

The Circus Is in Town

SPORT, CELEBRITY, AND SPECTACLE

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and Joel Nathan Rosen

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SYMBOLIC RUPTURE

"Take a Knee" and the NFL as Commodified Spectacle

BRIAN CARROLL

Something is seen not because it's visible: it's visible because it is seen.

DANIEL WALLACE, *MR. SEBASTIAN AND THE NEGRO MAGICIAN*

INTRODUCTION

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, white millionaires and billionaires, many of them pro football team owners and one of them the leader of the free world. When US president Donald J. Trump 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 pregame ritual in which they have been publicly included only since 2009, he shifted the debate away from anything related 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."

Such symbolic, quasi-religious displays, which rely on players as jingoistic props, support a highly militaristic brand of patriotism through 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 hypermilitaristic forms of national fealty, a program that depends upon and receives the cooperation of the networks and media outlets that "cover" these leagues and broadcast their games. 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 furnish their players with symbolic power to wield in disharmonious protest, as well. The fusing of professional and otherwise high-profile 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 camouflage at NFL.com/shop." It is likely no coincidence that such rhetorical strategies and communicative acts dominate national politics, as well.

This chapter explores the rhetorical strategies of symbolic patriotism as enacted by professional sports leagues, especially the National Football League and Major League Baseball, with the full participation and sponsorship of their media "partners." The media-sport-military triola 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

Although its lyrics date back to 1814, "The Star-Spangled Banner" became the nation's official anthem in 1931. And although 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:

"Take a Knee" and the NFL as Commodified Spectacle

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. [Branch] 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 US 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 US Olympic Committee 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 US national anthem was played, and wearing no shoes. They were subsequently thrown out of the Olympics by the IOC's president, Avery Brundage. Importantly, as Urrla Hill notes, 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 José State University in 2005 as well as a statue located in the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, in 2016.⁶

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' basketball game with Brigham Young, each student with one fist raised, the same Black Power salute employed by Smith and Carlos.⁷ Fast forward to 1991, when Chicago Bulls guard Craig Hodges was blackballed by the National Basketball Association for his protest of the Gulf War during the team's visit to the White House, or 1996 when the NBA suspended Denver Nuggets guard Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, formerly Chris

Jackson, for failing to participate in the national anthem, or 2003 when college basketball vilified Manhattanville Colleges' Toni Smith for turning her back on the American flag to protest the George W. 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*. "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 Also that year, Toronto Blue Jays first baseman Carlos Delgado, at the peak of his career, explained to the *Toronto Star* why he could not stand on the dugout steps for "God Bless America," telling that newspaper's readers, "I don't (stand) because I don't believe it's right. I don't believe in war."¹⁰

The "Take a Knee" movement, if a movement it was or is, began quietly on August 14, 2016, when then San Francisco 49ers 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.¹¹ "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."¹² 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 US soldiers take a knee in front of a fallen brother's gravesite to show respect, seemingly offering the 49ers quarterback symbolic cover.¹³ 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."¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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."¹⁶ 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 upon behavior at stadia that reflexively, unthinkingly endorses, embraces, and uncritically applauds the central role and prominence of the military in US 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."¹⁷ Filip Bondy wondered in the pages of the *New York Daily News* what an eagle trained to fly nowhere or merely 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."¹⁸

After being told by the 49ers after the 2016 season that he was going to be released, Kaepernick opted out of his contract on March 3, 2017, and became a free agent.¹⁹ By the end of the 2017 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.²⁰ 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 2017 lawsuit to be collusion on the part of NFL teams to keep him out of professional football.²¹ Once one of the best football players in the world, Kaepernick watched the 2017 season from home as forty other quarterbacks were taken off the unemployment rolls.²²

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 counterprotests by viewers disaffected with the Kaepernick-inspired protests.³² 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 have 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.³⁴ Kaepernick's employment status is perhaps evidence. David J. Leonard has called such treatment by the NFL and its more "patriotic" fans a form of "symbolic lynching."³⁵ In deploying players as props for its pageant of patriotism, the NFL risks 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.³⁶ In staging events and packaging games, the leagues since 9/11 have expanded the visual and symbolic vocabulary for this fusion of pro sports and nationalism to include fighter jet flyovers, field-sized US 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, baseball games played on aircraft carriers, and Major League Baseball played in the middle of Fort Bragg, North Carolina, on a field constructed just for the occasion.³⁷ As ESPN writer Howard Bryant puts it, patriotism in professional sports has devolved into what could be described as "a lucrative *Good Housekeeping* seal for marketers."³⁸ 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 the configuration of the stadia themselves, which can be considered billion-dollar television studios as much as playing fields and sporting arenas.³⁹

In exchange for subleasing 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, sports 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 and Flake's report disclosed contracts with nineteen NFL teams from 2012 to 2015 that totaled \$6.1 million in taxpayer money.⁴⁰ The Wisconsin National Guard 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 the billionaire founder of Home Depot, Arthur Blank, collected \$879,000 to produce and stage homecoming reunions at midfield before home games. The two Arizona senators proposed a bill to oppose this spending, saying that they believed such "paid patriotism" to be "morally fraudulent," trivializing military service by profiting off veterans and turning participating soldiers into mere marketing gimmicks.⁴¹ 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 is common at Pittsburgh Pirates games for Air Force Reserves to perform the anthem.⁴² At Cardinals games in St. Louis, firefighters unfurl 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."⁴³ For the anthem in Denver, on one occasion the Colorado Rockies executed a plan proposed by their owner, Jerry McMorris, to have Rockies and Arizona Diamondbacks players hold up a field-wide flag while fans waved their own personal US flags distributed at the turnstiles.⁴⁴ Public address announcers and TV and radio broadcasters serve as the rituals' unofficial clergy, reminding viewers and listeners to appreciate the sacrifices of those serving the country in the armed forces.⁴⁵ In approximating religious rite and ritualistic practice, these displays as symbols provide spectators

and participants with a ready-made accessibility and clarity, and, therefore, symbolic power.

IRRESISTIBLE STAGING

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-coproduced 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 since around the year 2000. 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*).³⁶ 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 Guy 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."³⁷

Among the more absurd of these indulgences or glorious tokens during the 2017 NFL 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 US 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 that he had walked down the tunnel and, because he had walked too far and therefore could be seen by the stadium and television audiences, 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 number 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."³⁸ Villanueva jersey sales skyrocketed, making number 78 the best-selling jersey in America, if for only part of one week, even though the micro-moment was only a pregame 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."³⁹

SPORT AS SPECTACLE

The leagues have embarked on what Debord might call "an immense accumulation of spectacles" and, therefore, as preferred by the former 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 approval 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 US Constitution.⁴⁰ In commenting on the Supreme Court case that rendered compelled participation in national flag salutes unconstitutional, historian G. Edward White writes 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."⁴¹ In the NFL's pregame 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 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: "[T]he 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."⁴²

Although 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."⁴³

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. Colin 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 lockstep fealty to flag and country, is "both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production," as Debord describes it,⁴⁴ and not something merely added to the experience of witnessing professional sporting events in the United States.

Standing for the national anthem isn't simply decorative, a sign of something else, but rather it has become an essential aspect of the hyperreal 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 come 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 hyperreal.

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 hyperreal.⁴⁵ 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) 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 Möbius 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 semisacred 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 hyperreal, the spectacle, "a frisson of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a frisson of simultaneous distancing and magnification," in Baudrillard's description.⁴⁶ To pick up the metaphorical snow globe 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 tears of inspiration (or sweat of having just warmed up) are seemingly shared, offering the appearance or seeming of intimacy that is of course simply an image. Less real and hyperreal, 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.⁴⁷ The nonsignifier, for example an eagle (or other 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 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 restart 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 [had] 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 [the batter, Yankees second baseman 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."⁴⁸

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 against a country that had nothing whatsoever to do with the 9/11 attacks.⁴⁹

A fresher example comes from Super Bowl LIII in February 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 hyperreal 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 *celebrified*, 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 hyperreal 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 were authentically seeking to connect with a fan while on the job of being an *übercelebrity* 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 close-up 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 vérité* or even something like communion that that moment promises.⁵⁰ 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 transcendently "real," choreographed and coproduced to become spectacle, or part of the larger spectacle saying plainly:

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 snow-globe world, reality, whatever it might be, and the representation and projection of that reality cannot be parsed or distinguished. Considering here Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz "wonderplex," which opened in 2017 and proudly boasts on its website two thousand screens,⁵¹ 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.⁵² 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.⁵³

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.⁵⁴ It is in this context that Kaepernick's symbolic rupture should be recognized as a threat, a recognition that might help us understand, but not excuse, the reactions it elicited from owners, presidents, and the "patriots" who turned off their 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 "forgets 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.*⁵⁵ Consider the aforementioned Carrier Classic basketball game played on the deck of the USS *Carl Vinson*; the July Fourth weekend baseball game in 2016 played in the middle of Fort Bragg, North Carolina; college football's Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl sponsored by a military hardware manufacturer and, since 2013, owned by ESPN; and ESPN's flagship program, *Sports Center*, broadcasting from what resembled a machine gunner's nest on location at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait in 2004, the set designed by the US military replete with camouflage netting and an anchor's desk made of sandbags. ESPN is of course owned by Disney, which hired Rush Limbaugh to do color commentary for *Monday Night Football* but would not distribute or air Michael Moore's documentary film *Fahrenheit 9/11* because it was "too political."⁵⁶

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 nation that is still trying to figure out how best to serve the people of Puerto Rico following the devastation wrought when Hurricane Maria slammed into the island in September 2017, or the nation with the highest infant mortality rate in the developed world, can still manage to spend more on defense—\$750 billion in 2020—than the next eight countries combined.⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

More than one hundred 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, 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 US flag covered the Hard Rock Stadium field as retired Air Force Sergeant Mark J. Lindquist sang the national anthem.⁵⁸ An \$89 million commitment from the NFL earmarked for social justice causes and organizations over the ensuing 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 seasons end.

For their part, Kaepernick and the kneelers vowed to press on, recognizing that effective protest is collective and contingent; success depends upon 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 acknowledgment 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 notes, this new or reconstituted normal "absorbs the most conspicuous forms of nationalistic display" in such a way as to render the spectacle largely immune to rhetorical or symbolic challenge.⁵⁹ Kneeling, as standing, is a communicative, symbolic act, and as such, for efficacy, it 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, jets, eagles, and requisite color guard. It must be consumed.

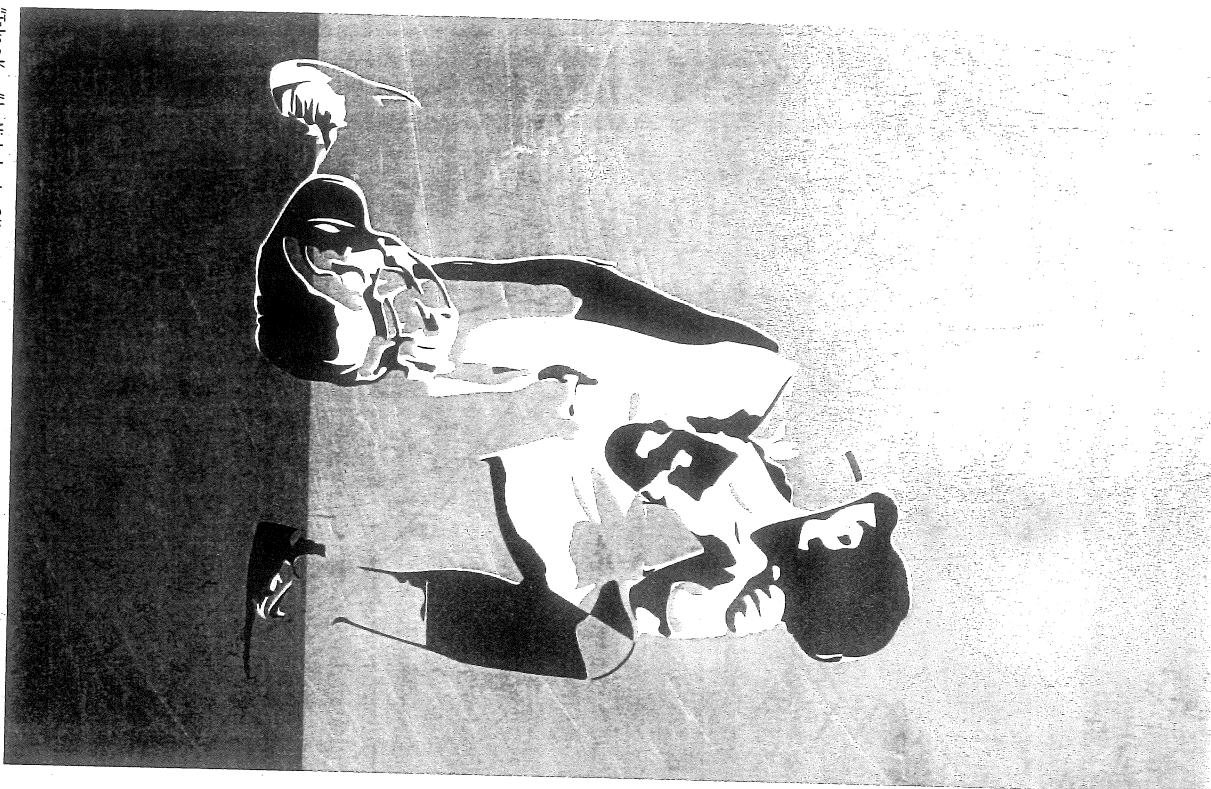
These ceremonies and pageants of patriotism, as staged and produced by professional sports in full partnership with the networks that broadcast them, are so immune to symbolic challenge, however, that it became possible, perhaps even expected in some quarters, for the highest elected official of a presumably free country to demand that those 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 in 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 toward those who attempt, even silently and respectfully, to put democratic ideals into practice represent 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.⁶⁰ That the call to fire such otherwise patriotic Americans was so favored, cited by many as inspiration to turn off their TVs, demonstrates the dangers even to a society of relying so heavily on symbols and allowing the signifiers to replace that which is signified, in this instance meaningful conversation about social justice in "the land of the free."

POSTSCRIPT

Returning the national conversation to the topics of police brutality, oppression against Black Americans, and "lynching" were, in short succession, the deaths of Breonna Taylor (Louisville, Kentucky), Ahmaud Arbery (Glynn County, Georgia), and George Floyd (Minneapolis, Minnesota).⁶¹ The country convulsed in protest and even riots. Confederate monuments symbolic of a time when white society was nearly united in its subjugation of Blacks were removed from public spaces. Sadly, nearly three years after Colin Kaepernick's pregame displays of courage addressing these very wrongs, those who seek justice through even peaceful protest continued to be demonized, attacked, and victimized by fellow Americans, including many with badges and guns, tasers and tear gas, helicopters and pepper spray. Yes, the relevance, validity, and urgency of the movement Kaepernick helped to reinvigorate have been recognized, but state violence against Black people remains largely unchecked. Clearly, however, this is much, much larger than professional sports.

The journey toward justice and, therefore, away from the cultivated ignorance of white supremacy presupposes a reasonable conversation about structural racism and prejudiced systems that treat black bodies as the enemy, including the signs and symbols of this racism. This journey is made all the more complicated by the exclusionary, nationalistic false "patriotism" produced by the big professional sports leagues and enacted as part of the pageantry of their games. America's pro sports as spectacles, like America's policing, would seem urgently to need a reimagining, including a reconsideration not only of *how*, but *why*. NASCAR made an important first move by removing the Confederate battle flag from its events, a response to the principled stand of its only Black driver, Darrell "Bubba" Wallace. Nike joined a wave of American companies making Juneteenth an official paid holiday. And NFL commissioner Roger Goodell attempted to apologize for the league's failure to support players who protested police violence, although he



"Take a Knee" by Nicholas Jay D'Acquisio

managed to cause additional furor by not specifically mentioning Kaepernick by name in his prerecorded remarks.⁶²

However, as if to underline the dangers of relying so heavily on symbols rather than embarking on that reasonable conversation, American political tribalism turned the seemingly basic first step toward safeguarding public health during a pandemic of wearing a mask into a referendum on something some called "liberty." Foregoing or even banning the wearing of masks, even in the rare instance in which they might have been worn to symbolize liberalism or whatever, which, as when kneeling during an anthem, would be lawfully protected expression, instead became symbols of "freedom" and "acts" of safeguarding liberty. This symbolic annihilation occurred despite the ironic fact that masks do not protect primarily the wearers but those in the vicinity of the wearers. Society would seem to need social distancing from its symbols, if for no other reason than in backing up and away, society might just bump into the false logic that produced those symbols in the first place.

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