24. DOI: 10.1080/09546550601054956.

Bergengruen, Vera. 2021. "'Our First Martyr.' How Ashli Babbitt Is Being Turned into a Far-Right Recruiting Tool." *Time*, January 10. https://time.com/5928249/ashli-babbitt-capitol-extremism. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Biesecker, Michael. 2022. "Ashli Babbitt a Martyr? Her Past Tells a More Complex Story." *AP News*, January 3. https://apnews.com/article/ashli-babbitt-capitol-siege-a15c7e52a04d932972b7a284c7a8f7df. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Bloom, Mia, and Sophia Moskalenko. 2021. "How Ashli Babbitt Became the First Martyr of Trump's MAGA Church." *Haaretz*, October 24. https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-how-ashli-babbitt-became-the-first-martyr-of-trump-s-maga-church-1.10319210. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1980. "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," trans. Richard Nice. *Media, Culture and Society* 2 (3): 261–93.

Bowersock, G. W. 1995. *Martyrdom and Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/cbo9780511518546.

Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctt17kk9p8.

Burns, Max. 2021. "Trump Makes Ashli Babbitt, Killed in the Capitol Riot, into a Martyr. Why That's So Dangerous." *NBC News*, July 12. https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/trump-makes-ashli-babbitt-killed-capitol-riot-martyr-why-s-ncna1273750. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Casquete, Jesús. 2009. "Martyr Construction and the Politics of Death in National Socialism." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10 (3–4): 265–83. DOI: 10.1080/14690760903495740.

Castelli, Elizabeth A. 2004. *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Catoggio, Maria Soledad. 2013. "The Consecration of Political Suffering: Martyrs, Heroes, and Victims in Argentine Political Culture." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 45 (4): 695–719. DOI: 10.1017/s0022216x13001144.

Cobb, Josh, Ngoc Bui, Matthew Alvarez, and Emily Bright. 2024. "'No Justice, No Streets': 4 Years after Murder, George Floyd Square Stands in Protest." *MPR News*, May 25. https://www.mprnews.org/story/2024/05/25/no-justice-no-streets-4-years-after-murder-george-floyd-square-stands-in-protest. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Cook, David. 2007. *Martyrdom in Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/cbo9780511810688.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé W., Andrea J. Ritchie, Rachel Anspach, Rachel Gilmer, and Luke Harris. 2015. "Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women." Research report, July. New York: African American Policy Forum and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies. https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/3226. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Danielle, Britni. 2021. "George Floyd Did Not Sacrifice Himself to Make America Better." *Shondaland*, April 21. https://www.shondaland.com/act/a36189241/george-floyd-verdict-sacrifice. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

DeSilva, Jennifer Mara. 2015. *The Sacralization of Space and Behavior in the Early Modern World: Studies and Sources*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. DOI: 10.4324/9781315553153.

DeSoucey, Michaela, Jo-Ellen Pozner, Corey Fields, Kerry Dobransky, and Gary Alan Fine. 2008. "Memory and Sacrifice: An Embodied Theory of Martyrdom." *Cultural Sociology* 2 (1): 99–121. DOI: 10.1177/1749975507086276.

Dodds, Io. 2022. "Trump's 'Manufactured Martyr': How Ashli Babbitt's Death Was Weaponised by the MAGA Movement." *Independent*, January 6. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/ashli-babbitt-trump-capitol-riot-b1988090.html. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Droge, Arthur J., and James D. Tabor. 1992. *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.

Durkheim, Émile. (1912) 1965. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain. New York: The Free Press.

Embassy of Israel to the United States. N.d. "Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day." https://embassies.gov.il/washington/AboutIsrael/Holidays/Pages/Holocaust-Martyrs%E2%80%99-and-Heroes%E2%80%99-Remembrance-Day.aspx.

Farouk-Alli, Aslam. 2002. "A Qur'anic Perspective and Analysis of the Concept of Sacred Space in Islam." *Journal for the Study of Religion* 15 (1): 63–78. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24764344.

Fierke, K. M. 2012. *Political Self-Sacrifice: Agency, Body and Emotion in International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/cbo9781139248853.

Fischer, Jordan, Eric Flack, and Stephanie Wilson. 2021. "'Who Shot Ashli Babbitt?' Inside the Effort to Make a January 6 Martyr." *WUSA 9*, July 20. https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/national/capitol-riots/who-shot-ashli-babbitt-inside-the-effort-to-make-a-january-6-martyr-right-wing-paul-gosar-donald-trump-white-supremacist-anti-semitic-qanon/65-6641f710-99d0-42ba-b657-4c568e132ef1. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Fruchtman, Diane Shane. 2019. "Martyrdom as Sacrificial Witness," *The Immanent Frame*, September 3. https://tif.ssrc.org/2019/09/03/martyrdom-as-sacrificial-witness. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

——. 2023. *Living Martyrs in Late Antiquity and Beyond: Surviving Martyrdom*. New York: Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/b22865.

Green, Micha. 2020. "Unintentional Martyr: How George Floyd's Death Revolutionized the BLM Movement." *Afro News*, July 3. https://afro.com/unintentional-martyr-how-george-floyds-death-revolutionized-the-blm-movement. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Hatina, Meir. 2014. *Martyrdom in Modern Islam: Piety, Power, and Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/cbo9781107477827.

Hooker, Juliet. 2023. *Black Grief/White Grievance: The Politics of Loss*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. DOI: 10.1353/book.114453.

Johnson, Rev. William. 1865. *Our Martyred President: A Discourse on the Death of President Lincoln, Preached in Stillwater, April 16th, 1865*. Troy, NY: Daily and Weekly Times Printing House.

Jones, Ja'han. 2021. "On George Floyd's Birthday, We Need More than Reflection. We Need Action." *The ReidOut* [blog], October 14. https://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/george-floyd-birthday-rcna3013. Retrieved October 26, 2024.

Kachun, Mitch. 2017. *First Martyr of Liberty: Crispus Attucks in American Memory*. New York: Oxford

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

University Press. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780199731619.001.0001.

Karikari-Yawson, Ama. 2020. "Dear Candace Owens and Glenn Beck, George Floyd is the Perfect Martyr for the Black Lives Matter Movement." *Medium* [blog], June 10. https://medium.com/@milestalespublishing/dear-candace-owens-and-glenn-beck-george-floyd-is-the-perfect-martyr-for-the-black-lives-matter-3850eecd9df8. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Kitts, Margo, ed. 2018. *Martyrdom, Self-Sacrifice, and Self-Immolation: Religious Perspectives on Suicide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190656485.001.0001.

Krutzsch, Brett. 2019. *Dying to Be Normal: Gay Martyrs and the Transformation of American Sexual Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190685218.001.0001.

Lankford, Adam. 2013. *The Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers*. New York: Macmillan.

Lincoln, Bruce. 2008. *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. DOI: 10.7208/chicago/9780226482071.001.0001.

Macintyre, Alasdair. (1981) 1984. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Mandziuk, Roseann M. 2022. "Memory and Martyrdom: The Transmogrification of Ashli Babbitt." *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 12 (3): 150–70.

Meyer, Ken. 2021. "Trump Reportedly Regrets Not Lowering American Flag at the White House to Honor Ashli Babbitt." *Mediaite*, July 15. https://www.mediaite.com/trump/trump-reportedly-regrets-not-lowering-american-flag-at-the-white-house-to-honor-ashli-babbitt. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Middleton, Paul. 2013. "Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom: A Statement for the Defence." *Journal of Theological Studies* 64 (2): 556–73. DOI: 10.1093/jts/flt123.

——. 2014. "What Is Martyrdom?" *Mortality* 19 (2): 117–33. DOI: 10.1080/13576275.2014.894013.

Mitchell, Jolyon. 2014. "Filming the Ends of Martyrdom." In *Martyrdom and Terrorism: Pre-Modern to Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Dominic Janes and Alex Houen, 271–90. New York: Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199959853.003.0013.

Moskalenko, Sophia. 2020. "Nobody Said George Floyd Was a Martyr or a Hero." *Psychology Today*, June 8. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/friction/202006/nobody-said-george-floyd-was-martyr-or-hero. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Moskalenko, Sophia, and Clark McCauley. 2019. *The Marvel of Martyrdom: The Power of Self-Sacrifice in a Selfish World*. New York: Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190689322.001.0001.

Moss, Candida. 2012. "The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern." *Church History* 81 (3): 531–51. DOI: 10.1017/s0009640712001254.

——. 2013. *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*. New York: Harper One.

Mumphrey, Cheyanne. 2024. "Finding Meaning in George Floyd's Death through Protest Art Left at his Murder Site." *AP News*, February 9. https://apnews.com/article/george-floyd-police-black-history-month-art-2ba96358dc5f877e026b94861c6c8943. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Murphy, Andrew R. 2023. "Theorizing Political Martyrdom: Politics, Religion, Death, and Memory." *Political Theology* 24 (5): 465–85. DOI: 10.1080/1462317x.2022.2125118.

Naveh, Eyal J. 1990. *Crown of Thorns: Political Martyrdom in America from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King, Jr*. New York: NYU Press. DOI: 10.18574/nyu/9780814759257.001.0001.

Oates, Joyce Carol. 2017. *A Book of American Martyrs*. New York: Ecco.

Outram, Quentin, and Keith Laybourn, eds. 2018. *Secular Martyrdom in Britain and Ireland: From Peterloo to the Present*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-62905-6.

Owens, Ernest. 2021. "George Floyd Didn't 'Sacrifice' His Life, Nancy Pelosi. It Was Stolen From Him." *Daily Beast*, April 26. https://www.thedailybeast.com/george-floyd-didnt-sacrifice-his-life-nancy-pelosi-it-was-stolen-from-him. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Pargament, Kenneth I., and Annette Mahoney. 2005. "Sacred Matters: Sanctification as a Vital Topic for the Psychology of Religion." *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 15 (3): 179–98. DOI: 10.1207/s15327582ijpr1503_1.

Perkins, Judith. 1995. *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*. New York: Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9780203210062.

Pipitone, Tony. 2021. "Rubio Argues Trump Could Emerge a 'Martyr,' Stronger from Impeachment." *NBC Miami*, January 13. https://www.nbcmiami.com/news/local/rubio-argues-trump-could-emerge-a-martyr-stronger-from-impeachment/2363096. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Ployd, Adam. 2020. "What Makes a Martyr? The Movement for Black Lives and the Power of Rhetoric Old and New." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 55 (1): 33–45. DOI: 10.1353/ecu.2020.0008.

Pomerleau, Julie M., Kenneth I. Pargament, and Annette Mahoney. 2016. "Seeing Life through a Sacred Lens: The Spiritual Dimension of Meaning." In *Clinical Perspectives on Meaning: Positive and Existential Psychotherapy*, eds. Pninit Russo-Netzer, Stefan E.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Schulenberg, and Alexander Batthyany, 37–57. Cham: Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-41397-6_3.

Porter, Tom. 2020. “Trump Retweeted an Attack on George Floyd’s Character by Glenn Beck and Candace Owens.” *Business Insider*, June 7. https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-retweets-attacks-on-george-floyd-by-conservative-activist-2020-6. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Rhodeen, Penn. 2020. “The Crucifixion of George Floyd.” *America: The Jesuit Review*, July 23. https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/07/23/crucifixion-george-floyd. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Richardson, Valerie. 2020. “George Floyd, Black Lives Matter Martyr, Struggled with Drugs, Crime,” *Washington Times*, June 7. https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jun/7/george-floyd-black-lives-matter-martyr-struggled-d. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Riddle, Donald Wayne. 1931. *The Martyrs: A Study in Social Control*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rozsa, Matthew. 2021. “Ashli Babbitt as the 21st-Century Horst Wessel: Symbolic Martyr to the Fascist Cause.” *Salon*, July 11. https://www.salon.com/2021/07/11/ashli-babbitt-as-the-21st-century-horst-wessel-symbolic-martyr-to-the-fascist-cause. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Rupar, Aaron. 2021. “Trump Has Found His January 6 Martyr.” *Vox*, July 13. https://www.vox.com/2021/7/13/22573658/trump-who-shot-ashli-babbitt-january-6-martyr. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Samuels, Robert, and Toluse Olorunnipa. 2022. *His Name Is George Floyd: One Man’s Life and the Struggle for Racial Justice*. New York: Penguin Random House.

Schwartz, Barry. 1982. “The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory.” *Social Forces* 61 (2): 374–402. DOI: 10.2307/2578232.

Schwartzman, Paul, and Josh Dawsey. 2021. “How Ashli Babbitt Went from Capitol Rioter to Trump-Embraced ‘Martyr.’” *Washington Post*, July 30. https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/07/30/ashli-babbitt-trump-capitol-martyr. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Scolari, Baldassare. 2017. “State Martyrs: Aesthetics and Performativity of a Contemporary Political Discourse.” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 10 (1–2): 71–106. DOI: 10.1163/18748929-01002004.

Scott, Jamie S., and Paul Simpson-Housley, eds. 1991. *Sacred Places and Profane Spaces: Essays in the Geographics of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Sharlet, Jeff. 2023. *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Sharpton, Al. 2020. “Reverend Al Sharpton’s Eulogy Transcript at George Floyd’s Memorial Service.” Speech delivered in Minneapolis, MN, June 4. https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/reverend-al-sharpton-eulogy-transcript-at-george-floyd-memorial-service. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Smith, Lacey Baldwin. 1997. *Fools, Martyrs, Traitors: The Story of Martyrdom in the Western World*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. 1963. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*. New York: Macmillan.

Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. DOI: 10.4159/9780674044289.

Taylor, Paul. 1993. “Mandela—Martyr, Statesman, Conciliator—Turns into Politician.” *Washington Post*, July 18. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/07/19/mandela-martyr-statesman-conciliator-turns-into-politician/5eec4890-2e90-4696-864f-18b066e734d7. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

van Henten, Jan Willem, and Friedrich Avemarie, eds. 2002. *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity*. New York: Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9780203994405.

Watts, Marina. 2020. “Everything Candace Owens Has Said about George Floyd so Far.” *Newsweek*, June 8. https://www.newsweek.com/everything-candace-owens-has-said-about-george-floyd-so-far-1508959. Retrieved August 26, 2024.

Williams, Michael Vinson. 2011. *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press. DOI: 10.1353/book13140.

Williams, Saul. 2016. “Saul Williams on Martyrs & Movements.” Video, 4:45. YouTube, February 17. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wViFYVxAXgY. Retrieved August 31, 2024.

Želinský, Dominik. 2020. “Becoming Socrates: Five Elements of the Consecration Process and the Case of Jan Patocka.” *European Journal of Social Theory* 23 (3): 370–88. DOI: 10.1177/1368431019852690.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001774 Published online by Cambridge University Press