

“Symbolic Rupture: ‘Take a Knee’ and the NFL as Commodified Spectacle”

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Something is seen not because it's visible; it's visible because it is seen. – Daniel Wallace, *The Negro Magician*

It is no small irony that in attempting to draw attention to racial inequality and police brutality, Colin Kaepernick, a professional football player of color, found his “Take a Knee” protest maligned, misunderstood, marginalized, and otherwise muted by, among others, mostly white millionaires and billionaires, many of them pro football team owners and at least one of them president of the free world. When this president in September 2017 called on National Football League owners to fire “son of a bitch” players who refuse to stand for the national anthem and, therefore, participate in a pre-game ritual for which they have been publicly included only since 2009, he shifted the debate away from anything relating to policing and profiling in America and instead to the decorum expected of highly paid professional athletes during the quasi-sacral playing or singing of the national “hymn.”¹ Such symbolic, quasi-religious displays, which rely on players as jingoistic props, support a highly militaristic brand of patriotism as expressions perhaps more accurately termed nationalistic. As such, they can be read or seen as an articulation of the politics of war, defying the naïve calls by many sports fans to keep the politics out of their spectacle. Rites and rituals like standing for the national anthem at a football or baseball game also seem to demonstrate Daniel Boorstin’s idea that often we “invent our standards and then respect them as if they had been revealed or discovered.”²

The professional sports leagues invited the “national anthem” communication crisis by so thoroughly integrating into their brands and marketing to fans what appears to valorize only hyper-militaristic forms of national fealty. At the same time, by relying on the players as symbols and on the pageant of their games as celebrations of at least the appearance of national unity, the leagues furnished their players with symbolic power to wield in disharmonious protest, as well. The fusing of pro sporting events with displays of military power and knee-jerk patriotism idealizes militarism, contributes to fervent, even hegemonic nationalism cloaked in hypermasculinity, and commercially exploits these activities through the commoditization of every aspect of the spectacle: “Get your official camo gear at NFL.com/shop.” It is likely no coincidence that such rhetorical strategies and communicative acts dominate national politics, as well.

This essay explores the rhetorical strategies of symbolic patriotism as enacted by professional sports leagues, including and especially the National Football League and Major League Baseball, with the full participation and partnership of the media that broadcast and cover them. The media-sport-military troika is interrogated here using the “Take a Knee” campaign as a case study and Jean Baudrillard’s and Guy Debord’s approaches to, respectively, simulacra and the spectacle as theoretical lenses. Also helpful in this analysis are Gaye Tuchman’s ideas about symbolic annihilation as a rhetorical strategy of erasure.³

Background

Though its lyrics date back to 1814, the “Star-Spangled Banner” became the nation’s official anthem in 1931. And though it has been played before baseball games sporadically since World War I, the anthem did not become a part of regular season games throughout big league baseball until, not coincidentally, another war, in 1942. The anthem was first played to begin a major league baseball game in 1918, when a brass band at a Cubs-Red Sox World Series game in Chicago struck up the tune. The fans, who were already standing prior to the spontaneous anthem performance, quickly joined in.⁴

In 1972, twenty-five years after shattering major league baseball’s color barrier, Jackie Robinson published these words in his third and final revisionary autobiography:

There I was, the black grandson of a slave, the son of a black sharecropper, part of a historic occasion, a symbolic hero to my people. The air was sparkling. The sunlight was warm. The band struck up the national anthem. The flag billowed in the wind. It should have been a glorious moment for me as the stirring words of the national anthem poured from the stands. Perhaps, it was, but then again, perhaps, the anthem could be called the theme song for a drama called *The Noble Experiment*. Today, as I look back on that opening game of my first world series, I must tell you that it was Mr. Rickey’s drama and that I was only a principal actor. As I write this twenty years later, I cannot stand and sing the anthem. I cannot salute the flag; I know that I am a black man in a white world.⁵

Robinson published these words the same year that black U.S. Olympians Vince Matthews and Wayne Collett were tossed from the 1972 Munich Games for, in the estimation of the International Olympics Committee, failing to show proper respect on the medal stand. After taking gold and silver in the 400-meter sprint, Collett stood casually on the stand barefoot, hands on hips, chatting with Matthews as if the two were waiting for the next bus, all while the anthem played. The sprinters’ dismissals recalled a similar action by the IOC in the Mexico City Olympics just four years prior. Tommie Smith and John Carlos, also black sprinters, each raised a black-gloved fist on the medal stand at the 1968 Games, also as the U.S. national anthem was played, and also wearing no shoes. They were subsequently thrown out of the Olympics by the IOC’s president, Avery Brundage. Importantly, as Urla Hill noted, Smith and Carlos “have [since] ascended their place as villainous traitors to become a sort of brand for gallantry and pluck in the face of inestimable odds,” celebrated with a twenty-foot-high monument of the raised fist moment that was unveiled on the campus of San Jose State University in 2005.⁶

Just months later, in February 1969, black students at the University of New Mexico marched onto the gym floor during the national anthem preceding the Lobos’ game with Brigham Young, each student with one fist raised, or the Black Dignity salute employed by Smith and Carlos.⁷ Fast forward to 1996 when the National Basketball Association suspended Denver Nuggets guard Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, formerly Chris Jackson, for sitting during the national anthem, or to the 2003 college basketball season when mediated sport turned on Manhattanville College’s Toni Smith for turning her back on the American flag to protest the Bush Administration’s plans to go to war in Iraq.⁸ “I did it for my own self-respect and conscience,” Smith told *The New York Times* at the time. “A lot of people blindly stand up and salute the flag, but I feel that blindly facing the flag hurts more people. There are a lot of

inequities in this country, and these are issues that needed to be acknowledged. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, and our priorities are elsewhere.”⁹

The “Take a Knee” movement, if a movement it was or is, began quietly on August 14, 2016, when then-San Francisco quarterback Colin Kaepernick sat on the bench during the playing of the national anthem rather than stand with his teammates in order to protest systemic oppression of and police brutality toward people of color.¹⁰ “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people,” Kaepernick told the NFL Network. “When there’s significant change and I feel that flag represents what it’s supposed to represent, and this country is representing people the way that it’s supposed to, I’ll stand.”¹¹ Following correspondence and a conversation with Nate Boyer, then a Seattle Seahawks long snapper and a former Green Beret, Kaepernick altered his nascent protest to instead take a knee alongside his (mostly) standing teammates. Boyer had explained that U.S. soldiers take a knee in front of a fallen brother’s gravesite to show respect, seemingly offering the 49er quarterback symbolic cover.¹² It took three games for anyone to even notice what Kaepernick was, or was not, doing.

A former Super Bowl quarterback frequently described as an ideal teammate, Kaepernick was soon joined on one knee by a teammate, star safety Eric Reid, who explained his decision in an opinion piece in the *New York Times* a year later. Reid wrote that they chose to kneel “because it’s a respectful gesture. I remember thinking our posture was like a flag flown at half-mast, to mark a tragedy.”¹³ This aspect of the protest was quickly forgotten, if it had ever been apprehended in the first place, much as Tommie Smith’s holding of an olive branch with his non-fist-clenched hand in 1968 was overlooked and cropped out.¹⁴

Sideline postures enacted in protest grew to include raising fists, locking arms, laying hands on shoulders, and simply remaining in the stadium’s tunnel until the anthem finished. As the expressions became variegated, it became increasingly difficult to track exactly what the gestures were protesting. What began as solidarity in joining Kaepernick to draw attention to social injustice, after Trump’s outburst became a protest of the president’s hypocrisy and bullying. Kaepernick’s motivating purposes were annihilated, in other words, by Trump’s provocations and later by Houston Texans owner Bob McNair, who criticized the players’ social justice agenda by saying, “We can’t have the inmates running the prison.”¹⁵ Protests grew further as a response to McNair and, more generally, to what was seen as equivocation by NFL owners in general.

In displacing and, therefore, symbolically annihilating Kaepernick’s symbolic gesture, the debate about proper decorum during the national anthem also further obscured larger questions about the politics of war. Patriotism became, again, dependent on behavior at stadia that reflexively, unthinkingly endorses, embraces, and uncritically applauds the central role and prominence of the military in U.S. foreign policy, reminiscent of similarly delimiting notions of patriotism in the commemorations and tributes staged on and around 9/11 each year. *San Francisco Chronicle* sportswriter Gwen Knapp, for example, once dared to assert that the ritual of jet flyovers before games is “fundamentally disrespectful to military operations. The presence of those planes at a sporting event trivializes their real purpose.”¹⁶ Filip Bondy wondered in the pages of the *New York Daily News* what an eagle trained to fly nowhere, to his handler on the mound, has to do with freedom. But, if during any of these nationalistic expressions a fan “dares to feel uncomfortable, if you think this is not the place or time for such introspection, you’re un-American,” Bondy wrote, calling these expressions, collectively, “creeping nationalism.”¹⁷

By the end of the 2017 NFL season, the number of protesting players had shrunk to fewer than twenty, according to media outlets such as the Associated Press and the *New York Times*, or

about 1 percent of the league's players.¹⁸ The games' broadcasters had stopped showing them on air, rendering them invisible to the spectacle's viewers. The president's famously short attention span had led him elsewhere for controversy and attention. And Kaepernick had been largely silenced, the result of what he asserted in a lawsuit in 2017 to be collusion on the part of NFL teams to keep him out of professional football.¹⁹ Once one of the best football players in the world, Kaepernick watched the 2017 season from home as forty other quarterbacks were taken off of the unemployment rolls.²⁰

Patriotism as Good Housekeeping Seal

Viewership of NFL games not coincidentally declined nearly 10 percent in 2017, a drop attributed at least in part to counter-protests by viewers disaffected with the Kaepernick-inspired protests.²¹ The double-digit drop followed a roughly 8 percent decline the year prior, a falloff that inspired efforts by the NFL to shorten games and seek alternative distribution for its telecasts, such as streaming and Facebook Live. To the extent that 2017's erosion in viewership can be assigned to fans' disaffection with the politics of player protests, a dissatisfaction fanned by Trump's ultimatum, the NFL can blame only itself. In endorsing such a narrow band of what may or may not be patriotism, one for which the defaults are war and war-preparedness, pro sports' image makers are capitalizing on, in the case of football, the sport as a metaphor for war and, for both football and baseball, a post-9/11 fervor for flag and country expressed in conspicuously pro-military ways. In so doing, these image makers foreclosed other conceptions of patriotism, including those espousing pacifism or protest, and they did so in such a way that players and fans seeking to express these alternative conceptions have found themselves resisted, even vilified and retaliated against.²² Kaepernick's employment status is perhaps evidence. David J. Leonard has called such treatment by, in this case the NFL and its more "patriotic" fans, a form of "symbolic lynching."²³ In deploying players as props for its pageant of patriotism, the NFL risked those same players wielding their own symbolic meaning in some other communicative act for other rhetorical goals.

Since 9/11, professional sports have doubled down on their bet on nationalistic expressions in support of the military, drinking with both hands from the goblet of pro-military spectacle, much of it Pentagon-funded.²⁴ In staging events and packaging games, the leagues since 9/11 have expanded the visual and symbolic vocabulary for this fusion of pro sport and nationalism to include fighter jet flyovers, field-sized U.S. flags, color guards, police and fire first responders, majestic eagles and birds of prey, Lee Greenwood and Ronan Tynan, "Proud to Be an American" and "God Bless America," highly choreographed American veteran family "reunions," players and coaches in camouflage-styled uniforms on, for example, Flag Day and Veterans Day, basketball games played on aircraft carriers, and Major League Baseball played in the middle of Fort Bragg, N.C. on a field constructed just for the occasion.²⁵ As ESPN writer Howard Bryant put it, patriotism in professional sports has devolved into what could be described as "a lucrative Good Housekeeping seal for marketers."²⁶ As spectacle, these displays and rhetorical strategies have turned ballparks and football stadia into sites of ritualistic memorializing that articulate and endorse the politics of war, communicative acts amplified by the leagues' media partners and by modern stadia that could be considered billion-dollar television studios as much as playing fields and sporting arenas. The Mercedes-Benz Dome in Atlanta, for example, a \$1.5 billion "wonderplex," in *Forbes Magazine's* description, requires two million square feet; features an eight-panel translucent, retractable roof; a nearly six-story-

high, 360-degree video board; separately, the world's largest video scoreboard; two "skycams" and facilities for more than one hundred TV cameras.²⁷

In exchange for sub-leasing its playing venues to displays of pro-military spectacle, such as the many tearful family reunions of veterans home from Afghanistan or Iraq with those they had left behind, the teams have traditionally received payments from the Department of Defense. In duping fans into believing that pro teams and leagues are genuinely, voluntarily grateful for the sacrifices of members of the armed forces, to the tune of \$53 million in only a few years, according to Arizona Senators John McCain and Jeff Flake, the leagues are articulating a political ideology. Of the five major sports leagues in the United States, including Major League Soccer, the DoD spent the most on marketing contracts with NFL teams. McCain's and Flake's report disclosed contracts with 19 NFL teams from 2012 to 2015 that totaled \$6.1 million in taxpayer money.²⁸ The Wisconsin National Guard, for example, paid the Milwaukee Brewers \$49,000 to play "God Bless America" during the seventh-inning stretch of games in 2014, while the Atlanta Falcons, owned by billionaire and Home Depot-founder Arthur Blank, collected \$879,000 to produce and stage homecoming reunions at midfield before home games. The two senators proposed a bill to oppose this spending, saying they believed such "paid patriotism" to be "morally fraudulent," trivializing military service by profiting off of veterans and turning participating soldiers into mere marketing gimmicks.²⁹ The bill died in committee.

Beyond direct payments from the Pentagon, however, the leagues have energetically, creatively, and systematically sought to present their games as panegyrics to "nation," employing religious-like rituals and tributes that are in a way sacralized by the opening "hymn" that is or has become the national anthem. It's common at Pittsburgh Pirates games for the Air Force Reserves to perform the anthem.³⁰ At Cardinals games in St. Louis, firefighters unfurled a huge American flag in center field with a video tribute played on the scoreboard to the soundtrack of Lee Greenwood singing, "Proud to Be an American."³¹ For the anthem in Colorado, the Rockies executed a plan proposed by their owner Jerry McMorris by having Rockies and Arizona Diamondbacks players hold up a field-wide flag while fans waved their own personal U.S. flags distributed at the turnstiles.³² Public address announcers and TV and radio broadcasters served as the ritual's unofficial clergy, reminding viewers and listeners to appreciate the sacrifices of those serving the country in the armed forces.³³ In approximating religious rite and ritualistic practice, these displays as symbols provide their spectators and participants a ready-made accessibility and clarity and, therefore, symbolic power.

For the media-sport complex, such gimmicks are perhaps irresistible. As spectacle, they rely on a panoply of symbols that further fuse the leagues as brands with something that looks and feels and smells like patriotism but that in the aggregate, ironically, serves to delimit freedom, democratic participation, and individualism, presumably three cornerstone cultural values for which "America" as concept has come to represent or comprise. Seeing the New York Mets take on the San Diego Padres in "alternate" camouflage uniforms, which are available for purchase at MLBshop.com, can be stirring, particularly when TV images of the players are interposed with scene-setting shots of the aircraft carriers docked just a mile or so away from Petco Field in San Diego. Switch to the football season for images of overweight NFL coaches in military-style jackets, replete with name tags and matching camo-themed headsets, images juxtaposed with those of "real" soldiers and national guards standing ready to consecrate the next NFL co-produced militaristic rite or ritual.

The slide in ratings clearly got the owners' attention, especially because the NFL has been able to assume TV ratings dominance for more than twenty years. Of the twenty most-

watched TV shows in American history, nineteen are Super Bowls (the other is the final episode of M*A*S*H).³⁴ This rupture of the real-but-unreal image of the NFL, one meant to project harmony and, therefore, to disappear disharmony, political diversity, dissatisfaction, and unrest, is a rupture also of what is a commodification of nearly every aspect of the NFL as spectacle. As Debord described the spectacle's dependence on commodification and commodification's dependence on the spectacle as spectacle, "waves of enthusiasm for particular products [are] fueled and boosted by the communication media. . . . The sheer fad item perfectly expresses the fact that, as the mass of commodities become more and more absurd, absurdity becomes a commodity in its own right. . . . the commodity's *indulgences* – glorious tokens of the commodity's immanent presence among the faithful."³⁵

Among the more absurd of these indulgences or glorious tokens during the 2017 season was the jersey of Pittsburgh Steeler offensive lineman Alejandro Villanueva, which trended if for only a few days at NFL.com and other online retailers. A former captain in the U.S. Army, Villanueva found himself standing for the anthem in Chicago's Soldier Field while the rest of his team remained in the locker room before a game with the Bears. Villanueva said he had walked down the tunnel and, because he had walked too far and, therefore, could be seen, felt he had to remain standing during the playing of the anthem. This awkward moment was enough to put jersey makers into overdrive producing Villanueva's no. 78 jersey, a reaction to his name trending on Twitter in the aftermath of his reluctant "patriotic" moment. The sports apparel manufacturer Fanatics even has a name for this sort of ephemeral, commodifying marketing opportunity: a "micro-moment."³⁶ Villanueva jersey sales skyrocketed, making no. 78 the best-selling jersey in America, if for only part of one week, even though the micro-moment was only a pre-game ritual mistake, one for which the player apologized to his coach and team. Villanueva's stumble with the NFL's symbols had been commoditized, and with great commercial success, punctuating the protest-plagued season with another image of "blissful unification of society through consumption."³⁷

Sport as Spectacle

The leagues have embarked on what Debord might call "an immense accumulation of spectacles" and, therefore, as preferred by the president, mere representation of or tribute to patriotism rather than real, actual, or lived patriotism, which would more likely include or authorize the risk of approbation by drawing attention to the treatment of those vulnerable in and to society, an activity and expression specifically protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.³⁸ In commenting on the U.S. Supreme Court case that made compelled participation in national flag salutes illegal, historian G. Edward White Barbas wrote that "freedom of speech became closely associated with the intertwined ideals of creative self-fulfillment (freedom to express oneself) and equality (freedom from discrimination or oppression). Free democratic speech . . . signified the power of the human actor, liberated from the dominance of external forces, free to determine his or her individual destiny, required only to respect the freedoms of others."³⁹ In the NFL's pre-game rituals, some are more equal than others, at least as symbols.

Importantly, for Debord the accumulated or aggregate spectacle that, in this case, is a professional football game is not a collection of images but rather a social relationship between people that is mediated by images. As such, this spectacle, one epitomized and taken to its own illogical extremes by the annual Super Bowl, is simultaneously the outcome and the goal of the

mediators, the major sports networks such as ESPN and Fox that pay so much to be able to carry the games and, therefore, to weld to and recast with their own brands those of the big pro leagues, all of them, not coincidentally, red, white, and blue. As Debord describes it, “the language of the spectacle is composed of *signs* of the dominant organization of production – signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-products of that organization.”⁴⁰

Though Americans do not stand for the playing or singing of the national anthem at, say, concerts or operas or plays, to do so at a sporting event is accepted as natural, even God-ordained as part and parcel of the quasi-religious event or pro game-cum-political rally that the games might be considered to simulate. As communicative act, this appearance of unity is presumably meant to disappear disharmony and disagreement over, among many other things, what it means to be American and the role (and levels of funding) that should be considered proper for the country’s armed forces. This is pro spectator sport’s power as culturally specific spectacle, one long recognized in the literature. David Rowe has argued that national governments and their militaries get involved in sports, especially televised sports, because of the “highly effective way in which sport can contribute to nation building.”⁴¹

The irony of celebrating democratic values, which must begin with or otherwise prominently feature freedom of expression and freedom of association, by so conforming to an accepted orthodoxy of rites and rituals is confabulated or otherwise turned on its head such that participation is a precondition to being allowed to self-identify as patriotic or as American. Kaepernick and those who joined him were frequently called un-American, further uniting them with sporting history’s protest heroes: Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Muhammad Ali, Curt Flood, Jackie Robinson, and others. Thus, the spectacle, specifically those aspects that tacitly demand lock-step fealty to flag and country, is “both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production,” as Debord describes it, and not something merely added to the experience of witnessing professional sporting events in the United States.⁴²

Standing for the national anthem isn’t simply decorative, a sign of something else, but rather it has become an essential aspect of the hyper-real unreality that is the obsessively choreographed, executive produced, rigidly timed, and relentlessly commercialized “event” in American society that is a pro football or baseball game. As such, the spectacle of “patriotism,” narrowly defined, should not be considered in opposition to “concrete social activity,” but in important ways *as* the social activity of being patriotic, one that is supportive of those serving in the armed forces and expressive of what it essentially is or has become to mean to be American. This is the challenge the NFL’s protests face not only to succeed, however that might be measured or determined, but even to be understood, because the spectacle’s mechanisms of contemplation, by so incorporating the symbolic and spectacular, now constitute their own reality. This spectacle is real, in other words, even hyper-real.

The French semiotician Jean Baudrillard likely would qualify these descriptions. Such displays, demonstrations, and, perhaps the better word here, *enactments* of patriotism (or something like patriotism) as spectacle are both less real, even unreal, and at the same time more than real, or hyper-real.⁴³ As simulacra, these ritualistic enactments are copies of an original that never existed, just as the “heroes” on the field are simulations (and dissimulations) of the true or real warriors (even soldiers) of whom they are meant to resemble, at least in terms of risk and achievement. Consider Curt Schilling’s bloody sock in pitching his Red Sox to improbable victory, or Michael Jordan’s “flu game” in 1997 in which he willed himself beyond illness to score thirty-eight points. As simulations of patriotism, rites such as standing for the national anthem follow their own logic, one that has little or nothing to do with facts or reason: symbolic

Gordian knots or Mobius strips of symbols and symbolic expression that seemingly cannot be untied or undone or else the entire spectacular firmament might unravel and become, again, just another game. Closer to a conjoining of desire and “values,” the rite of standing for the national anthem has acquired a semi-sacred status as professional sports and college football have displaced organized religion in American life as the places and spaces where ritualized, tribal affiliation and behavior are sanctioned, even demanded and rewarded. As sacred ritual, it has both contributed to and benefited from pro sports’ quasi-religious status.

In Baudrillard’s framework, such behaviors, or structures as he would more likely call them, are in their way utopian, which should suggest something of their power to exclude, in this case, any disharmony such as that caused or introduced by taking a knee or raising a fist. They are utopian in their paradoxical, even absurd conjoining of the real and something other than the real in a context or of an aesthetics of the hyper-real, the spectacle, “a frisson of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a frisson of simultaneous distancing and magnification,” in Baudrillard’s description.⁴⁴ To pick up the metaphorical snowglobe that the anthem tableau presents as a microcosm of the sports-media-military troika, notice the prototypical “fan” standing at allegiance, perhaps hand over heart wearing the same jersey the players are wearing, eyes on the pageant of “patriotism” being enacted on the field of play. He is distanced from the principal actors of that pageant, but at the same time, through camera close-ups displayed on a six-story “halo” video board, he is so close to those same actors and to the players standing on the sideline that the tear of inspiration (or sweat of having just warmed up) is seemingly shared, offering the appearance or seeming of intimacy that is of course simply an image. Less real and hyper-real, this distortion of scale that the uninitiated might find bewildering, perhaps even disturbing, presents an excess of transparency that might or might not be real in terms of authenticity, because the same tear-stained athlete is both a product and a prop of the very same production unfolding on the field, emotionally manipulated by the same produced, choreographed pageantry in service to nation and, perhaps more than anything else, brand-building. Because patriotism sells.

Such displays offer “the pleasure of an excess of meaning,” in Baudrillard’s analysis, but only because the bar of meaning has fallen below the usual waterline by being made up of mostly if not exclusively signs and symbols. The non-signifier, for example an eagle (or bird) trained to fly from some high perch and then to land on cue on the gloved hand of its trainer, is exalted by that most modern of meaning-makers and signifiers, the camera.

Two examples, one older and one newer:

For the one-year anniversary of 9/11, Major League Baseball centered its tributes on the New York Yankees, the team to which President George W. Bush turned to for support in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq by practicing for hours his “first pitch” for the first game after the attacks a year prior, a game that featured the spontaneous chanting of “U-S-A, U-S-A” by fans of both teams throughout that emotional re-start of the season. In the 2002 tribute,

There was an uncomfortable pause in the Sept. 11 pregame ceremony, just after Ronan Tynan finished a stirring version of ‘God Bless America.’ Nothing happened for a moment, and the fans seemed unsure if they were supposed to remain standing.

So they did what came naturally. Unscripted and uninhibited, they filled the silence with a chant. ‘U-S-A! U-S-A!’ they cheered, and a few minutes later they applauded and waved flags as the Yankees dedicated a memorial in Monument Park to the rescue workers and the victims of the terrorist attacks last Sept. 11. . . . There were

flags all over, including one from the World Trade Center that was presented by the Marines, and a giant one unfurled in center field as the Harlem Boys Choir sang the national anthem. The flags above the facade flew at half-staff. Representatives from the Army, the Navy, the Air Force and the Marines stood in the outfield, and the Yankees and Orioles stood on the baselines, arranged at random, during the ceremony. Challenger, the bald eagle featured prominently last October, took his place on the mound, though he did not swoop in from center field as usual. When four Navy F-18 Hornets flew over the stadium after the anthem, the applause reached its peak. The planes recently returned from combat operations in Afghanistan off the U.S.S. John F. Kennedy. . . . The fans who came were passionate, and they cheered ‘U-S-A!’ again during a video tribute from Major League Baseball that followed a moment of silence in the bottom of the fifth inning. The clock turned to 9:11. . . . The Orioles, the umpires, the base coaches and (Alfonso) Soriano stood at their positions and faced the center-field flag for a moment of silence, the organist Eddie Layton playing a slow, poignant version of ‘Ave Maria.’⁴⁵

As sports communication scholar Michael Butterworth reasoned, after describing another similar MLB-produced tribute, “It is not unreasonable to read this sequence as tacit support for Bush and his vision of America,” and as support for war in a country that had nothing whatsoever to do with the 9/11 attacks.⁴⁶

The fresher example comes from Super Bowl LII in 2018, when halftime act Justin Timberlake “interrupted” his singing in order to take “a Super Bowl selfie” with someone presented to viewers as an ordinary fan, while approximately 110 million American households looked on to witness the celebration of an otherwise mundane “event,” a microscopic simulation that paradoxically enables the real to pass into the hyper-real while at the same time being so much less than what otherwise would be less than real – the making of an image of the making of an image of nothing happening. As a juxtaposition of the ordinary with the celebrated, it enabled and even relied upon the voyeuristic appetites of its viewers, a moment strikingly similar in its transparency and distancing to pornography.

That such an “intimate” moment with Justin Timberlake and a presumed fan in what was otherwise the halftime lull in the middle of a football game proved, paradoxically, so alienating, just as viewing pornography does, shows the blending and blurring of the real with the hyper-real and, in that blending and blurring, the simulation and dissimulation that is occurring as a result of the illusory power of having televised or broadcast it *as if* viewers weren’t there, or as if Timberlake was authentically seeking to connect with a fan while on the job of being an *uber-*celebrity during what is *de facto* a national holiday.

This is the allure of reality television, to use one of the more oxymoronic terms ever coined to mask a genre’s own shortcomings, a genre not unlike pornography in its same trick of seeming voyeuristic transparency and simultaneous distancing that comes with being able only to watch. But this is to say that such a “moment” of being there without being there is neither true nor false, and thus it might be called utopian. Baudrillard would use this description. As such, it fascinates in its perversity, just as the moment of, say, seeing on a sixty-foot video board the expressions of Cam Newton or Alex Rodriguez during a performance of the national anthem via a closeup that seemingly takes the viewer inside the head or heart of the athlete does, a perverse pleasure of violating someone’s personal privacy for the faux verité or even something like communion that that moment promises.⁴⁷ The video board-projected moment of a fan asking his fiancée to marry him at the big game is a similar “moment,” one in which the image replaces

actual, lived experience in terms of its meaning and memory, both unreal and simultaneously transcendentally “real,” choreographed and co-produced to become spectacle, or part of the larger spectacle. (“People’s lives are *changed* and even made here! Now, back to the game!”)

Thus, the spectacle cannot be set in opposition to the lived “real,” because in this spectacular snowglobe world, reality, whatever it might be, and the representation and projection of that reality cannot be parsed or distinguished. Again, consider Atlanta’s Mercedes-Benz “wonderplex,” which opened in 2017 and proudly boasts on its website two thousand screens.⁴⁸ In Debord’s description, both reality and image “will survive on either side” of any such distinction that we might attempt to make between them.⁴⁹ The spectacle, therefore, turns reality on its head by being a product of “real activity,” or of “real” people standing, singing, kneeling, and emoting. This ritualized activity, so normalized by repetition and even sacralized, has therefore become a referendum on one’s patriotism, especially since 9/11, reified to the point that assaults on its hegemony, like those of Kaepernick, Malcolm Jenkins, and Baton Rouge-born Eric Reid, among others, are seen as inappropriate, even dangerous, especially if they come from athletes of color. *The Black Man Rises*.⁵⁰

The spectacle is tautological, therefore; its means and ends are the same. Knitted into the fabric of professional sport as it is enacted in America, such a rite contributes to “an empire of modern passivity,” to borrow Debord’s exquisite description, an empire on which the symbolic sun never sets, basking as it does in the perpetual warmth of its own glory. “The real consumer thus becomes a consumer of illusion. The commodity is this illusion, which is in fact real, and the spectacle is its most general form,” as Debord describes it.⁵¹ It is in this context that Kaepernick’s symbolic rupture should be recognized as a threat, a recognition that might help to understand, but not excuse, the reactions it elicited from owners, presidents, and the “patriots” who turned off their NFL-showing televisions to the tune of 9.7 percent.

For the Pentagon, such spectacles are superior to propaganda in the way they subsume the means in being the ends. Propaganda is typically a narrative argument. Good narratives and strong arguments, then, are persuasive, meaning they have successfully engaged the audience or relevant publics. The spectacle “forgoes persuasion in favor of fostering disengagement,” according to Roger Stahl. “Whereas propaganda addresses an audience that matters, the spectacle presumes an audience that does not,” one that has been distanced even as it has been invited into what is an illusion of democracy, community, and unity; “propaganda seeks to answer the question of *why we fight*, the spectacle loses itself in the fact *that we fight*,” Stahl wrote in his book, *Militainment, Inc.*⁵² Consider the Carrier Classic, a July Fourth weekend baseball game played in the middle of Fort Bragg, N.C., and the Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl sponsored by a military hardware manufacturer and, since 2013, owned by ESPN. Media-sport’s production of military-themed spectacles has worked to normalize a culture of war and, perhaps more corrosively, to delimit democratic deliberation and expression, especially dissent. This perhaps explains why the same nation that cannot provide basic services to the people of Puerto Rico six months after Hurricane Maria slammed the island, the same nation with the highest infant mortality rate in the developed world, can still manage to spend more on defense -- \$611 billion in 2016 – than the next eight countries combined.⁵³

Conclusion

More than 100 NFL players took a knee in Week Three of the 2017 campaign. In the last week of the regular season, that number had dwindled to seven: Duane Brown, Marquise Goodwin, Eli

Harold, Louis Murphy, Eric Reid, Michael Kenny Stills, and Olivier Vernon. In Miami, where Stills took a knee alone, the game was preceded by a fighter jet flyover courtesy of the Homestead Air Reserve Base. A giant U.S. flag covered the Hard Rock Stadium's field as retired Air Force Sergeant Mark J. Lindquist sang the national anthem.⁵⁴ An \$89 million commitment from the NFL to go to social justice causes and organizations over the next seven seasons neutralized much of the Kaepernick-initiated protest, a donation negotiated without the participation of Kaepernick or any of the seven who remained on one knee at season's end.

For their part, Kaepernick and the kneelers vowed to press on, recognizing that effective protest is collective and contingent; success depends on what legendary organizer Ella Baker called "spade work." They will indeed need their shovels, because the machinery of spectacle built by the media-sport-military troika has by relentless acknowledgement created a new "normal" for what is deemed patriotic, even American, at least in ballparks and stadia and on the telecasts that connect their events to those watching at home. As Butterworth noted, this new or reconstituted "normal" is one "that absorbs the most conspicuous forms of nationalistic display" in such a way as to render the spectacle largely immune to rhetorical or symbolic challenge.⁵⁵ Kneeling, as standing, is a communicative, symbolic act, and as such, for efficacy, must be seen and noticed. As protest, it depends on being on camera, on being broadcast as part of the coverage, along with the giant flag, the jets, the eagle, and the color guard. It must be consumed.

These ceremonies and pageants of patriotism, as staged and produced by professional sports in full partnership with the networks that broadcast them, are so immune to symbolic challenge, however, that it became possible, perhaps even expected in some quarters, for the highest elected official of a presumably free country to demand that anyone refusing to participate in a ritual that may or may not belong at a professional sporting event be fired from their jobs and, therefore, lose their means of livelihood for silently exercising their First Amendment rights in drawing attention to the lack of accountability of law enforcement shooting and killing people of color in wildly disproportionate numbers. Censoring the symbolic speech of Kaepernick and the NFL's protesters, both as a prior restraint and as punishment, is a lesser evil for this elected official than is any interruption in a selectively patriotic NFL ritual inclusive of the players publicly since only 2009. This fetish for merely the symbols of democracy paired with hostility for those who attempt, even silently and respectfully, to put democratic ideals into practice represents a civic death at the hands of the "terministic screen," the spectacle that purports to celebrate and display something that looks like democratic unity while symbolically annihilating democratic expression.⁵⁶ That the call to fire such otherwise patriotic Americans was so favored, cited by many as inspiration to turn off their NFL-showing TVs, demonstrates the danger of relying so heavily on symbols and replacing with them meaningful conversation about what those symbols should represent.

¹ Ted Johnson, "Trump Calls for NFL Boycott in Continued Criticism of Anthem Protests," *Variety*, 24 September 2017, available: <http://variety.com/2017/politics/news/trump-nfl-boycott-1202569237/>. Accessed 20 February 2018. In 1943, the United States Supreme Court, in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, held that a compulsory flag salute in a public school is unconstitutional under the First Amendment, noting that "if there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein" (in Samantha Barbas, *Laws of Image: Privacy and Publicity in America* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Law

Books, 2015], 125-6). For 2009 as the start of players publicly participating in the playing of the anthem, see Tom E. Curran, "NFL Teams Being on the Field for Anthem Is a Relatively New Practice," NBC Sports, 29 April 2016, available: <http://www.nbc.com/boston/new-england-patriots/nfl-teams-being-field-anthem-relatively-new-practice>. Accessed 23 February 2018.

² Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992, a revision of the original published in 1961), 5.

³ Gaye Tuchman, "The symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media," in *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*, eds. G. Tuchman, A. K. Daniels, and J. Benet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁴ Louis Jacobson, "A Short History of the National Anthem, Protests and the NFL," Politifact.com, 25 September 2017, available: <http://politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2017/sep/25/short-history-national-anthem-and-sports>. Accessed 23 February 2018.

⁵ Jackie Robinson and Alfred Duckett, *I Never Had It Made* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), 9.

⁶ Urla Hill, "Racing After Smith and Carlos: Revisiting Those Fists Some Forty Years Hence," in *Reconstructing Fame: Sport, Race, and Evolving Reputations*, eds. David C. Ogden and Joel Nathan Rosen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 104.

⁷ Hill, "Racing After Smith and Carlos," 114.

⁸ Bill Pennington, "Player's Protest Over the Flag Divides Fans," *New York Times*, 26 February 2003, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/26/sports/college-basketball-player-s-protest-over-the-flag-divides-fans.html>. Accessed 23 February 2018.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Julie Craven, "More Than 250 Black People Were Killed By Police in 2016," *Huffington Post*, 1 January 2017, available: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-people-killed-by-police-america_us_577da633e4b0c590f7e7fb17. Accessed 6 February 2018.

¹¹ In Cindy Boyer, "Colin Kaepernick Reportedly Will Now Stand During the National Anthem," *Washington Post*, 2 March 2017, available https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2017/03/02/colin-kaepernick-reportedly-will-now-stand-during-the-national-anthem/?utm_term=.04e5d3b955c4. Accessed 5 February 2018.

¹² Will Brinson, "Here's How Nate Boyer Got Colin Kaepernick to Go from Sitting to Kneeling," CBS Sports, 27 September 2016, available: <https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/heres-how-nate-boyer-got-colin-kaepernick-to-go-from-sitting-to-kneeling/>. Accessed 20 February 2018.

¹³ Eric Reid, "Why Colin Kaepernick and I Decided to Take a Knee," *New York Times* (25 September 2017), available <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/25/opinion/colin-kaepernick-football-protests.html>. Accessed 5 February 2018.

¹⁴ Hill, "Racing After Smith and Carlos," 102.

¹⁵ Ken Belson, "Texans Talked Walkout Over Owner's 'Inmates' Remark," *New York Times*, 27 October 2017, available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/sports/football/bob-mcnair-texans.html>. Accessed 20 February 2018.

¹⁶ Gwen Knapp, "Bullheaded Decision by Hall President," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 April 2003, B2.

¹⁷ In Michael Butterworth, "Ritual in the 'Church of Baseball': Suppressing Discourse of Democracy after 9/11," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (June 2005): 121.

¹⁸ John Branch, "The Year's Biggest Sports Story, All but Forgotten," *New York Times*, 2 January 2018, B5.

¹⁹ Mark Maske, "Colin Kaepernick Files Grievance Accusing NFL Teams of Colluding Against Him," *The Washington Post*, 15 October 2017, available: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/sports/wp/2017/10/15/colin-kaepernick-makes-plans-to-pursue-collusion-case-against-nfl-owners/?utm_term=.7c5126567713. Accessed 20 February 2018.

²⁰ For a comparison of Kaepernick's statistics to other, employed quarterbacks, see Reuben Fischer-Baum, Neil Greenberg, and Mike Hume, "The Colin Kaepernick Tracker," *Washington Post*, 7 September 2017, available: https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/sports/kaepernick-tracker/?utm_term=.7b964f1ab0b9. Accessed 15 January 2018.

²¹ Darren Rovell, "NFL Television Ratings Down 9.7 Percent During 2017 Regular Season," ESPN, 4 January 2018, available: http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/21960086/nfl-television-ratings-97-percent-2017-regular-season. Accessed 20 February 2018.

²² Recalled is the intense criticism Minnesota Twins manager Ron Gardenhire faced when complaining in 2003 about the long interruption of play and, as a result, effects on his pitcher associated with the seventh inning-stretch performance of "God Bless America" by Ronan Tynan at Yankee Stadium, another American "hymn" woven into

the pageant of games by the Yankees since the 2001 season after the 9/11 attacks. Following the lengthy performance, the pitcher, Brad Radke, hit a batsman. See “Gardenhire Not a Fan of His Music,” Associated Press, October 2003, available: <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/oct/03/sports/sp-twinsyankeesnotes3>. Accessed 23 February 2018.

²³ David J. Leonard, “Curt Flood: ‘Death Is A Slave’s Freedom,’” in *Reconstructing Fame: Sport, Race, and Evoking Reputations*, eds. David C. Ogden and Joel Nathan Rosen (Jackson, Miss.: University of Mississippi Press, 2008), 39.

²⁴ Rebecca Kheel, “McCain, Flake Slam ‘Paid Patriotism’ at Sporting Events,” *The Hill*, 4 November 2015, available: <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/259120-mccain-flake-slam-so-called-paid-patriotism-at-sporting-events>. Accessed 21 February 2018.

²⁵ In 2011, ESPN and Morale Entertainment, a sports promotions company, joined to stage the “Carrier Classic,” opening the men’s college basketball season on Veterans Day by pitting North Carolina and Michigan State against each other on the deck of the U.S.S. Carl Vinson, the aircraft carrier charged with burying Osama bin Laden at sea (“Carrier Classic: UNC-Michigan State,” *Sports Illustrated*, 21 November 2011, available: <https://www.si.com/college-basketball/photos/2011/11/14carrier-classic-unc-michigan-state#1>. Accessed 24 February 2018). On July 3, 2016, Major League Baseball, the Pentagon, and ESPN partnered to produce the first regular-season game of a major professional sport to be played on an active military installation, bringing the Miami Marlins and the Atlanta Braves to Fort Bragg, N.C. in a temporary \$5 million facility built just for the occasion (Jay Jaffe, “Fort Bragg game a Success as Marlins Top Braves on Historic Night,” *Sports Illustrated*, 3 July 2016, available: <https://www.si.com/mlb/2016/07/03/miami-marlins-atlanta-braves-fort-bragg-game>. Accessed 24 February 2018).

²⁶ Howard Bryant, “When Leagues Pay for Patriotic Acts, Sports Fans Cover the Costs,” ABC.com, 27 November 2015, available: <http://abcnews.go.com/Sports/leagues-pay-patriotic-acts-sports-fans-cover-cost/story?id=35447340>. Accessed 6 February 2018.

²⁷ Keith Flamer, “A Bird’s-Eye View of Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta’s Epic Wonderplex,” *Forbes Magazine*, 30 August 2017, available: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/keithflamer/2017/08/30/a-birds-eye-view-of-mercedes-benz-stadium-atlantas-epic-nfl-wonderplex/#1312b5d2659d>. Accessed 24 February 2018.

²⁸ Darren Rovell, “Roger Goodell Offers to Return Money if Tributes Specifically Paid for by DOD,” ESPN, 4 November 2015, available: http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/14051326/nfl-audit-teams-marketing-contracts-patriotism-tributes. Accessed 6 February 2018.

²⁹ Bryant, “When Leagues Pay for Patriotic Acts, Sports Fans Cover the Costs.”

³⁰ Erik Brady, “Patriotism Boosts Pastime,” *USA Today*, 18 September 2001, C1.

³¹ Michael Obermaier, “Ballparks Full of Fans, Flags & Patriotism,” *New York Daily News*, 19 September 2001, 114.

³² Tom Haudricourt, “Patriots Come Out for Baseball,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 18 September 2001, C5.

³³ For the notion of broadcasters as clergy, and for so many other remarkable parallels linking professional sport spectatorship to religion, see Butterworth, “Ritual in the ‘Church of Baseball,’” 107-129.

³⁴ Derek Thompson, “Why NFL Ratings Are Plummeting: A Two-Part Theory,” *The Atlantic*, 1 February 2018, available: <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2018/02/super-bowl-nfl-ratings-decline/551861/>. Accessed 23 February 2018.

³⁵ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, from the original *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967), 44.

³⁶ Zach Schonbrun, “Fanatics, Maker of Sports Apparel, Thrives by Seizing the Moment,” *New York Times*, 20 November 2017, available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/20/business/fanatics-apparel.html>. Accessed 23 February 2018.

³⁷ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 45.

³⁸ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 12.

³⁹ G. Edward White, “The First Amendment Comes of Age: The Emergence of Free Speech in Twentieth Century America,” *Michigan Law Review* 95 (1996): 331. The case is *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943).

⁴⁰ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 13. Emphasis in the original.

⁴¹ David Rowe, *Sport, Culture, and the Media: The Unruly Trinity* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1999), 22.

⁴² Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 13.

⁴³ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1994), translated by Shiela Faria Glaser.

⁴⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation*, 28.

⁴⁵ Tyler Kepner, "At Yankee Stadium, Tributes and a Monument to Heroism," *New York Times*, 12 September 2002, D1, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/12/sports/baseball-at-yankee-stadium-tributes-and-a-monument-to-heroism.html>. Accessed 20 February 2018.

⁴⁶ Butterworth, "Ritual in the 'Church of Baseball,'" 117.

⁴⁷ Film maker Chris Marker smartly, wonderfully explores this paradox in his 1962 short film, *La Jetee*.

⁴⁸ See <http://mercedesbenzstadium.com/technology-video-displays/>. Accessed 24 February 2018.

⁴⁹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 14.

⁵⁰ This element of perceived danger is another echo of the 1968 Olympics. Carlos said in a 2001 article that it was the fist that scared people. "White folks would have forgiven the black socks, the silk scarf, the bowed head," he wrote. "But they saw that raised black fist and were afraid." In Hill, "Racing After Smith and Carlos," 104.

⁵¹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 32.

⁵² Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 31.

⁵³ Nan Tian, Aude Fleurant, Pieter D. Wezeman, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in World Military Expenditure," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2017, available: <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-world-military-expenditure-2016.pdf>. Accessed 24 February 2018.

⁵⁴ Natalie Weiner, "The NFL's Last Men Kneeling," *The Bleacher Report*, 3 January 2018, available: <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/2752195-the-nfls-last-men-kneeling>.

⁵⁵ Michael Butterworth, "Public Memorializing in the Stadium: Mediated Sport, the 10th Anniversary of 9/11, and the Illusion of Democracy," *Communication & Sport* 2, no. 3 (2014): 11.

⁵⁶ The term "terministic screen" from Butterworth, "Public Memorializing in the Stadium," 6.