Narrative Assembly and the NFL Anthem Protest Controversy

by

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Abstract

By "taking a knee" during the performance of the U.S. national anthem, National Football League (NFL) players have been protesting "the oppression of people of colour and ongoing issues with police brutality" in America (Colin Kaepernick, the movement's founder, quoted in Coombs et. al., 2017). Despite this clarity of intention, the *meaning* of these protests (whether they are necessary and patriotic or counterproductive and 'un-American', for example) has been hotly contested in the public sphere, indicating the presence of a deeply seated counter-hegemonic struggle that is both expressed and contributed to by the anthem protest discourse.

This project explores this struggle through the lens of *narrative assembly*, or the individual and intertextual construction of meaning through the selection and arrangement of narrative objects. Special attention is paid to the treatment of social, symbolic, and normative *boundaries* by storytellers responding to the anthem protest and by the anthem protesters themselves, especially those related to political expression in professional sports, American national and racial identity, and racial exclusion and marginalization.

The project utilizes a structural approach to narrative analysis called the Qualitative Narrative Policy Framework (QNPF) supplemented by insights from Arthur Frank's (2010) method of Dialogical Narrative Analysis (DNA). These methods are applied in a sociological study of a segment of the NFL anthem protest discourse published in newspaper articles during the first 16 months following the start of the controversy. This sample captures narrative responses to three significant moments—Kaepernick's initiation of the protest, U.S. president Donald Trump's verbal attack on protesting players in speeches and over social media (which also resulted in mass-displays of unified resistance from NFL players), and Kaepernick's failure to obtain an NFL contract the year following his protest.

Findings indicate that by transgressing several normative boundaries related to work, sports, protest, and signalling patriotism, NFL anthem protest subverts a hegemonic tale of national unity and exposes the systemic discrimination and symbolic/social exclusion that continue to produce experiences of oppression for people of colour and others in the United States. By attending to their assembly of settings, characters, plotlines, memories, solutions, and moral lessons, authors that support the protests are shown forming an intertextual or collective narrative around a central demand for justice that challenges the American status quo and projects a preferred future of enhanced racial equality yet to be achieved by the nation. Alternately, authors who oppose the protests are observed assembling a collective narrative around a demand for respect that defends boundaries essential to the maintenance of the status quo and expresses a desire to return to a past America of uninterrupted white dominance.

In addition to providing a detailed case study that focuses on processes of narrative assembly in relation to counter-hegemony and social, symbolic, and normative boundaries, the project serves as an example of how the emergent methodology of the QNPF can be applied to the study of dynamic instances of everyday cultural-political struggle that may fall outside the sphere of policy research in which it has typically been employed.

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Dedication

For my dad, Steve, who shared with me a love of stories, sports, and questions: about why things are the way they are and how they might be instead.

Acknowledgements

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The Struggle over Meaning: Battle Lines in the NFL Anthem Protest Controversy

Stories, effective stories, perform themselves into the material world—yes, in the form of social relations, but also in the form of machines, architectural arrangements, bodies, and all the rest. This means that one way of imaging the world is that it is a set of (pretty disorderly) stories that intersect and interfere with one another. – John Law, 2010, p. 2

Beginning in the summer of 2016 and continuing at the time of this writing, some National Football League (NFL) players have been "taking a knee" during ritual performances of the U.S. national anthem to protest racial injustice and systemic oppression in America. Colin Kaepernick, then-quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers, initiated the movement at the outset of NFL preseason just over a month after two black men, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, were shot and killed by police in separate incidents just one day apart. The deaths were the latest in a series of such tragedies, many of which were captured on mobile recording devices, that saw white police officers using deadly and excessive force against a person of colour (often a young, black male) and facing no culpability for their actions.[1] Kaepernick attributed his decision to protest during the national anthem to "the oppression of people of colour and ongoing issues with police brutality" (Coombs et. al., 2017), and went on to state that, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses people of colour. To me, this

[1] Notable instances of police violence against people of colour that could have informed Kaepernick's decision to protest include the shooting of Michael Brown, which sparked massive and sustained civil unrest in Ferguson Missouri in 2014/2015, and the high-profile deaths of Trayvon Martin (2012), Eric Garner (2014), Tamir Rice (2014), among many others (blackpast.org). These incidents spawned or were subject to protest through the Black Lives Matter movement, which was founded by Alecia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in 2013 to combat issues of police brutality and continues to exist in solidarity with the NFL anthem protest movement.

is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and [get] away with murder" (quoted by Steve Wyche, 2016). He took a knee during the performance of the anthem before every game of the 2016/2017 season, and was soon joined by teammates and then other players throughout the NFL. Before long, what started as a one-man protest had grown into a full-blown national and international movement.[2] Somewhat (although perhaps not)[3] surprisingly due to his age (29 at the time), accomplishments, and stature in the league, Kaepernick was unable to secure a contract to play the following year and remains on the outside of the league looking in three years later.

The first two times Kaepernick protested during the customary pre-game performance of The Star Spangled Banner it went completely unnoticed (Sandritter, 2017). It wasn't until two weeks later, when 49ers media personnel unknowingly posted a

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[2] According to research conducted by ThinkProgress, an American news website, public policy research centre, and advocacy organization, more than 3,500 individuals joined the anthem protest movement between September 1st, 2016 (when Kaepernick was first joined by teammate Eric Reid) and September 26th, 2017 (Gibbs, 2017). Evidence was found of more than 200 isolated protests during this period in 41 states and four countries. While the researchers fail to specify the non-American nations, they are gathered to be Canada (Gill, 2016), England (Graham & Pengelly, 2017), and Germany (The Associated Press, 2017). 50 American colleges and 68 high schools were also found to have had some form of anthem protest activity in an athletic setting, which can involve kneeling, sitting, raising a fist, locking arms with teammates and/or coaches, walking off the playing surface just before or during the anthem, or remaining out of public view during its performance. School band-members, cheerleaders, anthem performers, and students, in addition to athletes, have all participated in the protests, and famous musicians such as Eddie Vedder, Roger Waters, Dave Matthews, and Pharrell Williams have taken a knee on stage in solidarity with the movement (Kreps, 2017). The phenomenon has been observed in professional North American soccer (Schmidt et al., 2018), basketball (theisen, 2017), hockey (Smith & Times Staff Writer, 2017), and baseball (Madani, 2017) leagues. The peak of the protests in the NFL was likely September 24, 2017, when, in response to criticism from U.S. President Donald Trump, an estimated 204 players either sat or knelt during the anthem ("NFL player protests sweep league," 2017). While data on the spread of the anthem protests in more recent years is lacking, at least three NFL players continue to take a knee at the time of this writing (Axson, 2019; King, 2019; Morgan-Smith, 2019) and the movement continues to surface in unexpected places internationally, such as the Pan-American Games most recently (de la Garza, 2019).

[3] Kaepernick and his representatives have maintained that he was blackballed from the league for his role in spawning the NFL anthem protest movement. This allegation appears substantiated based on the NFL's recent settlement of a collusion grievance filed against them by Kaepernick and his most consistent ally, former teammate and current player Eric Reid, who also faced difficulties finding a job after occupying a vocal role in the protest movement (Zirin, 2019).

photo of Kaepernick on the social media platform Twitter and it was later enlarged and commented on by a local sports reporter (Matt Barrows, *Sacramento Bee*), that the protest set off a powder keg of responses—plenty supportive, and plenty condemnatory as well. After this game, Kaepernick changed his method of protest from sitting to kneeling in response to the criticism that his protest was anti-military, thus giving rise to the taking-a-knee phenomenon as we know it today (Fucillo, 2016).

I tell the story of the movement's somewhat stilted and inauspicious beginning—lacking any definite unveiling and undergoing a fundamental shift in method early on—to underline the fluidity of *meaning* that is central to the controversy and this research. For a brief moment, before Kaepernick's decision was turned this way and that by the overwhelming forces of sports and news media, who shook meaning from every orifice and wrote it into the margins until the event grew to gigantic proportions, any who noticed Kaepernick sitting or kneeling may have thought that it was significant—that it meant *something*, but what that *was* remained up in the air, or in other words, more completely up to the observer. This opening of interpretive freedom didn't last. Kaepernick himself, team owners and their representatives, advertisers, activist groups, media talking heads, members of the general public, and the soon-to-be President of the United States all quickly jumped into the discursive fray, eager to make sense of and exert their explanatory agency over the anthem protests. To do this they had to encapsulate them within stories.

As "storytelling animals" (Jones et. al. 2014, p. 1), humans rely on stories as models through which we interpret experience and communicate this understanding to others (Wayne Booth, cited in Frank, 2010). They allow us to extrapolate generalized

meaning (such as a nation's overall moral decline or racial division) from specific events (such as the anthem protests), moving "from the particular to the more general pattern it reveals" (Mayer, 2014, p. 71). But storytelling never takes place outside of relations of power and intersecting historical currents of culture and politics. As James Cairns and Susan Ferguson have put it (2012, p. 221), "stories are always embodied and embedded in a contested and unequal social whole". Storytellers always speak from relative positions of power, and some stories are told in the interest of reinforcing the existing arrangement of influence and inequality while others reveal the hidden relations that prop up this arrangement and subvert it by lending voice to the excluded.[4]

The project communicated here considers the NFL anthem protests as a *narrative battleground* where the meaning of a series of replicating events centring on a single, unifying act of dissent (anthem protest) is struggled over by diverse interests engaged in what Gubrium and Holstein have called "the continuing work of storying everyday life" (2009, p. 39). Far from indicating a simple error in 'messaging'[5] or basic liberal/conservative hard-headedness, the vitriolic debate that has swirled around these anthem protests and chasm that persists between supporters and detractors reveals a particularly contentious ideological battle, where parties wage narrative war over the perpetuation or potential dissolution of the status quo.

Integral both to the habit of storying life and to this particular struggle over meaning, which is entangled with practices of ongoing racial oppression in the United

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[4] These two types of story are called "hegemonic tales" and "subversive stories" by Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey (1995), and receive further discussion in Chapter 1: Literature Review.

[5] In his famous article *Encoding/decoding*, Stuart Hall (1980, p. 137) attributes "so-called 'misunderstandings'" to "contradictions and disjunctures between hegemonic-dominant encodings and negotiated-corporate decodings", or, in simpler terms, "mismatches" in the ideological positions from which one person speaks and another listens.

States and the prospects of meaningful liberation, is the process of narrative assembly. Stories are built out of narrative objects or resources furnished by our own lifeworlds, and are therefore essential for living our everyday lives—they organize attention and thereby 'make sense' of what William James once referred to as the "blooming, buzzing confusion" of opaque reality (cited by Frank, 2010, p. 48). But this assembling process (or reassembling, as the term often appears in the literature—Latour, 2005; Frank, 2010) is also necessary for challenging or defending the social reality we perceive and are a part of. Further, assembly is not only the domain of storytellers who select and arrange characters, ideas, moral valuations, events, discourses, and so on towards particular ends. Story listeners also assemble their own worldviews, not only from the raw materials of life but also out of the plethora of narratives that they receive daily (in conversation, news stories, advertisements, emails, television, social media, and onward ad infinitum). And, of course, there is no separation between storytellers and story listeners. While some individuals have a 'bigger platform' for projecting their narratives (like the president of the United States and to a lesser extent professional athletes), we are all both.

As the fundamental mode of combat in the struggle over meaning, narrative assembly guides this project in two ways. First, in the basic, storytelling sense just described, I attend to differences and similarities in the way individuals—or authors, as I call them in the substantive portion of this work—assemble narratives about the NFL anthem protests based on their evaluation of them (whether they are For or Against Protesting Athletes). By studying a sample of 75 randomly selected newspaper articles published in the first 16 months after Kaepernick's initial protest—25 conveying approval of the anthem protests, 25 conveying disapproval, and 25 offering a neutral

stance—I find that authors appropriate and deploy a number narrative objects common to the discourse (such as the NFL, Kaepernick, the U.S. flag, or the anthem), as well as some that are distinct to their particular evaluative position (such as the economy for those Against the protests, or the civil rights movement for those who are For them). In order to support their personal position, if one is presented, individual authors must assemble narratives that situate the anthem protests within a set of relations, which, when the articles are taken as a whole, form a complex web of connections involving many objects with a deep significance to American history and national/racial identity, including the Vietnam war, 9/11, and slavery.

The second way in which narrative assembly guides this project can be understood in relation to the mode of assembly I have associated with the listener or audience side of communication, which I call intertextual narrative assembly. In casting a broad narrative net[6] and observing similarities and differences within and across the For and Against Protesting Athletes subsamples through a structural methodology called the Qualitative Narrative Policy Framework, I am able to hear and describe (or assemble) the articles as composite or collective stories that reveal particular ideological positions and worldviews held in common. The examination of particular types of narrative assembly help to reveal these positions, such as the assembly of particular characters and character schemas, recurring plotlines, associative contexts or settings, collective memories, solutions, and visions of preferred futures. I take up these types of assembly, most of

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[6] Taking in more stories about a subject or object in order to tell a more nuanced story about it oneself is one way of understanding what all researchers do.

which correspond to the core narrative elements identified in my methodology, in Part II of this thesis.

While in actuality the process of assembly is the same for the authors studied and myself—both they and I construct our own story out of the objects furnished by many others—increasing the scale and rigour of my narrative intake allows me to apprehend the counter-hegemonic struggle animating this controversy with some enhanced clarity. Because humans rely on stories for understanding and communicating lived reality, narrative analysis offers access to the broader, intersubjective mode of narrative assembly—where compatible stories congeal to form ideologies, and these ideologies are contested through the mobilization of more stories. The project is motivated by an interest in this somewhat abstract process of intertextual narrative assembly, but also by a desire to explore the transformative potential of the particular case of the anthem protests.[7] As an emergent and creative form of resistance to the established order that intersects with both racial and class politics (among other fields), I view this phenomenon as a "critical juncture" (Hackett & Carroll, 2006) in Western cultural politics capable of shifting the landscape and fortunes of ongoing struggles for racial justice.

In asking how stories are assembled in the service of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic projects in the context of this controversy, or those aimed at securing consent for or destabilizing the status quo, I arrived repeatedly at the binary notion of boundary transgression and boundary maintenance or defense. According to socio-narratologist

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[7] Broadly, this project is situated within an ongoing exploration of the narrative fabric of social reality—how the narrative form shapes human experiences of culture and politics, how pervasive stories coalesce into ideologies and act to inhibit or enable human activity, and how transgressive acts come up against and sometimes shift the boundaries of a living narrative structure that is coterminous with the extra-discursive.

Arthur Frank (2010, p. 70), who serves as a primary figure in this research and is quoted in the epigraphs that begin each chapter of Part II, stories are "boundary creators", as well as resources for navigating them: "to be human is to confront a sequence of questions throughout a life, of which boundaries to respect, which to cross, and how to know the rules of crossing. Stories create the boundaries, yet they also are humans' companions in living with—though not necessarily within—these boundaries."

The boundary most evidently transgressed in the anthem protest controversy is that between *sports and politics*, which is generally treated as if it were universal by those who control the sports industry and fans alike but is only enforced in cases of progressive politics such as the anthem protests, as will be shown. The *normative boundaries* that dictate 'appropriate' or authorized workplace behaviour, conduct during the anthem, and modes of political activism intersect with this first boundary and also central to the controversy. Anthem protesters perform[8] the crossing of these lines of convention by failing to conform to their employers' expectations in the workplace, protesting in an unconventional or unapproved fashion, and abstaining from the tradition of signalling nationalistic pride through displays of respectful acquiescence while the anthem is being played in one's vicinity.

Two other boundaries can be found at the heart of the controversy and are understood as both motivating and (to a degree) being successfully exposed by the NFL

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[8] The interdisciplinary field of performance studies has a rich tradition in sociology and some direct relevance for this study, as spectator sports, national anthems, public protest, and storytelling are all inherently and overtly performative. While narrative assembly, not the broader paradigm of performance, was chosen as the unifying concept for this project, several canonical figures in performance studies—namely Irving Goffman and J.L. Austin—inform Arthur Frank's (2010) theory of socio-narratology, which provides the primary language through which storytelling (of both a verbal and action-based nature) is discussed. The contributions of these authors are taken up briefly in Chapter 1: Literature Review (page 13-14).

anthem protests. The first is the *symbolic boundary of national and racial identity* that encompasses and defines the unified American Self or majority, and the second is the *social boundary of racial exclusion* that becomes manifest through the embedding of symbolic boundaries of racial difference in judiciary and law enforcement systems (among others), as well as the mainstream national discourse around collective interests and priorities. While the discourse of national unity represented by the flag and anthem suggests that all American races and creeds are equally a part of the national collective, racialized acts of violence and the storytelling practices that bring them attention (like the anthem protests) shatter this image and illuminate the stratified character of the nation. By refusing to "stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses people of colour" (Kaepernick, quoted by Steve Wyche, 2016), protesting football players transgress normative boundaries in order to reveal these underlying symbolic and social racial-boundaries that are persistently covered up by hegemonic national discourses. This project finds authors who assemble supportive narrative accounts of the anthem protests to be primarily allied with projects of counter-hegemony that challenge the (white, hetero-patriarchal, capitalist) dominant order, while the opposite is found to be true for those who oppose them.

Part I – Literature Review and Methodology

Chapter 1: Literature Review

My presentation of relevant literature is divided into two main sections. The first section centres on stories—their roles both in organizing everyday experience and political controversy, their core function of assembly or reassembly, their relation to boundaries, and to hegemony and counter-hegemony. Following this introduction to my narrative perspective I move the discussion to the realm of sports. After a brief introduction to the concept of the "anthem space" (Zirin, 2017b), I present the boundaries identified as central to the anthem protest controversy and to sports in general. These boundaries are discussed in two subsections. The first explores the sports/politics boundary through the lens of class, while the second focuses specifically on racial boundaries in sports. Both sports subsections trace historical patterns of boundary crossing and boundary maintenance.

Narrative Assembly, Hegemony, and Boundaries

Frederick Mayer (2014, p. viii) calls storytelling "the lifeblood of politics", and claims that "it is in large-scale collective action—protests, rallies, elections, and social movements—that stories are most prominent." This certainly bears out in the narrative-rich case of the NFL anthem protest controversy, where everyone involved seems to be pushing at least one narrative, and usually several. Protesting athletes tell a story of civil resistance to racial oppression, both through the symbolic gesture of taking a knee and in their own words, conveyed through the media. The NFL tells a story that walks a

tightrope between supporting the players who produce their product and 'meaning no disrespect' to the veterans, soldiers, and military supporters who are their customers. Through his Twitter account and on the campaign trail Donald Trump dispenses narratives about total disrespect and lack of gratitude that warrant immediate firing. Yet this ubiquity extends far beyond moments of political strife. Stories are part of our social fabric and therefore intimately familiar; it is only the shared stakes and heightened social awareness that surround political controversy that lift certain narratives from their deeply embedded stations between and within us and staple them to the wall for all to see.

As mentioned in the introduction above, I conceive of stories as influential models of understanding and communication. Through their distinct capacity for "expressing ambiguity, particularity, and complexity" (Ewick and Silbey, 1995, p. 205), stories act as "a grid through which we read the world" (Pierre Bayard, cited in Frank, 2010). Not only mediating between humans and their reality, however, stories also produce it. As Frank teaches, stories are always performative. They "*enact* truths", in that "something original comes to be, as if for the first time, in the full significance that the story gives it" (Frank, 2010, p. 40). This is what I mean when I refer to them as models—each story constructs its own storyworld analogous to the intersubjective 'real' world.[9] In selecting and assembling narrative objects into a unified or closed whole, storytellers produce windows into particularly formulated realities (or formulated realities of particulars). It is because no story has an ultimate claim to truth, universal meaning, or 'pure' reality that controversial events such as the NFL anthem protests become narrative

[9] At the risk of confusion: I view intersubjective reality as composed of many individual storyworlds, in addition, of course, to people, materials, systems, and so on, which are perpetually bumping into, amalgamating, overlaying, and bypassing one another in a messy scene of narrative interaction.

battlegrounds where stories are strategically assembled and deployed to achieve maximal definitional control. In assembling multiple corroborating stories into collective or composite ones, I also refer to generalized storyworlds built out of common narrative objects and materials.

The complex relationship between stories, truth, and reality can be teased out somewhat through a brief foray into the field of performance studies.[10] Frank gleans his notion that stories and storytelling are performative from the philosopher of language J.L. Austin, who was one of the first to observe that language is an *activity* as much as it is a code used for representation of other things. As he put it in 1962 (p. 12, emphasis in original), "to say something *is to do something*".[11] Because sentences *do* what they *say*, "the truth or falsity of a statement depends not merely on the meaning of words but on what act you were performing in what circumstances" (Austin, 1962, p. 145).

The location of truth or meaning in the broader context in which language is used, as opposed to within language itself, also appears in the work of Erving Goffman. In his famous work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1956/2013, p. 256-257) suggests that the generalized objective of any social encounter is "the maintenance of a single definition of the situation", and that one's 'self', in terms of being a "character" one performs, results "from the whole scene of his action … interpretable by

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[10] For a more complete picture of the field of performance studies free of the narrative-centric perspective conveyed here, the reader should consult other key titles such as Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2013), Victor Turner's *An Anthropology of Performance* (1988), Irving Goffman's *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face to Face Behavior*, and Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997).

[11] In illustrating the performativity of language, Austin highlights sentences through which a broadly recognizable action comes to pass simply by the words being spoken, such as the making of a promise, a bet, or a threat, however his work suggests that any use of language (including storytelling) is performative, in that it produces something new or original just by being used—itself (Frank, 2010, p. 200).

witnesses." As "socialized characters", then, we act with the awareness that our actions define us in the (narrativizing) eyes of those we interact with, but the source of this definition is not limited to these actions; "it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented," meaning that there are always other factors (characters, settings, plots, and props, for instance) involved (Goffman, 1956/2013, p. 256). Further, in understanding that the definition of 'what is happening' in our social interactions is "of collaborative manufacture", in that it lies beyond our own, or any other individual's solitary control, we are driven to sustain mutually reinforcing interpretations—in narrative terms, multiple stories with enough structural similarity to be recognizable as communicating the same events—lest the whole scene should break down in confusion (Goffman, 1956/2014, p. 256). In this sense, single stories perform the truth of their own storyworld (it really exists because it's there in the story), but corroborating stories perform intersubjective truth by aligning and amalgamating multiple storyworlds.[12]

In addition to performing truth, stories also perform work. Unlike a metaphor or analogy, according to Donna Haraway (2016, p. 63), "a model is a work object … a model is worked, and it does work." Gubrium and Holstien (2009, p. 39) also view stories as occupying a working role, noting that "the term work suggests that someone or other actively orients to a task; narrative work is purposeful effort". The work focused on in this project is that of narrative assembly—I observe stories told about the anthem

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[12] The stories that are most successful at staking a claim to intersubjective truth—for instance, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution—are compatible and become integrated with so many others—in this case, much of modern biology, for starters—that they cease to be considered stories at all and instead become what we call *reality*. The recent phenomenon of flat-Earth theory, as well as the historical transition from a popular belief that the Earth was flat to one in which it was round, both illustrate the process by which a formerly dominant story loses some hold over intersubjective truth and becomes 'just a story' to non-believers.

protests being put to the task of constructing contextual backdrops in front of which meaning can take shape, manufacturing characters and character schemas governed by causal relations that allocate blame and praise, erecting moral lessons that configure visions of the future, and so on. This assembly work is performed by individual authors and also occurs across texts with similar evaluative orientations, although this intertextual assembly depends on the "interpretive practices" of the listener (in this case me) (Smith, 1990, p. 91).[13]

Bruno Latour (2005) deploys the term "reassembly" as a general descriptor for social science's task of reconstructing "the social", which he imagines not as any stable or homogenous entity but rather that collection of processes, practices, and relations that connect people and coordinate actions. Building on Latour, Frank identifies storytelling (a social practice) as essential for the ongoing work of "creating the social" through reassembly (2010, p. 15). By telling stories "about lives that are always in progress, using whatever narrative components are at hand", people inject into the social that most central narrative attribute: meaning.

Narrative reassembly can perhaps most easily be understood in the case of memory, which some consider "less an act of recall than an act of reconstruction" (Mayer, 2014, p. 68). Frank describes stories as doing "the ongoing work of enacting or performing memory", and emphasizes that, "what is reassembled is never exactly what was, but always a slightly changed version" (Frank, 2010, p. 83). I may retell the 'same' story a thousand times, but its parts will always be arranged slightly differently and told

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[13] My understanding of intertextual narrative assembly is informed by Dorothy Smith's notion of the "active text" (1990, p. 90-92). Smith understands texts as "constituents of social relations" that organize certain courses of human action, even as they depend on the "interpretive practices of the reader to become operational. The reader "activates" a text, "but the structuring effect is its own."

in response to new circumstances and requirements. This is true even when simply recalling something to oneself, as there is no access to memories outside of stories; they can only be expressed through the form that narrative models provide. Notably for my purposes, collective memories are also held in stories, and are reassembled each time these stories are activated and a memory-story held in common is told anew. Much like 'common sense', as shown by Antonio Gramsci (1971), collective memory is not singular or natural; it is historically specific, power-based, and fragmentary, requiring repetitive performance or reassembly in order to maintain its appearance as natural, solid, and eternal.

The story-work of assembly, or reassembly, is not only essential for conjuring up memories, however. As models that can be conveniently adorned with expressions of difference, stories also help us assemble lives, identities, concepts, and relations, including relations of power that can solidify into social systems. Frank explains that, "what is known as a social system is assembled and reassembled from the dominance of some narrative representations of reality over others, and history … is the story of that context for narrative dominance" (2010, p. 80). Whether stories at-work in the public sphere reassemble their narrative materials in the service of social stasis or change depends, in large part, on whether (and how) they reinforce or transgress the social, symbolic, and normative boundaries that crisscross intersubjective reality. Some stories and storytellers work to hold social relations in place by defending or respecting boundaries (maintaining their relatively stable pattern), while others transgress these boundaries and create flux.

Richard Giulianotti (2005, p. 56), drawing on Gramsci, describes *transgression* as "boundary crossing, particularly breaching moral parameters or hierarchical codes." He also distinguishes it from the notion of *resistance* from an analytical, cultural studies perspective: "while resistance implies intentional social opposition, transgression focuses on consequences of actions, enabling sociological identification of how popular culture can break the dominant culture's conventions without inferring some latent intent behind social practices." The study of transgression is well suited to text-based narrative analysis, as access to an author's intentions is limited to signifiers appearing in one text or another.

The definition of boundaries employed in this project comes from Lamont and Molnár (2002), who differentiate between symbolic boundaries and social boundaries in their sketch of historical developments in the study of boundaries by social scientists. They describe symbolic boundaries as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). The racial distinction between black and white America (foundational to the anthem protest phenomenon) is an example of a symbolic boundary. Boundaries such as these "separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership". As conceptual distinctions made through language (and perhaps especially through stories) symbolic boundaries are *imposed* on social reality, allowing them to act as "an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168).

Defined in similar terms as symbolic boundaries but with important distinctions, social boundaries are "objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal

access and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). Unlike symbolic boundaries, which are imposed, these boundaries are "*revealed* in stable behavioural patterns of association" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168, emphasis added); it is their objectivity, versus conceptuality, that distinguishes them. To return to the racial example central to this work, the boundary of exclusion from safety and access to justice faced by people of colour in the U.S. is a social boundary.

The distinction between symbolic and social boundaries, as may be guessed by the reader, is itself a permeable boundary. Lamont and Molnár note that when symbolic boundaries are widely agreed upon they can become social boundaries, translating, "for instance, into identifiable patterns of social exclusion or class and racial segregation" (2002, p. 168-169). In the example of race relations in the U.S., the symbolic boundary between black and white America is widely recognized to the point of informing legal and policing practices, which manifest the social boundary of racial exclusion just mentioned. One should be careful not to confuse a social boundary with one that has gained a higher degree of 'reality', however, as "symbolic and social boundaries should be viewed as equally real: The former exists at the intersubjective level whereas the latter manifest themselves as groupings of individuals" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 169).

A particular type of boundary that appears to occupy this fluid middle ground and is a focus of this research is the *normative boundary*, which divides what is socially accepted as appropriate, normal, or 'good' from what is not. As *expected* patterns of behaviour, norms are both symbolic and social; they are engaged with hypothetically and conceptually (if I did *this*, *that* would likely happen), but exist for the purpose of, and are

observable in, practical application, or how people *actually* behave. Further, the collective work of sorting behaviours into the categories of appropriate and inappropriate always takes place within uneven relations of power associated with other types of boundaries (of both a symbolic and social nature) and in relation to hegemony and counter-hegemony (discussed further below). Receiving particular attention in my analysis are normative boundaries that dictate appropriate practices of protest, work, and signalling patriotic respect.

Stories have an intimate relationship with both types of boundaries, as they carry and communicate symbolic distinctions that often translate into social boundaries such as racial exclusion. As Frank (2010, p. 70) explains, "if stories make selection/evaluation possible, that selecting and evaluating requires that stories also be boundary creators." Using the example of feuding religious groups, he identifies both boundary transgression and boundary maintenance, or the defense and reaffirmation of a boundary, as important narrative functions.

The effects that a story has on a boundary (remember that the study of transgression, and thereby also boundary maintenance, is focused on consequence, not intention) depend on their particular context and organization, as the storied form has no inherent political valence of its own (Ewick & Silbey, 1995). These aspects of storytelling (not stories themselves) are also what make stories highly political, as politics is often about boundaries—who or what counts as important, where resources are deployed and where they are not, and so on. Ewick and Silbey (1995) identify two abstract types of political story that inform my analysis of boundary transgression and maintenance in the case of the NFL anthem protest controversy.

"Hegemonic tales", or master narratives, are defined as those stories that reinforce the status quo by articulating and reproducing ideologies and hegemonic relations of power and inequality (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 212). Two important features of these stories are their ability to "colonize consciousness" by occupying "social space" and therefore pre-empting alternatives, and their characteristic concealment of the social organization behind both their production and plausibility (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 213-214). The feature of concealment proves to be especially relevant to hegemonic boundary maintenance, as preserving a social boundary like racial exclusion often requires hiding it behind a story that asserts its nonexistence (such as the story of American unity mobilized through the performance of the anthem itself, as well as in response to the anthem protests). Drawing on Gramsci's original formulation of the term, Giulianotti (2005, p. 49) describes hegemony as "the particular fluid power relationships, methods and techniques within a class society whereby dominant groups secure their control through the ideological consent, rather than the physical coercion, of the dominated group." Through the consolidation of consent, he continues, "the exploitative social order appears 'natural', or 'common sense', ensuring that the dominated group 'lives its subordination'."

Subversive stories, on the other hand, are "narratives of resistance" that do counter-hegemonic work when they "contest dominant political-economic and cultural-psychological formations" (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 217; Carroll, 2016, p. 9). One way in which subversive stories do this work, according to Ewick and Silbey (1995, p. 217-219), is by emplotting connections effaced by hegemonic tales in ways that reveal the interests and relations of power behind them. They describe this process as illuminating

the relationship between history and biography, using the terms employed by C. Wright Mills (1959) in his explanation of the sociological imagination (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 218). Contrasting the move towards grand totalizations characteristic to hegemonic viewpoints (Hall, 1980, p. 137), "subversive stories recount particular experiences as *rooted* in and part of an encompassing cultural, material, and political world that extends beyond the local" (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 219, emphasis in original). This connective, contextualizing, and counter-hegemonic mode of storytelling is also transgressive when it gives voice to those who have been excluded or marginalized by "colonizing" master narratives—tellers of these stories refuse "to remain within the categories provided" and defy "the social parameters" of sites governed by powerful forces (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 216).

Sports

Political sportswriter and outspoken Kaepernick supporter Dave Zirin (2017b) has referred to protesting athletes as commandeering an "anthem space"—that opportunity for consent or subversion opened up through the consistent repetition of a sequence of acts we know as 'performing the anthem' at sporting events (the playing and singing of a particular song, people standing, removing their hats, etc.). While the terminology may be new, Zirin would be the first to agree that a dissenting athlete putting the anthem space, or another like it, to a use other than that intended by the powers-that-be, is certainly not. Michel de Certeau (1984, p. xvii) has referred to this mode of repurposing as a "tactic" by which "the weak make use of the strong, thus lend[ing] a political dimension to everyday practices."

It may be hard to imagine someone like basketball star and business mogul LeBron James as 'weak' or needing to creatively or covertly manipulate the tools provided by ownership in order to subvert them, especially in today's era of so-called "player empowerment" (Akhtar, 2019). Yet, as a sports worker, even James forfeits the full control of his labour power to a member of the capitalist class, agreeing to maximize productivity and profits in exchange for a salary (Giulianotti, 2005, p. 32). Athletes play within the lines, and those lines are almost always drawn by someone else. The public nature of spectator sports makes them especially powerful venues for crossing these lines. As Zirin has discussed, sports are where societal and cultural meaning play out; they reflect and constitute society, and have often served as a "window into larger social struggles for equality and justice" (Zirin et al., 2014, 18:52). In the following subsections, I first consider the sports/politics boundary with reference to literature that connects sport to capitalism, the dominant economic system within which ruling interests set the parameters for what constitutes dissent and consent. Next, I turn to racial boundaries relevant to American professional sports, highlighting several historical antecedents to the NFL anthem protests and situating the taking-a-knee movement in relation to them.

Sports, Class, and Politics

Legendary sportscaster Howard Cossell once referred to the separation of sports and politics as "rule number one of the jockocracy" (cited in Zirin et al., 2014), but we may justifiably wonder who made this rule, why, and is it truly ever followed?

We can begin our search for answers with advanced capitalism, the dominant economic system under which professional sports have thrived since the turn of the 20th

Century (Edwards, 2016a). Sports have appeared closely tied to the individualism and accumulative impulses that characterize modern capitalism during this time period, with the sports-star cult of personality becoming well established and lifestyles of excessive consumption promoted[14] (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). Marxist media scholar Sut Jhally (1980) has posited that the two primary functions of what he calls "the sports-media complex" under capitalism have been the provision of audiences for sale to advertisers, and the production of ideological legitimation for the economic system it is a part of. It stands to reason that the capitalists who own and control sports teams and leagues would be keen to instil and enforce a no-politics-in-sports normative boundary capable of protecting an interest that is not only a significant cash-cow but also contributes to the maintenance of a highly consumptive dominant culture. Other Marxists studying sports have highlighted the mirroring between their emphasis on sportsmanship and impartiality and the capitalist need for cooperation in the "partnership between labour and capital", as well as the cathartic emotional release garnered by sports viewing, which may dissipate feelings of anger that could turn revolutionary under the right (or wrong) circumstances (Jean-Marie Brohm and Frederick Jameson, respectively, cited in Giulianotti, 2005, p. 32-34).

But it is not only capitalists who baulk at the mention of a political issue on game-day. Plenty of athletes and fans (as will become evident in the findings section of this thesis) appear to be of the mind that politics has 'no place' in sport. Jhally (1980, p. 202) has explained this aversion in terms of the dialectical contributions of "socialization and

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[14] Think of the excessively consumptive behavior sports fans have become accustomed to witnessing anytime a team wins a championship. Cases of Champaign are routinely sprayed all over dressing room walls, teammates, and reporters while goggle-clad athletes puff on cigars.

escape" that sports provide society. Sports are shown to be a socializing force capable of diffusing the primary values of a dominant social system (in this case, those of white, patriarchal, hetero-normative, capitalist America) while simultaneously providing refuge from the same social system that these values come from. This refuge from the hardships of the 'real world' exists (and is fiercely defended) because sport enactment is not a standard part of the economy but a "dramatized lifeworld" – a universe of ritualization held apart from the rest of reality (Jhally, 1980, p. 205). This dramatized lifeworld (or storyworld) has implications for racial solidarity, as well, as sports effectively disguise genuine common interests based in shared experience by pitting arbitrarily assigned groups of individuals against each other in competition. The real unity of oppressed or marginalized groups is replaced by the unity of the team and the city, which can be more easily broken through trades, manufactured rivalries, and so on.

Past research of my own (Miller, 2016) has corroborated Jhally's theory of socialization and escape, finding that sports act as a loose and legitimizing metaphor for capitalism by mixing together recognizable elements of the economic system (specialization, precision, accumulation—of points and statistics) with just relations of production that are actually foreign to it (such as a universal set of performance-based rules). This could explain in part why some observers, and especially prominent members of the capitalist class such as Donald Trump and Dallas Cowboys' owner Jerry Jones, have been so upset with Kaepernick and others for bringing 'real world problems' into the sacred confines of the sports arena. These protesting players are disrupting an image of capitalism and America (still the undisputed stronghold of capitalism) that is used to cast the system in a favourable light and thus maintain the status quo.

Despite the consistent policing of the boundary between sports and politics by labourers and capitalist alike, a closer look exposes the true intimacy between these two spheres. As appears to be revealed to several authors in my dataset through consideration of the anthem protests (which constitutes one of their counter-hegemonic qualities), the performance of the anthem before every game, often by a member of the armed forces, itself politicizes sport. Displays of nationalism and military might such as jet fly-overs are incorporated with sporting events on a near-nightly basis (Zirin et al., 2014, 00:59). But it is the immersive quality of these displays that manages to disguise sports as apolitical. Even in the case of the overt, ritualized patriotism exhibited by Major League Baseball and other leagues in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001, these politicizing acts were naturalized in the media as part of a healthy and logical national grieving process (Butterworth, 2005). As these examples make evident, it is not 'politics' that is unwelcome in the world of sports, but a particular *kind* of politics—namely, that which pushes back against the status quo. Conservative politics, on the other had, masquerade as simply *the way things are* and thus manage to remain hidden behind the general 'rule' against politics in sports.

Sports and Race

The compatibility of sports and nationalism is not the only feature that makes sports political, nor is the so-called exclusion of politics from sports the only boundary found on this terrain. Racial politics, especially those related to distinctions between black and white America (another central boundary identified in the dataset), has a long history in sports that continues today, whether recognized or not.

In his book Playing While White (2017), David Leonard suggests that sports culture represents an uneven racial landscape on which white athletes often receive preferential treatment by media and fans. Linking this observation to deeply ingrained and widely experienced racism, he states, "the same sorts of racial logics and stereotypes that produce national mourning for mass shootings in suburbs, that contribute to a culture of racialized fear resulting in countless dead black bodies at the hands of police, operate in a sports world that routinely redeems, forgives, and humanizes white athletes, all while criminalizing and policing black athletes" (Leonard, 2017, p. 3). By painting racial oppression in terms of the positive affects it has for whites, not just as something that negatively effects people of colour, Leonard makes clear that there are two sides to this boundary and one side's loss is the other's gain. He highlights the "trope of selfishness" that black athletes are often burdened with, and describes an unveiled nostalgia for a time before the perceived dominance of the black quarterback in American football (Leonard, 2017, p. 5, 16). Both of these themes—viewing black athletes as selfish and expressing nostalgia for a bygone era of white domination—are expressed in the Against Protesting Athletes subsample studied under this project, and point to the continued presence of a boundary separating whiteness from blackness in the realm of professional sports that dictates their differential interpretation and treatment.

What Leonard is essentially describing is a discrepancy in the types of *stories assembled* about white and black athletes. Underlying racism is expressed in the way storytellers arrange narrative objects around particular subjects, with tales of exceptionalism and "bootstrapism" sticking to white athletes and those decrying lack of leadership or toughness piling up around black ones (Leonard, 2017, p. 5, 20). Describing

this pattern as rooted in “racial logics and stereotypes”, Leonard indicates that the same storying process that privileges the white athlete informs the “culture of racialized fear” that results in the disproportionate killing of African Americans by police. As Frank has noted (2010, p. 80), stories have a distinct capacity for making fears more vivid; they suggest appropriate objects for fear, expressing it by holding it in a visible form. In this case, stories of the black Other, dehumanized and injected with white fear, continue to reassemble the social boundaries that make up America’s racial hierarchy. The task of enforcing this hierarchy has historically fallen to police, going back to the days of slave patrols, and today it is also performed by a criminal justice system and growing mass incarceration regime that has disproportionately targeted the black community (Rickford, 2016).

These boundaries of racial exclusion—from safety, equal access to justice, and ultimately free society in the case of the incarcerated black population—are those that have traditionally been cited as motivating protests by athletes of colour, including Kaepernick. To draw attention to these issues, protesting athletes must cross the other boundary we have already discussed: that between sports and politics. The precursor bearing the closest resemblance to today’s NFL anthem protest is the case of former professional basketball player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, who refused to stand for the pre-game anthem back in 1996. The progression of events is strikingly similar to those involving Kaepernick, with Abdul-Rauf explaining that, to him, the American flag symbolized racial oppression and that standing for the anthem conflicted with his moral beliefs (in this case informed by his Muslim faith) (Washington, 2016). Also like Kaepernick, Abdul-Rauf found himself outside of the league the year following his

protest at only 29 years old. While it's unclear whether Kaepernick was inspired by Abdul-Rauf, their shared fate can serve as warning to those who would cross the normative boundary of signalling respect and reverie during the performance of the U.S. anthem. As Zirin has noted (Zirin et. al., 2014, 18:52), mainstream sports have historically been "hostile territory for those who don't fit", and the anthem space has precedent as a proving ground for the determination of who fits the model of the professional athlete preferred by those with the power to dictate continued athletic employment.

Other notable antecedents to today's anthem protesters can be found earlier in the 20th Century. John Carlos and Tommie Smith, the sprinters who famously gave a black power solute by raising their fists while on the podium at the 1968 Olympic games, are often referred to in my sample. Like football players coopting the anthem space, Carlos and Smith turned the medal ceremony into a site of public protest through a series of coded gestures.[15] Again, the two were ostracized from their sport for their actions and received death threats from their reactionary 'patriotic' countrymen and women (Zirin et. al., 2014). The silver medalist for that race, white Australian Peter Norman, also shared this fate for merely showing support for his fellow runners by wearing a civil rights badge while receiving his medal (Montague, 2017).

According to sports sociologist and civil rights activist Harry Edwards (2016a), Smith and Carlos, along with boxer Muhammad Ali's stand against the Vietnam War during the same period, are representative of a "third wave" of black athlete activism.

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[15] According to Zirin et. al. (2014, 56:132), Smith and Carlos scaled the podium barefoot to signify black poverty in the U.S., wore beads to signify lynching, unzipped one of their jackets to represent blue-collar workers, and each raised a fist during the performance of the anthem to show solidarity with the civil rights movement.

The first wave came at the turn of the 20th Century, coinciding with sports' marriage to capitalism, while the second was epitomized by Jackie Robinson's 1947 Major League Baseball debut. While Robinson's 'breaking of the colour barrier' that had formerly excluded non-whites from the league is celebrated as a victory in the movement for racial equality, he himself was critical of its cooptation, stating that, "you as an individual can make it, but I think we've got to concern ourselves with the masses of the people" (Zirin et. al., 2014, 40:07). Offered up as confirmation of America's commitment to racial equality of opportunity by mainstream pundits, Robinson's story of boundary-crossing is at times used to obscure the symbolic and social boundaries mentioned above that so many non-athletes of colour remain stuck behind. As Yan et. al. have explained (2018, p. 26), "in exchange for the athletes to be recognized by the mainstream, racial inequality at a broader societal level was not allowed to be openly discussed."

In the era of neoliberal consolidation that followed the tumult of the 1960s and 70s, when Carlos, Smith, and Ali were active, black athletes (as well as athletes in general) have mostly complied with the "shut up and play" demands placed on them in regards to political activism (Yan et. al., 2018, p. 26). No one epitomized this trend more than Michael Jordan, the apolitical basketball superstar and one-man-brand who famously took the position, "Republicans buy shoes too" when pressed for comment on American political affairs.

However, professional sports in America have experienced a political sea-change in recent years, with prominent athletes like LeBron James and Stephen Curry, as well as outspoken coaches such as Steve Kerr and Gregg Popovich, joining Kaepernick and his NFL allies in speaking out against the current President, Donald Trump, and expressing

discontent with enduring experiences of systemic racism. A defining feature of this fourth wave has been the prominence of social media, which has been paramount both for organizing collective action through 'hashtag'-based movements like #BlackLivesMatter and for disseminating video evidence of police using deadly force against people of colour[16] (Edwards, 2016a; Yan et. al., 2018; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

As vehicles for political storytelling and engagement, social media platforms and the mobile devices they are often accessed through have been instrumental in assembling collective narratives that run counter to those that carry the message *all is Right in America; nothing to see here, folks*. Feel-good, boundary-crossing stories like 'Jackie Robinson breaks the colour barrier', or 'Barack Obama becomes America's first black President' can easily be put to hegemonic use by legitimizing the established order as just, fair, or progressive. However, this is more difficult to do with stories like '17-year-old Trayvon Martin killed by police for appearing suspicious in a dark hoodie', or 'unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown shot to death after putting hands up and pleading *don't shoot*' (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). These are *witness stories*, which Frank (2010, p. 76) describes as possessing the power to *make narratable* "events so terrible that most people have good reason for wanting them not to be narratable", or situations "they want to believe did not or does not happen." Narratability simply means that stories about a life or lives can be told and heard by others. Because stories are performative, they lend

16 While social media has certainly changed the landscape of political mobilization, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) remind us that using mobile technology to record and circulate footage of racial violence has a longer history. This mode of generating public outcry can be traced at least as far back as 1991, when a VHS tape recording of the infamous beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police spurred race riots across the United States.

reality to their objects; as Frank puts it (2010, p. 75), "a life can be invisible until a story makes it narratable."

When athletes perform symbolic gestures like anthem protest, or mobilize their significant cultural capital (represented by social media followers often in the hundreds of thousands) by reposting the stories of victims of police violence, they are making those lost lives narratable. Narratability can be equated to visibility (when something *appears* in a story we can *see* it in our minds eye), and when the lives of these victims become narratable the boundaries of racial oppression also come into sight. Refracting attention away from the sports-related subject matter that typically constitutes their power-approved two-dimensional character (the apolitical 'model athlete' mentioned earlier) can be risky, as seen in the cases of Kaepernick, Abdul-Rauf, Smith, Carlos, and Norman. This is because those "who have good reason" for wanting certain events to remain unnarratable, identified by Frank, above, often have the power to supress narratability; to silence those who would lend their voice to others through the telling of subversive stories, and to cover up boundaries that keep them in a privileged position. While I believe that some powerful interests perform this work knowingly, there are also assuredly many bystanders who perpetuate hegemonic tales that conceal such events and boundaries, making them unnarratable in the interest of preserving a comforting but misleading image of inclusive American unity.

Like those that came before, today's NFL anthem protesters have sparked widespread discussion and debate—over institutionalized racism, the relationship and boundary drawn between sports and politics, morally appropriate forms of protest, traditions of showing respect and gratitude, privilege, and the American national and

racial identity, among other controversial topics. But unlike the relatively isolated events of the past, Kaepernick's protest also initiated an entire movement. "The Kaepernick effect", as it has been termed by a variety of scholars and media outlets (McNeal, 2017; Abrante, 2018; Sports Illustrated; The Atlantic; ThinkProgress; Adweek) has even seen athletes utilizing the malleable and symbolically potent act of anthem protest to draw attention to a diversity of causes. In Canada and Australia, basketball and rugby players, respectively, have taken a knee or vowed to remain silent during the anthem to protest issues of ongoing colonialism and the mistreatment of indigenous peoples (Gill, 2016; Parry & Cleland, 2019). US women's soccer star Megan Rapinoe has used the act to champion the rights of LGBTQ+ people (Schmidt et al., 2018). Most recently, fencer Race Imboden and hammer thrower Gwen Berry (uncoordinated, but in solidarity with one another) took a knee and raised a fist (respectively) during the US national anthem at the Pan-Am Games to protest racism, lack of gun control, and the mistreatment of immigrants in their home country (de la Garza, 2019).

While the remainder of this thesis focuses solely on the NFL anthem protests, the widespread use of anthem protest has implications for the boundaries I have identified as central to this controversy. It indicates that the barrier between sports and progressive politics is weakening the world over, while the narrative that sports are, or ever were, apolitical is becoming exposed as false through the very existence of the anthem space as an opportunity for expressing either consent or dissent. The popularity of anthem protest illustrates that all is not *Right* in the world—people are looking for opportunities to lend their voices to the voiceless and make their daily struggle narratable to those who may prefer to look away. Through tactical refiguration of the anthem space, protesting athletes

ready it for the telling of subversive stories that transgress the normative boundaries that give it its usual form. This transgression elicits a range of responses that reveal a counter-hegemonic struggle over meaning—a struggle that can be detected in patterns of narrative assembly, including the collective assembly of characters, settings, morals, and memories meant to either justify or dismiss and negate the anthem protests. Illuminating this process and identifying its hegemonic and counter-hegemonic undertones is the goal of what follows.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The Qualitative Narrative Policy Framework

Dubbed the "science of stories" by its inventors (Jones et al., 2014), the traditional narrative policy framework (NPF) is an operational theory and structural approach to narrative analysis that identifies and parses stories by four elemental, structural categories: setting, characters, plot, and moral of the story or "policy solution" (see Table 1, below). While most of its applications to date have been positivist and quantitative in orientation, the framework's compatibility with qualitative methods has been emphasized by a number of its practitioners (Pierce et al., 2014; O'Bryan et al., 2014; Ney et al., 2014, Gray & Jones, 2016). O'Bryan et al. (2014), for instance, argue that "the NPF is a 'way of knowing' socially constructed realities grounded in objective epistemology and social ontology—the key is not the adoption of quantitative research methods" (p. 127). Echoing this belief in the NPF's methodological openness are Gray and Jones (2016, p. 1), who assert that "the framework is quite compatible with qualitative methods—and the various epistemologies associated with them."

As a research platform for the development of original theory through systematic empirical analysis, the NPF and Qualitative NPF (QNPF) have primarily been used to study the processes by which narratives garner support and ultimately contribute to the shaping of public policies (Weible & Schlager, 2014, p. 236). While my own interest lies in how narratives are assembled in the service of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic projects, my chosen topic—the NFL anthem protests—fits the mould as a policy issue. Central to the debate it has fostered are potential policies that could require NFL players

to stand during the performance of the anthem, existing and potential policies aimed at mitigating the effects of structural racism, and the question of whether protesting athletes are operating within their constitutional right to freedom and speech and expression when protesting 'on the job', or in the case of student athletes, at school.[17]

In tailoring the QNPF to my particular topic and focus on hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narrative assembly, I followed the guide to conducting QNPF research provided by Grey & Jones (2016). This process involved selecting an appropriate dataset and specific methods of analysis, which are discussed after the following section, as well as making decisions regarding presentation. I present my findings (Part II of this thesis) in three chapters, each corresponding to one of the narrative elements of setting, characters, and morals. I abstain from discussing plotlines in a chapter unto itself, as separating out observations regarding the "established relationality between a narrative's parts" (McBeth et. al., 2014, p. 228) from those concerning the other three primary narrative elements (the parts themselves) proved difficult to the point of exceeding the spatial and temporal limitations of the project. As such, I have incorporated discussion of relational emplotment into the three remaining findings chapters.

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[17] See *The Kaepernick Effect and Public School Athletics: A First Amendment Analysis* by Alyssa Abrante (2018) for more information on the legality of the protests in an academic setting.

Table 1. Elements of the Narrative Policy Framework

Narrative Element	Definition
The Setting	The context of the policy debate. This can include economic conditions, scientific evidence, legal and constitutional parameters, geography and social norms. (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 228), and can be thought of as "the physical, ideational, and discursive space in which regulation takes place" (Gray & Jones, 2016, p. 11).
Characters	The NPF identifies three standard character types: Victims (those who suffer or are harmed in the context of the policy debate), Villains (those who inflict the harm), and Heroes (who provide relief from the harm and a solution to the problem) (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 228).
The Plot	The established relationality between a narrative's parts (its characters and setting) through an overarching structure, often with a temporal element (a beginning, middle and end) (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 228). Following Gray and Jones (2016, p. 5), "plots affect how blame is assigned to the villain, what actions are needed from the hero and what moral is to be gleaned from the story."
Moral of the Story	A proposed solution to the problem as it is framed in a particular narrative (McBeth et al, 2014).

Dialogical Narrative Analysis (DNA)

Structural NPF narrative analysis awards equal attention to content and form—not only is what happens in a story treated as important, but so is the manner of telling, or how the components of the story are assembled. Because it emphasizes the minute, linguistic details of a story ("language is treated seriously – an object of close investigation"), this mode of analysis is ideal for detailed case studies that compare a relatively small number of narratives (Riessman, 1993, p. 4). However, this microscopic focus can also be limiting: According to Catherine Riessman (1993, p. 4), "strict application of the structural approach can decontextualize narratives by ignoring historical, interactional and institutional factors." In this way it can have similar shortcomings to statistical investigation, of which Michel de Certeau (1984, p. xviii) has said, "the power of its calculations lies in its ability to divide, but it is precisely through this analytic fragmentation that it loses sight of what it claims to seek and to represent."

Counteracting this tendency in my project is an understanding of the dialogism practiced by Arthur Frank (and informed by Mikhail Bakhtin), which attends to relational aspects of storytelling. Similar to the "interactional analysis" described by Riessman (1993, p. 4), dialogical narrative analysis (DNA) emphasizes the "process between teller and listener"; "attention to thematic content and narrative structure are not abandoned … but interest shifts to storytelling as a process of co-construction, where teller and listener create meaning collaboratively." Dialogical inquiry goes a step further, however, by also recognizing the influence of the socio-historical context within which a diversity of (storytelling) perspectives are embedded (Linell, 2009). By awarding equal attention to the circumstances of storytelling, dialogical analysis allows researchers to observe the

ways in which societal forces (institutions, ideologies, economic systems, and so on) may also contribute to the co-construction of meaning—storyteller and listener do not operate in a vacuum, after all—as well as how the meanings held in stories may filter back into and shape the extra-discursive world through and actions of those who believe in or are otherwise affected by them.

The specific form of DNA employed here is the practical counterpart to Arthur Frank's (2010) theory of socio-narratology. It furnishes narrative researchers with an array of concepts, interpretive techniques, and questions designed to study "the mirroring between what is told in the story—the story's content—and what happens as a result of telling that story—its effects" (Frank, 2010, p. 71-72). One DNA question is concretely incorporated into my analytical strategy along with the tools of the QNPF, namely, how does a story do the work of memory? However, this is not the only influence that DNA, and the dialogical perspective more broadly, has over the project. Many of its concepts and principles (such as its attention to processes of narrative assembly) inform my general understanding of stories and their relations to social forces, and some of these have already been introduced in the literature review above.

Data Collection

My dataset (available in Appendix B) consists of 75 English-language newspaper articles that discuss the NFL's anthem protests. Newspaper articles were selected as the primary means of communication under examination for the established archiving processes that make them available years after publication and the relative length they provide authors with (compared to social media posts) to structure their responses in narrative form. Most

articles in the dataset originated within the United States, while a small handful are from Canada or the U.K. 25 have been determined to support the NFL anthem protests (the For Protesting Athletes subsample), 25 cast the protests in a negative light (the Against Protesting Athletes subsample), and an additional 25 have been categorized as neutral.

The initial population of news articles was acquired using the Lexisnexis search engine, accessed through the University of Victoria library database link: http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/hottopics/lnacademic/. This search engine was chosen for its detail-oriented advanced search options, which allowed me to impose specific parameters on what was an extremely salient and therefore somewhat unwieldy public topic. To conduct my search, I selected "Advanced Search" and entered the terms "NFL AND anthem AND protest OR protests OR kneeling OR kneel OR knee". This was meant to catch any variation of phrases like "take a knee", "players kneel", and "kneeling players", along with the necessary terms "NFL", "anthem" and "protest". For specific "Index Terms", I specified only articles from or about the United States under the "Geography" heading, and also selected the subject "Freedom of Speech" from within the "Human Rights and Civil Liberties Law" directory. The later filter was chosen as a strategy for privileging articles that deal with the crux of the issue from a policy standpoint: players have the constitutional right to free expression and protest but are purposefully exercising that right in a way that angers many by giving the impression of being un-American, which is often interpreted as synonymous with being unconstitutional. I then selected only the "Newspapers" button under the Content Type heading.

I set the date range to begin on August 1st, 2016 and end on December 1st, 2017, when I began my preliminary analysis. This time range appears to cover the most heated period of the controversy—it spans what I identified at the time as the three most critical moments of the NFL anthem protest controversy: Kaepernick's initiation of the protest on August 26th, 2016, U.S. President Donald Trump's incendiary comments about protesting athletes made on September 22nd, 2017 (which spurred mass counter-mobilization from then-protesting NFL players), and Kaepernick's failure to obtain an NFL contract for the season following his protest (which became official when that season began on September 7th, 2017). After adjusting for duplicates, my search resulted in 620 total articles—a large but manageable number.

To sort the sample into my three categories (For, Against, and Neutral) I used the number generator found at http://www.randomnumbergenerator.com and engaged in a preliminary content analysis. Qualitative content analysis reduces the data by focusing analysis on selected aspects of the text (Schreier, 2012, p. 7). One by one I selected an article at random and coded it for certain themes to determine its evaluative orientation. When one of the subsamples reached its capacity (25 articles), I discarded any additional selected articles that fit into it until all three groupings were satisfied. The codes used for sorting were generated through a preliminary convenience sample of online articles that served as a gateway into the topic (see Appendix A). Articles interpreted as expressing support for protesting athletes did some combination of the following:

- Referred to protesters as patriotic or courageous
- Referred to the protests as a potential source of positive social change

- Mentioned the issues of racial injustice and inequality that the players are protesting for and portray them as legitimate
- Praised protesting athletes for using their 'platform' and 'giving voice' to marginalized people
- Referred to the misrecognition of the 'real' issues by the protestors' opponents
- Made note of the players' constitutional right to freedom of speech or protest
- Discussed the intersection of politics and sports as a good thing, or past instances where these two spheres have overlapped to positive effect
- Denigrated divisive or obfuscating tactics employed by the protestors' opponents

Articles allocated to the Against Protesting Athletes subsample, on the other hand, displayed some or all of the following discursive choices:

- Highlighted the 'disrespect' or 'dishonour' shown by protesting players towards the flag, the USA, law enforcement, the military, service people ("first responders", etc.), NFL fans, or the American public in general
- Suggested that the anthem space utilized by protesting NFL players is the "wrong time and place" for protest
- Brought up the relative wealth of NFL players and/or portrayed them as ungrateful
- Described the player protests as a 'distraction' or 'public relations nightmare'
- Referred to 'other deviant behavior' engaged in by some NFL players, such as murder, domestic violence, or animal cruelty

Finally, those articles sorted into the neutral subsample were found either to be purely informative without any bias of representation, to draw on points from both of the above

lists relatively equally, or to suggest that both sides are wrong' and emphasize solutions such as increased discussion, listening, and mutual understanding. While receiving less analytical attention than the For and Against Protesting Athletes subsamples (which were deemed more reflective of the underlying hegemonic struggle), these neutral stories provided valuable mid-range perspectives not present in stories told by those more outwardly invested in the outcomes or broader meanings of the controversy.

It bears mentioning here that I did not require an author to express a particular bias themself in order to qualify the article for either the For or Against Protesting Athletes subsamples. Drawing from Ewick and Silbey (1995, p. 214), this project recognizes that stories fill "social space" with the content that they selectively represent—space that could have been occupied by alternative narrative arrangements. Therefore, if an author provided a clear account of a certain individual or group who qualified as either For or Against Protesting Athletes without taking an overt stance against that person's position the article was sorted into the category that the source was associated with.

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded at three levels: the micro (studying individual texts), meso (identifying cross-textual themes within the For and Against subsamples), and macro (contrasting the two composite-narrative models abstracted and assembled from the primary subsamples). At the micro-level I deductively coded each text for the four primary narrative elements furnished by the QNPF, as well as for memory, informed by DNA, using the qualitative coding software Atlas.ti. The basic unit of my analysis was

the *narrative object*, which I understand as any identifiable component of a story used to advance its general plot—a character, item, place, idea, and so on.

To inform my understanding of the narrative setting, I identified a subset of narrative objects particularly important to the projection of background meanings that provided context for the story told and arguments made. The way in which these setting-objects were introduced or 'staged' was also recorded and contributed to my identification of two primary *contextual backdrops*—the economic and American historical—in front of which dominant meanings took shape. Characters appearing in texts were sorted into the victim, villain, and hero roles based whether they were described as suffering, causing suffering, or attempting to alleviate it. Characteristics or attributes associated with each category were also recorded. Individual texts were reduced to a primary and secondary plot(s) through the identification of relations between narrative objects, such in the case of Kaepernick *disrespecting* veterans, or Donald Trump *manipulating* Americans. For the moral content of each text, a primary and secondary solution(s) were identified and these solutions were paired with a value or values that they appeared to represent (such as respect, unity, loyalty, etc.). Additional analytic notes were recorded on how each text assembled a memory or image of the past, the policy position taken regarding the players right (or lack thereof) to protest, and how the dominant narrative objects of the discourse—Kaepernick, Sports/the NLF, Anthem Protest, Activism, the Anthem/Flag, America, and Freedom—were assembled, framed, or bounded.

At the meso-level of analysis I focused on each of the For and Against Protesting Athletes subsamples in turn, identifying commonalities and differences in the above

areas. Through this collating process I attempted to hear those accounts containing a similarly supportive or oppositional evaluation of the anthem protests as a collective story or voice, attending to tone as much as content (Frank, 2010, p. 126). This was done with the understanding that the specific authors selected as participants in the study were likely not consciously responding to one another or even necessarily aware of each other's positions, but that each conveyed sentiments present in the wider NFL anthem protest discourse and were therefore constituents in a dialogical process of intertextual narrative assembly. While the dual-narrative structure that resulted from this level of analysis is artificial in that it imposes a structure of 'two sides' onto a discourse that, like all others, is polyphonic, or composed of "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciounesses" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6), it presents an approximation of the process by which independent voices echo and reinforce one another where relatively fixed (or fixing) ideological positions overlap. The primary intentions guiding meso-level analysis were to capture structural similarities in the way narratives For or Against Protesting Athletes were assembled, and to identify plotlines that appeared in more than a single text.

The broadest (macro) level of analysis involved comparing the two collective or composite narrative structures and identifying areas of divergence and convergence. Various aspects of setting, characterization, plot, moral, memory, and the conceptual dimensions of primary narrative objects were found to be similar regardless of evaluative orientation, others appeared to be assembled in ways that directly mirrored those on the other side of the evaluative divide, while others still simply displayed variance. The primary outcome from this analytical level was the identification of several normative,

symbolic, and social boundaries located where the two collective stories appeared to clash most evidently. For instance, the boundary between sports and progressive politics emerged from opposing claims that sports should be free of politics (mostly made by authors Against Protesting Athletes) and that sports are already politicized (mostly made by authors For Protesting Athletes). The identification of boundaries flowed into more substantiated insights about hegemonic and counter-hegemonic functions of the anthem protests and stories told about them, although this interest was in-mind throughout analysis and observations addressing it were accumulated at all three levels.

Researcher Positionality

As a white person writing from the unceded territories of indigenous peoples known as Canada, it seems appropriate to disclose that I am distanced from the topic of this project in a number of ways (geographically, nationally, and racially, most obviously). This is not to say that my home is free from racial injustice, nationalism, or any of the other currents that run through this debate—they are in fact quite entwined. It is simply to acknowledge that the primary events to which the articles I examine respond—the NFL anthem protests—took place in a different country from the one where I live, as did the specific instances of police violence that many athletes claim to be protesting.

Neither is this to say that I myself do not have some vested interest in the outcomes of the anthem protest movement. As a critical sociologist my allegiance and energies generally lie with social change, and I believe that, like other aspects of my subjectivity, this position cannot be quarantined away from my research and writing sensibilities. With that being said, I have approached my practices of interpretation,

analysis, and communication with an eye towards critical empathy and straight foreword representation. I have strived for rigor and systematic procedure in my methods and analysis, aimed for transparency of methodology and motivations, and hope that my findings are not misleading, nor that they cause anyone distress.

Part II – Analysis and Findings

Chapter 3: Setting the Scene

The art of storytelling is to affect that suspension of listeners' attention to anything except what the story frames. Like all arts, that effect can be put to any use. Its danger lies in its power. – Arthur Frank (2010, p. 150).

Like the establishing shots of a film or physical structures on a theatre's stage, each newspaper article in my sample introduces a field of *narrative objects* that organize the reader's attention and provide a foundation for the assembly of character profiles, sewing of relations (plotlines), and establishment of moral arguments. Unrestricted to physical 'things' or those attainable through the senses, narrative objects can include ideas, events, discourses, time periods, and other stories, in addition to items, characters, and locales. As the nuts-and-bolts materials of stories, they are present in all aspects of storytelling and can be deployed to diverse affects.

Consistent with an understanding of stories as performative (Frank, 2010), the narrative setting is here considered in terms of a process of *staging* wherein a "physical, ideational, and discursive space" (Gray and Jones's definition of setting, 2016, p. 11) is prepared for the story to be told.[18] Building this foundation demands a particular function of narrative objects that draws on their capacity for producing *interpretive context*, or sets

[18] In this case study, the performance space prepared through staging can be understood both as the literal pages on which an article is written and an abstract communicative dimension existing between author(s) and reader(s), wherein interpretation and understanding occurs.

of background meanings on top of which characters, plotlines, and moral messages can be 'made sense of'.

While interpretive context is inevitably built up through a story's progression (each new revelation plays upon a base of what came before), it generally has at least as much to do with systems of correlated meanings that exist *outside of* the story itself. As an author sources narrative objects from her or his own lifeworld and sets them into relations in a single outward-facing storyworld, she or he does so with the awareness that those familiar to the reader will invoke series of additional objects absent from the actual text but brought to it in the form of ready-made knowledge by the reader.[19] It is these familiar objects—referred to hereon as setting-objects—that appear most integral to the production of context in the anthem protest discourse.[20] In endeavouring to isolate the setting from processes of characterization and moralization active in and across the For and Against Protesting Athletes subsamples, I found it necessary to begin from setting-objects, without which no backdrop or narrative landscape could take shape. Words such as 'America', 'the NFL', and 'Kaepernick' are prevalent throughout the dataset but rarely receive thorough explanation; instead, each is allowed to stand for a system of associations that provide the atmospheric, visual, emotional, and/or intellectual base upon which more substantive ideological and rhetorical structures can be built.

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[19] In his linguistic model of narrative analysis, Roland Barthes (1977, p. 96) refers to these contextualizing units as "informants", the role of which is "to identify, to locate in time and space."

[20] Many the texts in my sample (especially those penned by news reporters, as opposed to editors, columnists, or members of the public) follow the journalistic principle of brevity. This mode of storytelling depends more than others on ready-made knowledge brought to the communicative exchange by the readership, as its purpose is to convey information in as few words as possible. Furthermore, this external knowledge can be more readily anticipated due to the medium's focus on current affairs that have often already garnered some media attention.

In identifying the primary narrative objects in each article and attending to their staging, I distinguished two primary genres of association, which I have termed *contextual backdrops*. These backdrops—the economic and the American historical—are thematically distinct but overlap where setting-objects can clearly be associated with more than one of them. Once glimpsed *through* setting-objects the backdrops *encompass* them, serving to contextualize not only these but other narrative objects whose meanings emanate more directly from the storyworld. As will become clear in my descriptions of the economic and historical backdrops, most of the objects that produce them are not discrete or static; they are fluid assemblages of smaller objects, whose contribution to the manifestation of a contextual backdrop can be spotted most clearly when taken as a whole.

It is important to note that the meanings I associate with the setting-objects discussed below result from my own sphere of awareness and "interpretive practices" (Smith, 1990), and cannot be assumed to translate unaltered to any abstract, generic reader (if one even existed). With that said, I have attempted to cultivate a dual understanding of these objects and backdrops that accounts for both typical hegemonic and counter-hegemonic positions, and believe that most readers with a (mainstream, surface-) level of knowledge of the American economy and the country's history comparable to my own would relate to these 'common sense' interpretations. As Frederick Mayer says (2014, p. 64), "to the extent that our individual interpretations of stories are enabled by a common narrative code, it is possible to have considerable convergence, and to talk, therefore, about a story's meaning for a community."

The Economic Contextual Backdrop

While especially prominent in articles expressing an Against Protesting Athletes viewpoint, meanings associated with the U.S. economy play a contextualizing role on both sides of the evaluative divide. A vista of American capitalism comes into view primarily through the assembled notion of the *economic agent*. Like other character roles, or "actants" in the terminology of the French semioticians (Barthes, 1977), economic agents are defined by what they do or engage with—in this case they are actors and decision makers who exercise their agency in a particular mode (working, governing, spending, etc.) and in relation to a particular aspect of the economy. Through emphasis placed on the economic relations (or economic plotlines, in narrative terms) associated with a cast of characters, five abstract categories of economic agent emerge from the dataset. Employer (the NFL), employee (NFL players), customer (fans), government (of the U.S.), and taxpayer (America's general public), are each discussed in turn below. Together, the associative offshoots of these familiar objects create a contextualizing image of interdependent local, national, and foreign markets (of labour, production, and circulation) that crisscross the nation and emanate beyond its borders. This is accomplished through the privileging of economic interpretations of their narrative elements (emphasizing that Kaepernick is an employee over other parts of his identity, for example), which activates already existing knowledge in the readership of 'how this sort of thing works'—conventionally understood business priorities, practices, and relationships, the working class imperative of holding a job, and so on.[21]

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[21] Wendy Brown (2018), among others, has explained the diffusion of economic thinking to other realms of life in recent decades in terms of expanding neoliberal rationality. Unlike ideology, Brown says (2018, p. 61-62), neoliberal rationality is "productive, world-making: it economizes every sphere and human

The NFL is associated with a particular sector of the entertainment industry—professional sports—and, along with its subsidiary teams (which can be viewed as smaller constituent versions of the whole), it represents not just any business but the dominant type within advanced capitalism: the corporation. From a hegemonic perspective that views American capitalism as a natural and fair system of producing goods and allocating labour and wealth, corporations such as these are indispensible to any national economy, and thereby to the wellbeing of the entire nation. Not only does the NFL provide an assortment of entertainment products that enhance the lives of their customers and contribute to the national culture, they occupy the essential role of *employer*, making necessary jobs available to players and coaches but also thousands of others, from front office personnel to stadium custodians.

The familiarity and associative gravity of employers and employees—the first two types of economic agent discussed here—make a significant contribution to filling out the contextualizing economic backdrop. As *employees* of NFL teams, players are economic agents whose primary role in the economy is to sell their labour power, usually to the highest bidder. Through the signing of contracts, players like Kaepernick agree to use their particular athletic skillset to contribute to the profitability of their teams and the NFL as a whole—a responsibility for which they are paid handsomely, relative to other workers.

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endeavor, and it replaces a model of society based on the justice-producing social contract with society conceived as markets and with state oriented by market requirements." This extension of privatism has dangerous implications for democracy and equality, according to Brown (2018, p. 61), as it engenders a pervasive "mistrust of the political and disavowal of the social" that can be seen at work legitimizing popular/reactionary right wing politics in the U.S. at the time of this writing.

While employer and employee are essential units in this common vision of the economic system, we know that it requires a third, the *customer*, to achieve viability—a fact captured by the platitude commonly espoused by athletes that 'none of this would be possible without the fans.' The conceptual orientation of fan-as-customer emphasizes the importance of fans to the entire system—including through association with the dictum 'the customer is always right'—however it also highlights how fans depend on the NFL and its teams/players to satisfy their sports-related desires. Like other areas of the economy, the sports industry is governed by principles of supply and demand. The demand represented by fanaticism makes fans vulnerable to those who control the supply, not only in terms of pricing but also in regard to the quality of the products they rely on. This economic context is particularly relevant for fans/customers offended by the anthem protests, as it enables the dual-interpretations that players are wrong for protesting while 'on the clock' (as other employees could never 'get away with'), and that their actions represent a devaluation of the NFL's primary product—the games themselves—for which the customer is the one to suffer.

Frustration over this, as well as a neat example of all five identified economic agents including the role of *taxpayer* and *government* (discussed next), can be found in the following passage:

> I wonder how long it will be accepted by the NFL if there is a continued decline in overall TV ratings and stadium attendance. I will be keeping my hard-earned money in my pocket. Money that would have helped pay the salaries of those players, lined the pockets of the owners, supported jobs and put tax money in local government coffers. I am exercising my right not to support a business that is acting

in an irresponsible way.

(Scott Schneider, Irvine, "no football for me", Chico Enterprise-Record (California), October 1, 2017).

As we can see, the author projects an economic backdrop through portraying himself as a customer, taxpayer, and presumably an employee himself, through the reference to spending his "hard earned money".[22] Through associations with the practice of paying taxes on sports related expenditures, the fan, in this example, evokes another narrative object occupying the economic contextual backdrop: *the government*. As the overseers and benefactors of the national economy (through regulation and taxation, respectively), the government, too, exists within relations of mutual dependence with corporations like the NFL, and customers/taxpayers like its fans. Accordingly, they too stand to be affected by any devaluation of the NFL's product and resulting economic standoff between the corporation and its customers.

What this type of standoff might entail is also made quite clear in the quote above. The concept of *boycott* in invoked—one of two primary relational objects (plotlines) identified as constituting this backdrop, the other being employment (discussed further below)—as an act of economic freedom mirroring and counteracting the freedom of expression exercised by protesting players. The notion of customers 'voting with dollars' creates an associative link between the economic contextual vista and the narrative object of democracy, which factors prominently into moral elements of the discourse—players

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[22] The class distinction between workers and those who own and control the means of production (capitalists) is often blurred within hegemonic, mainstream discourse. It benefits those in power to push the narrative that 'we all work hard for our money' and that it makes no substantial difference whether one's effort contributes directly to ones own profit margins (through increased control of the market, in competition with other capitalists) or produces surplus value for someone else who has purchased this right with wages.

are alternately suggested to be using and protecting their democratic rights or abusing and taking them for granted. It also provides additional nuance to the contextual background of the NFL by positioning it as a regulatory body (similar to the government) capable of putting an end to the devaluation of its product, but only likely to do so if its bottom line (relative amount of profit) is significantly impacted by boycotting fans (from the quotation above: "I wonder how long it will be accepted by the NFL if there is a continued decline in overall TV ratings and stadium attendance…").

Whereas boycott acts as a contextualizing relational bridge between customer and corporation/employer, *employment* (already touched on briefly at the beginning of this section) is a plotline that ties together employer and employee. References to Kaepernick and other players' status as employees, and their teams, as well as the NFL, as employers, abound, creating a connotative structure featuring the likes of human dynamism, hierarchical power, exploitation and control, and economic freedom, responsibility, and provision. For articles published after the start of the second NFL season during which players have been protesting (September, 2017), the negative image of employment is increasingly evoked. Kaepernick's *unemployment* becomes a common focal object that shades the economic context with an increased sense of precarity—his actions must be viewed in light of the risks they present to his employability in his chosen profession.

While to this point I have portrayed the economic contextual backdrop primarily through associations likely to result from a hegemonic reading of the discourse,[23] the frequent evocation of employment provides an opportunity to draw in some potential

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[23] Narrative interpretations that privilege the economic dimension of all characters at the expense of their fuller humanity are presumably more likely to reinforce a dominant system (capitalism) that treats humans the same way.

counter-hegemonic connections. Depending on the ideological precepts and communicative/interpretive practices of the author and reader—or the positions from which the articles are encoded and decoded, in the words of Stuart Hall (1980)—references to employment may contextualize the anthem protests within the ongoing dialectical struggle between labour and capital under capitalism. From a Marxist perspective, this relation is the, or at least a, primary driver of the entire economic system (Larrain, 1983; Harvey; 2014). Workers sell their labour power to capitalists out of necessity, who exploit their workers by paying them less than the value they produce and appropriating the surplus value, which can then be reinvested as capital, and the cycle continues. This is a vantage point from which the economic backdrop blurs into the historical; the meanings associated with anthem protest take shape in relation not only to economic 'realities' of the present but the entire history of class struggle. Protesting athletes, within this contextual overlap, appear as dissenting labourers themselves and/or spokespeople for particular working class minorities who elicit predictable outrage and pushback from members of the capitalist class (such as Donald Trump and NFL team owners). This adversarial relation between labour and capital can be observed as contextualizing the following Neutral quotation, which positions the anthem protests in relation to an ongoing erosion of American democratic rights:

> America is transitioning from a democratic state where free speech is a fundamental right for a reason to an oligarchy controlled by a super-wealthy elite operating through multinational corporations which increasingly own and dominate the economy, the political system, the culture and the public square.

> (Ron Rollins, "Companies Controlling Speech?; Today's moderator: Ideas & Voices Editor", Palm Beach Post (Dayton Daily News Ohio), September 14, 2016)

More often, however, the narrative object of employment is deployed independently of any historical forces or trends. Those articles that assemble the employee/employer relationship in a way that makes it appear natural, rational, or fair (predominantly found in the Against Protesting Athletes subsample) sow the seeds of hegemonic characterizations, plotlines, and moral arguments that focus responsibility and blame onto individuals and groups instead of systems or structures of power. The influence of this aspect of the economic contextual vista can be heard in the following quotation:

> Whether you're a quarterback or a trash collector, your employer doesn't have to simply put up with your actions just because you have the right to free speech. Our bosses can fire us if we do not represent their company in the manner they require, and that could include anything from tasteless social media posts to refusing to stand for the National Anthem.
>
> (Daniel Suddeath, "Glasgow Daily Times, Ky., Daniel Suddeath column", Glasgow Daily Times (Kentucky), August 9, 2017)

We can see here a backdrop of economic precarity contextualizing an argument that equates anthem protest with poor behaviour in violation of an employee's responsibility to their employer.[24] The comparison made between protesting athletes and trash

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[24] Comparisons between anthem protest and other activities deemed detrimental to an employer and thus 'fireable offenses'—such as this author's example of "tasteless social media posts"—are abundant in the

collectors, in this case, works to assemble a context in which athletes exhibit disdainful behaviour when failing to fulfil all of their team's and the NFL's expectations. Several similar comparisons can be found in the Against Protesting Athletes subsample, including those contrasting football players with fast food workers, employees of Home Depot, and journalists. It is interesting to note that most of the jobs selected for contrast are relatively low paying. This could indicate that the authors in question assemble the economic contextual backdrop in order to highlight the power imbalance of the employee/employer relationship as they experience it in their own lives, and to express indignation at protesting players' ability to exercise more agency over their own working lives than they.

The American Historical Contextual Backdrop

The second class of setting-objects identified as exerting a strong influence over the discourse was the historical. Just as the economic agent does for the background setting described above, the abstract figure of the *historical agent* occupies the centre of a web of contextualizing associations related to America's past. Again defined in terms of action and agency, this figure has some effect on the progression of human history—in a creative sense, such agents *make* history through their actions (or sometimes inaction). A variety of narrative objects assemble to form this figure, whom I call *the agent of change*[25] on the For Protesting Athletes side of the debate, and *those who serve/d* on the

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Against Protesting Athletes subsample, including references to charges of drunk driving, domestic violence, and other crimes.

[25] This title comes from an article in the dataset called "The athlete as agent of change" (Lonnie Bunch & David Skorton, The Washington Post, September 29, 2017).

other. Both versions of the historical agent are awarded additional attention in the following two chapters, as they are not only deemed integral to evoking a contextualizing background but also serve as primary character types central to moral messages found throughout the sample. Unlike the economic backdrop, which has a more noticeable contextualizing effect in the Against Protesting Athletes subsample, historical associations feature prominently on both sides of the debate.

In the For Protesting Athletes subsample, a variety of characters sharing the trait of *activism* work together to assemble the agent of change. A landscape of political struggle takes shape through references to students who "have always fought for the right to express themselves in schools" (author unknown, "Allegiance?", republished from The Washington Post in the Charleston Gazette-Mail, October 16, 2017), past athlete activists, of which Kaepernick is "the latest in a long line" (Gerald Harris, "kaepernick's Political Football", The New York Times, September 1, 2016), and celebrated civil rights figures like Rosa Parks and Malcolm X.

Parks, in particular, is invoked to justify the discomfort experienced by many in watching players take a knee and to counter the argument that the anthem is the 'wrong time and place' for protest:

> Diaz believes many Americans don't like the protests because they don't want to be made uncomfortable, an attitude she compared to people on the bus when Rosa Parks, a black woman, refused to move to the back of the bus. Many of them likely felt inconvenienced and that it wasn't the right time or place for Parks to protest.

> (Daniel Walmer, paraphrasing ex-marine Hazel Diaz, "Lebanon area residents offer opinions on patriotism, protests, free speech and NFL players taking a knee", The Lebanon Daily News (Pennsylvania), October 15, 2017).

The quote is explicit about who Parks was, what she did, and how it relates to the anthem protests, but it also performs connotative work by sending associative webs to the concepts of necessary social progress—of course African Americans should be able to sit wherever they choose—and civil disobedience—boundaries will be crossed and people made uncomfortable in the process of making change.

While neatly displayed in the case of Parks, the moral virtue of *transgression* is a prominent feature of the stories associated with all historical precursors to the NFL anthem protesters. As touched on in my literature review, Jackie Robinson famously 'broke the colour barrier', and Mohammed Ali was arrested and stripped of a boxing title for refusing to be drafted during the Vietnam War. Like employment in the economic, *transgression* is a primary relational object or plotline in the American historical backdrop that ties together agents of change and the societal forces or conventions they seek to change. Recall Frank's point (2010, p. 70), conveyed earlier, that central to the human condition is the question of which boundaries to respect and which to cross. In Robinson's case, it was baseball's social boundary of racial exclusion that he sought to transgress. For Ali, it was the normative/legal boundary of the military draft, but also the more personal one between doing what your nation asks of you and what you believe is right. Both men are widely celebrated for these decisions now. Acts that push up against the boundaries drawn by powerful forces, or against these forces themselves—be they the government, international threats, or the dominant culture—are plentiful in and integral

to stories told of America's past, and this history serves to contextualize the anthem protests of today in ways that emphasize their alignment with this rich tradition of transgression.

While I observed historical associations exerting an influence across the sample, articles espousing an Against Protesting Athletes position drew contextual support from a stock of past characters and events quite different from those that didn't. Narrative objects such as America's Founding Fathers, its fallen soldiers, war veterans, and "first responders" are assembled into another type of historical agent: *those who serve/d*. Whereas agents of change in the For Protesting Athletes subsample are historically situated within a broader story called the Civil Rights Movement—by definition an internal struggle—those who serve/d are linked (both explicitly by authors and through familiar associations made by the reader) to national threats from without—various wars abroad as well as foreign attacks on U.S. soil such as 9/11. This outward orientation requires a different type of primary relation, as well, which I will call *protection.*

Unlike 'activism', a word that can conjure up chaotic scenes of societal disruption involving picket lines, rowdy marches in the street, and inflammatory slogans, 'service' and 'protection' invokes the opposite: a return to order. The images that cluster around this type of historical agent display military conformity, immense collective efforts organized from above, nationalistic traditions of self-sacrifice, and the social capital that accompanies the 'honour' of serving one's country. Those who serve/d are not boundary-crossers; they are boundary protectors.

While both areas of the historical backdrop described here bring a sense of national pride to bear on the events at hand, in this case pride is accompanied by fear of

losing what has been gained. When contextualized by this combination of pride and fear, the discomfort engendered by the anthem protests is not an admissible and predictable part of collective forward motion; it is a signal of attack and a call to defense-positions for those who continue to serve America. In this sense, service is not restricted to acts of military engagement or ‘first response’ but open to everyday interactions in which patriots speak up for America’s fallen heroes, of which storytelling, such as the authors studied here are engaged in, is an important one.

Chapter 4: Cast of Characters

Stories have a singular capacity to delve the character of the characters who deal with trouble. Stories incite and guide reflection on who these people are and the significance of being that kind of person. – Arthur Frank (2010, p. 29)

My analysis of characterization in the NFL anthem protest discourse yielded a rich and surprisingly uniform system of character traits and motivations. What perhaps should have been less of a surprise was that it was at this level of character analysis—parsing the texts for examples of victims, villains, and heroes—that cohesive narrative forms began to emerge from the subsamples. In examining the assembly of blame, the extension of sympathy and compassion, and the glorification of particular individuals and actions, I began to feel that I was detecting cornerstone elements of the ideological structures that animate the debate over anthem protest—particularly which lines are perceived as being crossed and which transgressions deemed unforgivable, admissible, or even necessary.

I say that this should not have come as a surprise because of the undeniable centrality of character to narrative structure. As quoted in the epigraph above (Frank, 2010, p. 29, emphasis in original), "stories have a singular capacity to delve the *character* of the *characters*"; they are models that allow us to work out how we feel about others and ourselves, what makes them *them* and us *us*, and how we understand human actions in relation to the world. In the Q/NPF literature, a policy narrative is defined as sometimes lacking a plot or moral, but always having at least one character and a setting (Jones et. al., 2014, p. 11-12). And while setting is somewhat elusive (at least as I have chosen to frame it) in that it relies on background associations, characterization is more

direct and concrete. Understanding character-objects depends on plenty of the same kind of ready-made knowledge brought to the narrative by the reader, but what is most informative is not usually found in these associations but written into the content of the story for all to see.

I present my character findings below in three sections. In the first two, I describe the heroes, villains, and victims found in each of the For and Against Protesting Athletes subsamples in turn. In the third section, I identify relations between the character schemas just described and the contextual backdrops discussed in the previous chapter. As with the economic and historical agents I described as crucial to the setting of the discourse, narrative objects presented here are assigned to character roles based on what they *do* in the anthem protest narratives. The practice of eschewing any imagined ability to define characters based on their "psychological essence" in favour of a model that attends to their participation in a "sphere of actions" has roots in Aristotelian poetics and was learned from the French semioticians, as mentioned earlier (Barthes, 1977, p. 104-107). This approach aligns with conventional character-based techniques employed by practitioners of the Q/NPF, who do not limit their use of the term to individuals but apply it to groups and organizations, as well as "any anthropomorphized abstraction or broad categories" (Jones et. al., 2014, p. 11).

With this open definition in mind, it may not surprise the reader to see the same narrative objects identified as important to the setting reappear here, this time solidly in character form. Kaepernick and other players (protesting and otherwise), the NFL, its fans, Donald Trump and the U.S. government, activists, and Americans of the past and

present all receive ample characterization, and many are framed as more than one type of character in different areas of the discourse.

While plenty of variety was found in the actions, attributes, and motivations assigned to characters across the sample, patterns of characterization were also identified both in and across the For and Against Protesting Athletes subsamples. Generally, victims were portrayed as voiceless, heroes as selfless, and villains as selfish.

Characterization in the Against Protesting Athletes Subsample

When it came to discussing victims, or those deemed to be harmed or suffering, the most common universal thread was not what they did but what they did *not* do—speak and be heard. Regardless of any author's evaluation of the anthem protests, what was predominantly observed across the dataset was a story of marginalization; of segments of the American populace brushed to the side, left behind, silenced, or forgotten entirely.

An array of narrative objects assemble in and across texts in the Against Protesting Athletes discourse to form a composite character-object already discussed in Chapter 3: *those who serve/d.* Many of the character-objects cast to this victim role are voiceless, or lack the ability to speak for themselves, because they have been lost to the annals of time. They include America's Founding Fathers, its fallen soldiers, police officers slain in the line of duty, and others who have given their lives in service of America and its people, such as its "servicemembers" and "first responders" (Mr. Gaetz, House Proceeding from The Library of Congress, quoted in Washington: Remove Tax-Exempt Status of Professional Sports Leagues, September 27, 2017). Also animating this victim-character are the men and women of the armed forces still fighting for America

today, and those surviving veterans who risked their lives only to be disrespected by protesting athletes on national television. Veterans and soldiers are not voiceless in the same literal sense that the deceased are, but they are portrayed in a similar way—as lacking a platform to defend or express themselves in the public sphere, which finds stark contrast in the protesting athletes who live in the limelight of modern American culture and seem to have their opinions waited on with bated breath. In this case, lack of voice can be attributed to both necessity and humility; to keep Americans safe often requires labouring outside of the public eye (outside of U.S. borders, for instance), and these selfless individuals rarely seek recognition for their actions.

Humility and service, of course, are generally viewed as heroic characteristics, and this is the case here as well. Those who serve/d occupy both the hero and victim-roles on this side of the debate, with their heroic characteristics also including courage, selflessness, and sacrifice. They are portrayed as forsaking personal gain and risking their own wellbeing in order to serve in the interests of the American majority. The duality of their character can perhaps be best understood in relation to *respect*, the primary demand at the heart of the grievance voiced by those offended by the anthem protests. As we can see in the quotation below, respect is conveyed in a transactional sense as something that must be *earned*. Put simply, respect gets respect; showing or giving it is a prerequisite for receiving it back:

> How are we as proud Americans of our nation and all that it stands for, including our soldiers who gave their lives during our wars, for our veterans and for our rights and privileged democracy supposed to respect "their cause" when they view our national pride so dismissively and disdainfully.

(Peter Pinette, “Outraged by disrespect some NFL players showing during anthem”, Bangor Daily News (Maine), August 21, 2017)

Refusing to stand for the national anthem, which these authors seem to view as a symbolic representation of those who serve/d, transgresses a normative boundary held sacred to many—that between what is considered appropriate tribute to those who have *earned respect* through self-sacrifice in service of ‘the greater good’, and that which fails to meet the requirements of this norm, and as such takes the form of *dis*respectful behaviour.

This transgression appears to be deemed especially egregious because it makes use of the very rights and freedoms that are viewed as a gift from those who serve/d. Freedom of expression and the right to petition the government for redress of grievances (both provided under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution) are viewed as originating with the Founding Fathers but requiring continual protection from other self-sacrificing American heroes ever since, including now and in the future. This is what makes the use of these freedoms against symbols of America (a word which here connotes the semi-inclusive character of those who serve/d), such an affront. As Mike Butler, a retired marine, puts it, “it's like spitting in the face of those who fought and died for those freedoms" (quoted by Paul Pierce and Mary Ann Thomas in “Game day shunned”, Tribune Review (Greennsburg, PA), November 13, 2017).

Those who serve/d, who are usually discussed in heroic terms, slide into the victim role when their service is not repaid with the respect they have so clearly (in the eyes of many) earned. Their voicelessness, either due to death (historical marginalization/exclusion from the living present), soldiering overseas (geographic

distance and invisibility), humility, or public disinterest (cultural marginalization) leaves them reliant on others to demand that this debt of gratitude be met. Speaking on behalf of others is another action that constitutes heroism for both those who are For and Against Protesting Athletes. In the Against Protesting Athletes subsample, narrative objects such as President Trump and other vocal disapproving politicians are introduced and commended for calling attention to the disrespectful nature of the protests and demanding that the norms of conventional, 'patriotic' engagement with the anthem be honoured. While these heroes are secondary to those who serve/d, they demonstrate the same selflessness by speaking up for others[26] and protecting the boundaries on which they depend.

Intersecting with the boundary of dis/respect in this case is that of sports/politics, with protesting athletes viewed as violating the purity of sports entertainment and victimizing not only those who serve/d but also fans who view professional sports as a 'safe space' free of politics, or more specifically free of the progressive or identity politics they associate with the anthem protests. Frustration over this transgression and appreciation for selfless heroes like Trump can be found in the following short quotation:

> Our president is right to be upset about this! Many of us (including more and more African-Americans) detest that self-righteous progressives inject politics into everything and play the race-card at every turn.

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[26] In the anthem protest discourse, as elsewhere, 'speaking up' for others is metaphorically analogous with 'standing up' for them, whereas 'holding one's tongue' when she or he has the ability to speak up (or act) for another is akin to 'turning one's back' on them. The point (which may be obvious) is that we understand the use of language in actional terms, as is simplified in the term "speech act" (Austin, 1962; Bakhtin, 1986). Speaking in support or rejection of someone can have the same effect as standing beside or walking away from them, and vice versa. As one the authors in my dataset says: "The NFL players took center stage and spoke loudly on Sunday. Even without speaking" (Kirk Bohls, "U.S. is their nation, too", Austin American-Statesman (Texas), September 26, 2017).

(Christopher Andrus, Dublin, quoted in "Talk Back debate on NFL players taking a knee", The East Bay Times (California), October 6, 2017)

True to narrative convention—many stories set reflecting adversaries into conflict over some stake (Barthes, 1977, p. 108)—villains in the Against Protesting Athletes discourse are characterised in opposite terms to those associated with its heroes. In contrast to those who serve/d, they are portrayed as selfish—as acting in their own interest at the expense of others. Of course, those who approve of the protests disagree (as is discussed in further detail below). They view protesting athletes as selflessly acting on the behalf of others, and this evaluative dissonance can be traced to another formative boundary. The symbolic line separating the interests of the majority and minority (which can also be thought of as dividing the collective Self and Other) weighs heavily on the discourse, with race acting as the primary determinate as to which side an individual or group resides on.[27] For those Against Protesting Athletes, the goal of bringing attention to the alleged or perceived[28] mistreatment of people of colour in the U.S. may be well intentioned and even noble. But when this requires showing disdain for America's national symbols and thereby offending all whom they are purported to represent it is no longer viewed as a productive or valuable route to social change. This line of reasoning can be seen in the quote from Peter Pinette above, who places quotation marks around the term "their cause", as well as in other texts that frame Kaepernick's objection to the

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[27] The term 'minority', of course, is often used in reference to racial groups that make up less of the national populace than do another. While several authors suggest, and one states explicitly, that the anthem protests are "deliberately insulting to most Americans" (editorial, "An NFL Double Standard on Speech", The New York Post, September 13, 2016), whether this means white Americans specifically, as the racial majority, is left unsaid.

[28] Qualifications emphasizing the uncertainty of claims that race-based oppression exists in America are common in the Against Protesting Athletes subsample, but appear infrequently if at all on the other side of the dataset.

oppression of people of colour in America as a 'special interest' suitable for conventional protesting measures but out of place in a public, majority-serving forum such as the NFL arena.

Characterization in the For Protesting Athletes Subsample

A similar character schema, with several notable differences, is assembled in the For Protesting Athletes discourse. Like their counterparts, authors who support the actions of protesting athletes portray their victims as voiceless. Similar to veterans and soldiers, these victims live at the margins of American society, and therefore their plight goes largely unrecognized and unaddressed unless someone of heroic character (like a protesting athlete) lends them their voice and demands that their experiences be acknowledged and respected. These victims, however, are not only voiceless but *silenced*, which is the label I will apply to the composite victim-character on this side of the debate. Again, a broad swath of narrative objects can be observed compiling to form this abstract character, including people of colour in America, women, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ folks. These groups and individuals are not just marginalized as a result of their job description or through the passage of time and their own mortality, but in the conventionally understood sense of lacking access to particular rights, resources, and opportunities awarded to other, privileged groups. Marginalization of these characters is framed as an ongoing issue in America in the following quotation, with their liberation representing the ultimate goal of a well-meaning society:

> Our nation has always struggled to equally apply the ideals embodied in our Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Although the United States is steeped in the

> principles of individual liberty, freedom of expression and democracy, people of color, immigrants and women have struggled to receive the full benefits of citizenship. And as the struggle to perfect our union continues. Admitting to our imperfection is not a weakness, nor is it unpatriotic.
>
> (Lonnie Bunch & David Skorton, “The athlete as agent of change”, The Washington Post, September 29, 2017)

While these authors recognize the struggles of the silenced, they could be criticized by others in favour of the anthem protests for legitimizing the continued oppression of women, immigrants, and people of colour as a natural feature of a nation founded on noble ideals but struggling to actualize ‘perfection’ in the real world. The quotation below, on the other hand, pulls no such punches:

> In taking the stand he did, Kaepernick is expressing his dismay that the country he loves is built and thrives upon a collection of self-aggrandizing myths and lies. The 'home of the brave' has built its empire on genocide, theft, and the betrayal of allies. The 'land of the free' on the other hand, was built on the kidnapping and enslavement of hundreds of thousands of Africans and their descendants.
>
> (Mike Mcdevitt, “And the banner yet waves”, Sherbrooke Record (Quebec), September 25, 2017)

This perspective (which, it should be noted, comes from outside America) highlights the active role of the oppressor, in this case played by America the nation. There is no victim without villain, which attacks, betrays, and exploits others for its own ill-gotten gain. The resulting present-day voicelessness of descendants of African slaves and others is therefore not circumstantial; they are silenced by the powers-that-be in a process of

subjugation, the existence of which can be corroborated by a myriad of historical precedents (as is done in the quote above).

In addition to being applied to disempowered and oppressed groups, the characteristic of being silenced is combined with attributes of heroism to illustrate the ongoing struggle between individual *activists* who 'speak truth to power' (also discussed in the historical contextual backdrop section in Chapter 3), and those they oppose, the former of whom are often targeted and stifled by the later for their resistant efforts. This dual victim-hero role applies to students like India Landry, who refused to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance for 200 days at her Texas high school before being expelled and then reinstated due to public pressure (original author unknown, "Allegiance?", republished from The Washington Post in the Charleston Gazette-Mail, October 16, 2017). A slew of athlete activists associated with America's civil rights movement such as sprinters John Carlos and Tommie Smith, boxer Mohammed Ali, basketball player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, and baseball player Jackie Robinson are also positioned as courageous heroes who paid a price for their resolve in the face of downward pressure from the establishment.

While heroic in their own right, these activists from past and present are evoked to provide reference points from which to view the character of Colin Kaepernick and other protesting NFL players, who are the protagonists and primary heroes of the For Protesting Athletes discourse. Like those who serve/d on the other side of the debate, protesting athletes are portrayed as selflessly acting/speaking for others—the silenced—and undertaking personal risk to do so:

> Kaepernick's choice not to stand during the national anthem could create a public backlash that might cost him millions in endorsements and affect his value as a player on his team, reducing his salary earnings or even jeopardizing his job. If team ticket sales seriously dipped as a result, he would pay for his stance. We should admire those who risk personal gain in the service of promoting the values of their country. (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, "Kaepernick's protest is patriotic", The Washington Post, August 31, 2016)

As touched on earlier, the divergence between how protesting players are characterized on the two sides of the dataset—as selfish by one group and selfless by the other—can be explained in part by the presence of the Self/Other, or majority/minority boundary that runs through popular conceptions of American identity. Across the dataset, those who serve/d are portrayed as acting on behalf of collective 'America', while protesting players act on behalf of a minority group *within* America. The difference lies in whether support for this 'special interest' is positioned in opposition to the collective or viewed as bolstering it (by striving for 'perfection' of the American union, which benefits all Americans). As illustrated in the quotations below, those opposed to the protests view them as dangerous acts of divisive betrayal:

> To see players kneeling or, even worse, holding up black gloved fists intentionally reminiscent of the Black Panthers' separatist nationalism of the 1960s, encourages division and dissent during one of the few days a week, during one of the few weeks a year when a great American tradition brings us together in living rooms, bars and stadiums across the United States.

> (Ross Kaminsky, "Football should be a unifier, not a platform for dissent", The Denver Post, September 16, 2016)
>
> Frankly, it made many of us sick to our stomachs or just plain livid to see such open contempt for our country - particularly by an overindulged professional athlete who has done quite well here. If he doesn't like it here, Delta is ready when he is. But he knows he'd never flourish the way he has in the United States of America.
>
> (Author unknown, "Turnabout", the Augusta Chronicle (Georgia), August 14, 2017)

With the exception of the second author above (who at one point compares Kaepernick to an American athlete playing overseas)[29] and perhaps several others, most in the Against Protesting Athletes subsample appear to view black protesting players and other 'minorities' as part of the American Self or collective (at least at a surface or outward-facing level). This is partly what makes the protests so frustrating to them. Kaepernick, other protesting players, and the NFL are often portrayed as *self*-victimizing, which we can view in a double-sense—Not only do they needlessly cause their own material (financial) suffering, but they also attack symbols that are representative of *themselves* as Americans, causing emotional-psychological suffering to a group to which they belong.

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[29] The quote I am referring to, which seems to reflect ignorance of or a strategic failure to acknowledge that Kaepernick is an American-born athlete playing in his home country, goes as follows: "Imagine for a moment you're a young basketball player who accepts a deal to play pro ball in Europe. But during your stay, you decide to disrespect your host country's national anthem before each game. Don't you think the country's fans would have every right to despise you and boo you off the team?" (Author unknown, "Turnabour", the Augusta Chronicle (Georgia), August 14, 2017).

Instead of viewing the actions of protesting players as creating an internal split, or as extraditing their perpetrators and those they claim to represent from the American Self ('Othering' themselves), most authors For Protesting Athletes appear to view this divisive boundary as already existing. The regularity with which white police officers shoot and kill unarmed black men and women and face no culpability for doing so provides evidence of the Otherness of African Americans[30] in their own country, which is what motivated the protests in the first place (Coombs et. al., 2017). No accusations of betrayal or divisiveness emanate from the For Protesting Athletes camp, despite the agreement of these authors that players act on the behalf of a subordinate or minority group of Americans, because they view America as already divided and see those who are denied "the full benefits of citizenship" as the ones betrayed (Lonnie Bunch & David Skorton, quoted at the beginning of this section).

Further, the attempts of protesting athletes to achieve equality for silenced minorities are viewed as efforts to improve America, thus serving the interests of the entire collective. Instead of demanding *respect* and gratitude for gifts given by those who serve/d, they call for *justice*, or the fulfillment of promises made. These promises—of "individual liberty, freedom of expression and democracy" for all—are made in the Constitution, as noted by Bunch and Skorton. However, they are also translated into expectations through the abundance of stories about the American Dream in circulation

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[30] Note that the prefix 'African' denotes a difference from 'regular' (white) Americans. Whiteness's claim to represent the Self not only of particular nations but all of humanity is summated nicely by John Storey (2012, p. 183), who explains that, "part of the power of whiteness is that it seems to exist outside categories of 'race' and ethnicity. These categories appear to apply only to non-white people; whiteness seems to exist as a human norm from which races and ethnicities are a deviation."

globally, or what Mcdevitt, the Canadian critic also quoted above, disparages as "a collection of self-aggrandizing myths and lies".

The primary villain assembled in this storyworld is she or he who fail to uphold these promises. President Donald Trump draws particular ire based on the special obligations authors associate with his office and his inflammatory remarks demeaning protesting athletes.[31] As one author puts it:

> It is clear that the president did not stand by his oath, by calling out and demanding retribution against those few who were clearly employing rights granted by the Constitution of the United States.
>
> (K. Ellis Davis, "Letter Protesting players are protected by the Constitution", The Salt Lake Tribune, October 18, 2017)

However, the charge of failed responsibility is also directed at the U.S. government, the corporate sector, and the established order as a whole. Many authors For Protesting Athletes appear to employ what is referred to in the NPF literature a "mechanical causal mechanism" of blame assignment: by asserting that the harm they observe is being done through systemic racism, they imply that *the system is broken* (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 241). This finds contrast in the Against Protesting Athletes discourse, which more commonly employs an "intentional causal mechanism" that locates the source of the problem as "wilful nefarious action" taken by protesting athletes.

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[31] The majority of articles sampled on the for protesting athletes side of the dataset were published after September 22nd, 2017, when Trump made the following comments at a rally for Republican Senator Luther Strange in Alabama: "That's a total disrespect of our heritage. That's a total disrespect of everything that we stand for … Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, you'd say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out! He's fired'". Alternately, more articles in the Against Protesting Athletes subsample were published closer to the beginning of my sampling time frame, when Kaepernick first took a knee.

Like protesting players in the Against Protesting Athletes storyworld, Trump is described by authors who support the protests in selfish terms. He is portrayed as manipulating the American people for his own political gain; of inflaming his base of support and undermining American unity by inciting reactionary hatred. These traits can be observed in the following quotations, the first of which relays comments from the commissioner of the NFL and the second of which conveys Marie Tillman's response to Trump using her husband Pat's name (a former NFL player who left football to join the military in the wake of 9/11 and was later killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan) to support his Against Protesting Athletes sentiments:

> Goodell didn't mention Trump by name but clearly referred to the president in a written statement Saturday that emphasized the need for "a sense of unity in our country and our culture." He said, "Divisive comments like these demonstrate an unfortunate lack of respect for the NFL, our great game and all of our players, and a failure to understand the overwhelming force for good our clubs and players represent in our communities." (Jim Puzzanghera, "Trump's comments stir up sports leagues", The Baltimore Sun, September 24, 2017)

> Marie Tillman wanted to set the record straight on her husband's sacrifice after President Donald Trump referred to Pat Tillman in a Monday morning retweet targeted at NFL protests of the national anthem … As a football player and soldier, Pat inspired countless Americans to unify, Tillman told CNNs Brian Stelter. It is my hope that his memory should always remind

> people that we must come together. Pat's service, along with that of every man and woman's service, should never be politicized in a way that divides us. (Daniel Mano, "Pat Tillman's wife: We must unify, not divide, after Trump comments", The East Bay Times (California), September 26, 2017)

While selfishness, divisiveness, and 'politicization' mirror the villainous characteristics that appear on the other side of the debate, the relational actions of *silencing* and *dehumanizing* paint villains in the For Protesting Athletes discourse in a slightly different light and extend this villainy to upset football fans themselves. In an article titled "Do white NFL fans see players as mascots?" Gracie Bonds Staples (The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, October 8, 2017) describes a "precarious relationship" between black players and white fans, in which players are supported only as long as they remain the prototypical, two-dimensional characters that fans expect to see on the field and their television screens, defined by their skills alone and devoid of deeper problems, concerns, beliefs, and opinions unrelated to the game. She quotes Erin C. Tarver, an assistant professor of philosophy at Oxford College of Emory University, who suggests that "many white fans are happy to root for black men on the field, but unwilling to accept them as full human beings". This sentiment is echoed quite consistently in another article:

> Why are we, as sports fans, continually surprised when one of our heroes turns out to be a real person, with real feelings who is living in the same world we also live in? And when that athlete is black, why does white America respond with anger, as if the hero has broken some kind of sacred rule or understood deal? That

> deal seems to be, "You just go out and win games, collect your check, and if we really like you, you can retire and sell us stuff in TV commercials."
>
> (Gerald Harris, “Kaepernick’s Political Football”, The New York Times, September 1, 2016)

Like their slave-owning ancestors, white fans upset by the protests appear here to be objectifying black players and imposing restrictions on their humanity. By taking a “shut up and play” approach to athlete activism (Yan et. al., 2018, p. 26), they attempt to silence black protesting players just as the system that privileges whites based on their skin colour has done and continues to do to America’s Others, which also include immigrants, women, and LGBTQ+ folks, on a broader scale.

Contextualization: Connecting Characters to Settings

Several aspects of the Against Protesting Athletes character schema can be observed drawing on the fortifying influence of the economic contextual backdrop. Recalling that the texts evoke a background of economic associations by populating abstract categories of economic agent such as employer, employee, customer, and taxpayer, we can cast those who serve/d to a new role: that of donor/creditor. Depending on (and perhaps flowing from) the reader’s familiarity with economic systems of exchange and charity is the depiction of the rights enjoyed by all Americans (including protesting athletes) as a *gift* from heroes past and present that nonetheless disserves *repayment* in the form of public displays of respect and admiration. The sacrifices made and rewards received by those who serve/d are often contrasted directly with those of NFL players, with the latter found wanting:

> "They didn't get a 'signing bonus' when they were drafted or joined up," [an unidentified Veterans Affairs worker] wrote. "Most didn't even get a promise they would be treated like everybody else. The promise they got was of several years of danger and death and the understanding that they were part of something bigger than us all, our country."
> (Terry Dickson, “Kaepernick shouldn’t be focus on TV”, Florida Times-Union (Jacksonville), September 22, 2016).

> The loss of glory, endorsements and lucrative contracts are costly, but they pale in comparison to the bloodshed to defend our country. Protesting the national anthem and our flag demonstrates irreverence for the sacrifices of those who pay the ultimate price for our freedoms - including our displays of defiance. (Patrice Lee Onwuka, “NFL players’ protests need to take a knee; Counterpoint don’t disrespect the anthem”, Dayton Daily News (Ohio), September 17, 2017)

Likewise, authors in the Against subsample use cost/benefit-style analysis to weigh the offence given by protesting players against the possible gains it could achieve for minorities (the ‘special interests’) and deem the venture untenable. It must be counterproductive because it upsets the majority of Americans (or America’s white majority) to the point of yielding a poor return on risk taken and resources invested (including time, energy, and of course dollars lost). This is a hegemonic storyworld oriented along capitalist lines. The normative boundary that determines what an employee can ‘get away with’ without being deemed ‘too distracting’ is located where

their earning power leaves it, and human rights are trumped by the economic rights of employers and customers, the latter of whom will boycott when a product fails to meet their standards (moral or otherwise). To be clear, what Kaepernick is 'distracting' fans from, while not always explicitly stated, is the product that they are assumed only to wish to consume: NFL football. His relevant 'earning power', in this case, applies only to the revenue he can generate for his bosses, not money made for himself. As one author puts it, "part of Kaepernick's beef is with the treatment of black people by police officers, but the reason he's sidelined is a green issue", implying that his skills on the field fail to counterbalance the loss in viewership that his political position is thought to effect (Daniel Suddeath, "Daniel Suddeath column", Glasgow Daily Times (Kentucky), August 9, 2017).

This transactional model of character relations betrays a hegemonic faith in the fairness of the system; a belief that, at least in America, people generally get what they disserve, what was agreed upon, or what the market will bear. When this eye-for-an-eye relationality is perceived to break down, for instance when those who serve/d are left uncompensated for their noble deeds, outrage becomes a justifiable response.

The primary grievance assembled by authors in the For Protesting Athletes subsample also has a transactional character, with minorities and other silenced groups in America framed as being cheated of the equal rights and freedoms promised them in the Constitution. A key difference appears to be that while one collective narrative centres on a debt of gratitude owed for a price already paid, demands of equality made by people of colour have never been met in America (as well as many other nations). Instead of functioning economically, with sacrifices made and privileges gained exchanged for

respect and consent given as if they were bartered materials, the notion of equal rights has always been *immaterial*. While its existence or lack thereof can be measured in terms of material wealth, physical safety, and so on, it remains a ideal rooted in humanism, which emphasizes more than mere economic agency, and thus evades strict reduction to economic terms and allegory.

Because the For Protesting Athletes discourse centres on the demand for yet-to-be achieved ideals, the image of America that it assembles is essentially forward or future facing. It presents a story of how far America has to go, which counters and is countered in turn by one about how far the nation has come. While it may seem contradictory, arguing the validity of anthem protest as a route to a better future appears to require at least as much historical contextualization (or looking *back*) as does the alternative. By linking past to present through antecedents to the actions of protesting players—be they activist athletes of yesteryear, civil rights figures unafraid of causing white discomfort, or students versed in the tradition of institutional struggle—authors draw on instances of counter-hegemonic resistance embedded in the American historical contextual background to create a continuum that stretches into the future. The validity of the anthem protests depends on their situation within this continuum of struggle, not because it gives them the appearance of being any kind of a safe bet to attain the ideals it reaches towards, but because it is the only avenue that exists for trying. As Harry Edwards has proclaimed about the endless nature of such efforts (2016b, p. 4), “there are no final victories! Only ‘the struggle’ and ‘the people’ on whose behalf it is waged”.

The Against Protesting Athletes discourse also draws contextualization from allusions to history, but it does so primarily to create a causal pathway between past and

present. “The struggle” that disapproving observers primarily associate with the flag and anthem is not one taking place within America today, in the streets and courtrooms of black communities, but rather the struggles for American independence, for safety from geo-political threats like Nazi Germany and Terrorism, and for the continued provision of American freedoms that Others would take away if given the chance. Told from a privileged position of Self-confidence, in the sense of projecting confidence in one’s ability to speak for and represent the nation with which she or he identifies, this is a hegemonic tale of a mature, unified nation that works to paper over uncomfortable racial fissures.

Not only past-facing in its demand for gratitude towards great deeds done, this discourse also locates America’s golden age somewhere in years gone by. In this sense, the lack of gratitude shown by protesting athletes, people of colour, immigrants, and the like is not just an indignation in and of itself; it is/they are actively making the nation worse for everyone. For these authors, America is not stuck in some continual process of arriving. It arrived some time ago, and has in fact gone too far in the wrong direction. The call to return to a version of American gone-by is common to articles in the dataset lamenting the lack of respect shown by protesting athletes, and is reflective of the same sentiment behind Trump’s successful Make America Great Again slogan. The struggle described here, then, also contains a future or aspirational component. But instead of pursuing something yet to be obtained, the ultimate goal is to bring back what (white) Americans—“the people” on whose behalf the struggle is waged—have lost. This dimension of the anthem protest discourse and others related to contrasting images of America’s past, present, and future are discussed further in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Moral of the Story

The moral issue is what a person's responsibilities are towards people on either side of the boundary and towards the boundary itself – Arthur Frank, 2010, p. 70.

In a narrative sense, morals can be understood as core messages or 'life lessons'. They can be found in fiction, of course, but are also regularly extracted from real-world situations—think of the last time you heard someone say, "moral of the story is…".[32] As a collectively experienced phenomenon that has elicited multitudinous narrative responses (dare I say narratudinous?), the NFL anthem protests have been subjected to the moralizing tendency of human storying many times over. In this chapter I present the primary moral currents found in the two primary subsamples.

According to Frederick Meyer (2014, p. 63), the deeper meaning or moral of a story "relates to the general patterns it reveals about why things are as they are, how the world works, or what should be." With this in mind, the moral content of the For and Against Protesting Athletes articles is presented following a temporal progression. Again discussing the Against Protesting Athletes moral in full before moving to the For Protesting Athletes discourse, I first examine how the body of texts works together to assemble a memory of America. Next, I tie this memory into an image of the present and identify a problematic mass *forgetting* inferred in each set of texts. The storytelling engaged in by the authors of the texts themselves can be viewed as an attempt to address this issue through *reminding* certain groups of important features of American history.

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[32] The identification of morals in lived experiences is a prime example of "the continuing work of storying everyday life" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 39).

This snapshot of the current moment and the issue of forgetting are then situated within larger background narratives that frame the allocation of blame (or in the case of the Against Protesting Athletes discourse, a "deep story" provided by Arlie Hochschild). I follow this with a discussion of the primary solutions offered in each subsample as a route to distilling an abstract moral[33] ("this is a story about what happens when….", Meyer, 2014, p. 63) and surmising aspects of a preferred future that these fixes could lead to. Finally, I reflect on these solutions in relation to hegemony and counter-hegemony, situating the aims of those who support or oppose protesting athletes within a broader struggle over the consent or resistance of the subjugated under the currently dominant social order.

Moral of the Against Protesting Athletes Story

To summarize findings from previous chapters, narrative objects central to the Against Protesting Athletes discourse are contextualized against a backdrop of American history that emphasizes the heroic acts of service carried out by defenders of the American people. Overlaid on this backdrop is another, the economic, which highlights the financial agency or freedom of the selfless heroes, selfish villains, and voiceless victims found in this storyworld, and casts a web of associated transactional relations amongst them such as employment and boycott. The collective story told by these authors hinges on a demand for respect and gratitude, which orient readers towards the past. These demands draw support from both contextual backdrops: the *price* paid by heroes of the

[33] As a reminder, those employing the Q/NPF method have commonly employed the terms "policy solution" and "moral of the story" interchangeably (Weible & Schlager, 2014)

past requires the reciprocal *payment* of respect today, and likewise, the historical *gifts* of freedom and democracy enjoyed by Americans of the present demand their gratitude.

The memory assembled in the Against Protesting Athletes texts is largely one of melancholic nostalgia for a simpler time when principled Americans honoured the core normative boundaries of respect and tradition upon which the nation relies. These authors yearn for the return of an age when simple entertainment was just that, free of the divisive identity politics that seem to have permeated the last vestiges of pure American culture, from the NFL to the academy awards (Dennis Walker, Yorba Linda, "Save the Sermons", Chico Enterprise-Record (California) October 1, 2017). They lament the disappearance of strict "game operation manuals" and team behavioral codes that forbade all but the most respectful body language during the performance of the anthem ("stand at attention -- face the flag -- hold helmets in their left hands and refrain from talking or face discipline such as fines, suspensions and forfeiture of draft choices") (Jacqueline Bourgault, "Letter: NFL players should protest on own time", Sentinel & Enterprise (Fitchburg, Massachusetts).[34] And they mourn the loss of a citizenry that recognized "the price of freedom" and the "measure of sacrifice" that made America the great nation it is today (D. Harmon, "Don't forget the high price paid for freedom of expression – it is not free", Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City), July 4, 2017).

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[34] Interestingly, the memory assembled in by authors Against Protesting Athletes seems to have athletes standing at attention for the anthem since the beginning of sport or nation, which ever came first. Yet, anthem performance has only been performed before all NFL games since World War II, and players have only been mandated to be on the field during the song since 2009—before then they usually remained in the locker room (Willingham, 2017).

Embedded in this wistful memory is a critique of the present, which is connected to the past through a problematic plotline of *forgetting*. As Harmon (the last author quoted above) adds at the end of an eloquent reminiscence of his late father and others of America's "Greatest Generation", "I think there is a new generation of young Americans who have no idea what price has been paid by other generations of men and women." Interestingly for our purposes, this can be viewed (from my own imposed narrative perspective, to be clear) as an indictment of American storytelling—a tradition in its own right. Because stories of the past are always assembled in response to needs of the present (Frank, 2010, p. 83-84, drawing on Bakhtin), a failure to furnish younger generations with narratives that instil in them a reverence for the sacrifices made by American war heroes (imbuing these deeds with renewed "recency, salience, and emotional impact") is in part a failure of intergenerational storytellers. Without proper stories, which Julie Cruikshank describes as connecting, "as if by centripetal force, those areas of life that seem to be disintegrating", the America of the present appears to be falling apart. This failure or absence is in one sense what Harmon and other Against Protesting Athletes authors seek to rectify through their accounts. As such, *reminding* citizens of "the cost of freedom" enjoyed today is one solution implied in the texts.

The problem of mass forgetting can be situated within a larger background narrative of America's overall decline, in which economic, political, moral, and other shortcomings have led both to decreased global status and national wellbeing. The stories that reflect this common plotline (observable both inside and outside the

dataset, through casual conversation and engagement with mainstream media) project America's 'heyday' somewhere into a more prosperous or less trying past, which, as we have just seen, must be assembled anew with each telling. Many of the Against Protesting Athletes articles reflect this pattern, assembling a diminished present-America that suffers at the hands of either an unengaged younger generation or misguided protesters and provocateurs (both labels that are often applied to protesting players).

One author, Daniel Suddeath, focuses on the former culprit, citing declining intelligence, attention span, and political participation. After decrying low voter turnout in his home state, he says:

> Our ability to stay informed is also waning. We prefer a quick 10-second sound byte over a detailed story. We don't read books and we sure don't write like we once did. Who needs language when you have emojis anyway? With the direction we're headed politically and educationally, we may soon be back to writing on cave walls.
>
> (Daniel Suddeath, "Daniel Suddeath column", Glasgow Daily Times (Kentucky), August 9, 2017).

Alternatively, America's decline can be laid at the door of angry, foolish agitators, especially those bent on finding racial injustice even where none exists:

> Ironic, isn't it, that there were riots in Charlotte overnight Tuesday after an African-American man was shot dead by an African-American police officer. Police say the dead man got out of the car with a gun…Maybe it's like a longtime

> friend of mine said in an email: It's like our mamas always told us. Just ignore the fools and they'll finally go away.
>
> (Terry Dickson, “Kaepernick shouldn’t be focus on TV”, Florida Times-Union (Jacksonville), September 22, 2016)

As I touched on at the end of the last chapter, dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in America and the desire to return to a facsimile of the past (make America great *again*) was a common theme during the build up to the 2016 U.S. election, which coincided with the beginning of Kaepernick’s protest (Sandritter, 2017). American sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2016) has described this sentiment through what she calls “the deep story of the far right”. Developed over the course of five years of fieldwork in Louisiana and 60 interviews, 40 of them with Tea Party supporters, this is a “*feels-as-if* story” that conveys envy, anger, anxiety, grief, and suspicion in the form of a metaphorical narrative. Paraphrasing Hochschild’s longer version: the subject stands in the middle of a long line of people that ends at the American Dream. While most of those around the subject are white and male, the subject notices others, predominantly people of colour, immigrants, and career-driven women, cutting in line up ahead, causing the subject to move backwards instead of forwards. A liberal government waves the line-cutters in, affirming their right to be ahead of the subject.

This liberal government (the Obama administration) is no more, having been replaced by a conservative one that seems to have risen to power based on precisely the core fears Hochschild describes—of threats from without and mistreatment from above. This deep story can be heard in the background of many the articles in my dataset, as frustration with one’s lot in life and a siege mentality—expressed so aptly in Trump’s

desire to build a wall at the U.S./Mexico border—can be heard in jabs taken at 'misguided' or 'disconnected' dissenters and an unwillingness to entertain "their cause" (Peter Pinnette, "Outraged by disrespect some NFL players showing during anthem", Bangor Daily News (Maine), August 21, 2017). Draped over the narrative form in my sampled texts, these sentiments give rise to a collective memory of a better past and an image of a diminished present.

These articles also point to visions of America's preferable future through the solutions they propose. The most common of these are for fans and businesses to *boycott* the NFL who allow the protests to happen (previously discussed in Chapter 3: Setting the Scene), and for players to adhere to *approved methods* of protest or political action, such as voting or picketing.

Like Dickson, above, who urges others to "ignore the fools" in the hopes that they will go away, many of those opposed to the protests insist that they will be exercising their own individual freedoms by disassociating from the NFL. Putting an end to financial support is commonly trumpeted, however time and emotional divestment are also implied.[35] For these authors, boycott appears to represent a form of counter-protest. Responding to a perceived attack on their national symbols (which, as 'patriots' who identify with their nation, they interpret as an attack on themselves), they "stand up and tune out" the NFL (Dennis Walker, Yorba Linda, "Save the Sermons", Chico Enterprise-Record (California) October 1, 2017). As with protesting players, justification comes

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[35] While the concept of boycott is not always applied to the spending of money, the prominent influence of the economic contextual backdrop (especially on the Against side of the debate) causes non-financial relations like attention and fandom to be framed in financial terms (see Chapter 3: Setting the Scene). This trend can be explained by the expansion of neoliberal rationality experienced in recent decades (Brown, 2018), which is described in Footnote 21.

from pushing back against an oppressive system—this one comprised of a disingenuous 'liberal media', the continual creep of politicization, obtrusive celebrity culture, unengaged youth, spineless or morally defunct corporations like the NFL, and a misguided, dangerous, and growing population of minorities (bolstered by immigration, legal and otherwise).

These authors appear to benefit rhetorically from identification with both sides of the majority/minority divide. While gaining legitimation through claims that 'most Americans' are upset by the protests (and therefore the protesters must be wrong), they also tell an underdog story of standing up to the burgeoning forces just described. This is the story of the marginalized Self; a formerly secure majority made to feel like outsiders in their own land. As such, they tell a story of counter-protest with tenets similar to those of the movement they oppose: speaking for the voiceless, standing up to powerful forces, and so on.

Yet, while the plot device of 'taking your business elsewhere' may resemble dissent (in terms of constituting a withdrawal of support based on a critical evaluation), in this context it is hardly radical. Consumer boycott is conventionally understood as exercising one's freedom to choose, but in the capitalist marketplace this choice is always between options presented by and within a system, never between systems.[36] It contains no active, oppositional element, representing merely a financial turning-away, and as such it offers no real threat to capitalism and the regimes of hetero-normative patriarchy

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[36] This model of choice mirrors the classic Marxian illusion of working class freedom, where the worker appears free to choose whether or not to enter into a pact of employment, with whom, and for how long, but the real choice is between being exploited or jobless, which isn't much of a choice at all (Larrain, 1983, p. 36).

and white supremacy it supports.[37] Of course, these authors make no such claims to radicalism; I merely highlight differences between the approaches of disgruntled fans and transgressive protesting athletes to dispel any notions that boycotting the NFL over the protests could do anything other than reinforce the status quo. In fact, it can be interpreted as another, more stern *reminder* of the material consequences that come to those who act against 'the greater good'. When making the wrongness of protesting athletes' actions clear to them through storytelling fails, angered fans may attempt to tamp down the rising tide of difference and radicalism through exercising their economic clout. The moral of story is that those who bite the hand that feeds get bit back.

To contextualize the second primary solution on this side of the dataset—adherence to approved methods of pursuing social change—it is necessary to highlight the theme of staunch positivity and optimism that permeates this subsample, counter to what might be assumed from the above. Many authors, such as those quoted below, make a point of acknowledging America's faults but argue that their existence fails to justify turning one's back on their nation (as protesting athletes are perceived to be doing). They suggest that this reaction is not just misguided but also counterproductive:

> America is far from perfect, but it's the best the world has to offer, and it's getting better every day.

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[37] There are of course exceptive cases where mass organization and collective action involving boycott have had transformative effects, such as when boycotting South Africa over Apartheid played a role in bringing down a racist regime. My criticism is reserved for (often petulant) claims by individual shoppers that a business 'just lost a customer' because of the actions of its employees (which might sound familiar to anyone who has worked in customer service). If enough individuals shared this reaction it could pressure an employer into disciplining her or his employees but this hardly ever happens without coordinated effort, which is increasingly difficult to achieve due to the neoliberal conception of society as nothing more than a collections of self-interested individuals (Brown, 2018, p. 62). With this in mind, the tactic of individual boycott seems more likely to express a conflation of worker and capitalist on the part of the unhappy customer.

> (Matt Dwyer, Long Beach, "Kneeling on the Sidelines: The Wrong Way to Protest", The New York Post, September 30, 2017)
>
> To be sure, racism and injustice exist in America, but I challenge players to name a nation that has done more good for humanity in its short existence than America has. There are many reasons why millions of immigrants come here, legally and otherwise, and it's not because they expect to be oppressed here. Yes, America is imperfect, but if perfection is the standard required to end the protests, then we ought to apply that standard to professional athletes whenever they stumble. (Steve Fillerup, "NFL players are wrong", Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City), October 10, 2017)
>
> Today, our political leaders are unproductively partisan, our institutions are broken in ways that harm too may Americans, and our citizenry is disengaged. But, our nation is still full of promise, opportunity and hope. (Patrice Lee Onwuka, "NFL players' protests need to take a knee; Counterpoint don't disrespect the anthem", Dayton Daily News (Ohio), September 17, 2017)

The exceptionalism displayed above, with America portrayed as the eternal global vanguard of freedom, fairness, equality, opportunity, and so on, reinforces claims that if Americans *stick together* and keep doing things *the American way* they can overcome any challenge. With this in mind, protesting athletes appear to show lack of faith or fortitude, in addition to selfishness, by giving up on a nation that has

given so much, not just to them but also the world at large. By sowing division, their protest represents the wrong path to effective change, whether or not the change they hope to achieve is valid.

The ‘right way’, or ‘American way’ to effect change from this perspective appears in front of overlapping economic and historical contextual backdrops, as democratic process collides with (and is partially subsumed to) economic rights and priorities. As one cited individual puts it, "if they want to protest, they should go out, get a permit from City Hall, make up a sign and protest. But not on company time” (Mike Cooley, quoted by Jacqueline Bourgoult, “Letter: NFL players should protest on own time”, Sentinel & Enterprise (Fitchburg, Massachusetts), October 4, 2017). Protesting athletes’ democratic right to free speech may be recognized, but by exercising it “on company time” and in front of those who paid to see them play football, not make political statements, they transgress normative boundaries that dictate appropriate methods of expressing discontent in America as well as behaviour in the workplace. In defence of these boundaries, these authors implore athletes to work with the system instead of against it, and, if they are unwilling to do so, call on the NFL to enforce stricter anthem-related regulations.

As far as solutions go, hoping for protesting athletes to ‘come to their senses’ and adhere to traditional or approved methods for voicing displeasure with one’s country is clearly a bit of wishful thinking. As Meyer has explained (2014, p. 71), “when we use narrative to make sense, we are constructing a particular story on the basis of our general worldview.” As long as protesting athletes’ worldviews remain the same—in which, we can assume based on the comments of Kaepernick

and others, young black men are disproportionately targeted for acts of violence by police officers, people of colour face systemic oppression more broadly, and working with the system that actively oppresses them is not a viable route to change—they can be expected to continue to tell stories, through words as well as symbolic actions like anthem protest, that reflect these worldviews. Again, the solution depends on storytelling as a means to changing someone else's perspective (*reminding* them). Regulation, on the other hand, falls closer to the method of boycott in that both represent proactive responses by those who wield power (as consumers, investors, regulators, and so on) meant to silence dissenters and reaffirm the status quo.

In this case, the ultimate goal is a return to the 'simpler time' described at the beginning of this section, which appears dependent on people of colour either 'knowing their place' (and reflecting this knowledge in their adherence to conventions of inoffensive democratic engagement), or are 'put in their place' (either through boycott or regulation). All of these solutions are hegemonic in nature, in that they can be tied to moral lessons about the evils and consequences of trespassing against the established order. Stepping outside of ones approved character-role as athlete or actor, bringing 'personal' politics into the sacred confines of the sports arena, using one's agency as an influential public figure even if it contradicts the wishes of one's employer, or failing to show appropriate respect to those who made America what it is today (even if that 'what' is systematically tilted to privilege one race over others)—all represent transgressive behaviours detrimental to a system that benefits the power-elite. Despite many recognizing the

validity of the protesting athletes' concerns, by defending these boundaries authors Against Protesting Athletes demonstrate their consent to being ruled by a system that oppresses people of colour, LGBTQ+ folks, women, and the working class, and, more specific to this phenomenon, one that subjects people of colour to disproportionate threats of institutional violence and incarceration. They also actively contribute to the extension of hegemony by recruiting new subjects to this position through their narrative offerings.

Moral of the For Protesting Athletes Story

To again recap findings from the previous two chapters, a backdrop of American history provides primary associative context for the For Protesting Athletes discourse. Making up this backdrop is a lineage of civil rights activists, which protesting athletes are knitted into as "the latest in a long line" (Gerald Harris, "Kaepernick's Political Football", The New York Times, September 1, 2016). The primary relation associated with this lineage is *transgression*, which links agents of change to the boundaries they cross and paints civil disobedience and the discomfort it often engenders as necessary elements of social progress. Victims in this storyworld are actively *silenced* and pushed to the margins by their oppressor(s), who appear(s) as selfish as well as dehumanizing. As in the Against Protesting Athletes collective narrative, heroes 'speak up' for victims (whom they often share subjectivity with) and 'speak out' against villains. This is a future-facing narrative based on the demands for *justice* and *equality*, ideals that have yet to be attained and must be *struggled for* persistently.

While authors upset or offended by the anthem protests appear nostalgic and generally bitter when assembling memories of the past, authors who are For Protesting Athletes give the impression of taking great pride not only in their country's history but also in the continuation of its traditions. While a break still exists between past and present, as identified in what follows, it appears less substantial. Together, these authors tell a memory-story that takes the form of 'this is who we are', instead of 'this is who we used to be'.

Integral to the collective memory assembled on this side of the dataset are the notions of dissent and transgression, which are recalled as spawning the nation itself. As one author describes:

> The colonists, these proto-Americans, were ticked off with King George and his way of controlling their lives from across the ocean. Their protest led to a declaration of independence, a war, the creation of the United States and the adoption of a Constitution that lays out our rules of engagement with each other, with the nation and with the world.
>
> (E. R. Shipp, "The ultimate patriot", The Baltimore Sun, September 7, 2016)

Far from relegating "principled dissent and vigorous debate" to the country's inception, these activities are remembered as crucial tools for the task of forming "a more perfect Union" (words enshrined in the Constitution) that have shaped America's past and present (Lonnie Bunch & David Skorton, "The athlete as agent of change", The Washington Post, September 29, 2017). The nation's fallen soldiers are central to this collective memory of America, as they are in across the sample, however here they are remembered more specifically for giving their lives in defence of the ideals "that we are

all equal, that we all have a voice and that we're all free to espouse a difference of opinion without fear of reprisal" (Kirk Bohls, “U.S. is their nation, too”, Austin American-Statesman (Texas), September 26, 2017). Authors in this subsample also frequently lionize sport as a sustained “canvas” upon which the nation’s rich tradition of dissent continues to play out, as well as a powerful repository for lessons learned from past instances of social upheaval due to its intergenerational resonance (Lonnie Bunch & David Skorton, “The athlete as agent of change”, The Washington Post, September 29, 2017).

The disjuncture that appears between memories of the past and images of the present in these articles mirrors that on the other side of the debate, in that it takes the form of a collective *forgetting* of crucial components of American history. Unlike those who take aim at protesting athletes themselves and/or a younger, disengaged generation, however, authors For Protesting Athletes directly criticize their vocal, Against Protesting Athletes counterparts. As Shipp (also quoted above) suggests, those who disparage protesting players as ‘un-American’ forget the nation’s deeply transgressive roots:

> Dissent defined us. And yet a very public act of disobeying authority deemed wrong is now being characterized by masses of not-so-well-informed people as the ultimate act of disloyalty.
>
> (E. R. Shipp, “The ultimate patriot”, The Baltimore Sun, September 7, 2016)

Problematic forgetfulness is not limited to the American public in this discourse, but extends to the highest office of the state: the presidency. In reference to president Trump’s failure to uphold principles held in the Constitution, one author says “it is his job to actually protect those who see [racial injustice] and want to make statements about

it, and it is at the very core of our value system to allow peaceful dissent" (Joel Sherman, "Stars & gripes: Fans should celebrate right of players to protest anthem", The New York Post, September 25, 2017). Again, the solution of *reminding* Americans, and especially those in positions of power, of the source of their freedoms (in this case dissent and transgression) stares us in the face, as it is precisely what these storytellers, and to a degree protesting athletes themselves, attempt to do.

Whereas in the other primary subsample mass forgetting was situated within a background narrative of America's decline, here it is contextualized by a diffuse story of *continued struggle*. As indicated by the frustration expressed by numerous authors For Protesting Athletes, the task of reminding the white majority that dissent is a part of their nation's origin story, and that inequalities condemned in the Constitution persist, has been undertaken before with little success. As Kareem Abdul Jabbar (a prominent former athlete-activist himself) explains in his op-ed piece:

> What should horrify Americans is not Kaepernick's choice to remain seated during the national anthem, but that nearly 50 years after Ali was banned from boxing for his stance and Smith's and Carlos's raised fists caused public ostracism and numerous death threats, we still need to call attention to the same racial inequities. Failure to fix this problem is what's really un-American here. ("Kaepernick's protest is patriotic", The Washington Post, August 31, 2016)

Despite sustained efforts and numerous sacrifices made by activists towards achievement of the ideals of equality and justice, the struggle continues. For those in this camp, there are no simple solutions. Policy adjustments, elections, and polite, sanctioned rallies are unlikely to affect the fundamental change necessary. If

they were sufficient, racial inequality would have been vanquished some time ago. All of these may help, but they are not enough. *Continued struggle*, then, is not just a story that today's activists still find themselves stuck in, but one that they must keep telling and playing a role in. It is both the problem and the solution. The alternative to continuing to fight until victory is achieved is defeat.

While detractors of the anthem protests may see them as a sign of giving up on one's country, playing by the oppressors' rules would be viewed by others as giving up on their victims. To this point, when asked about his team's position on his protest, Kaepernick said: "this is not something that I am going to run by anybody. I am not looking for approval. I have to stand up for people who are oppressed" (Wyche, 2016). Allowing the appropriate time and place for protest to be dictated by any other than they on whose behalf the protest is made, while potentially fruitful in the short term, can only result in snuffing out its transformative and counterhegemonic power to some degree.[38] I believe this is especially true in the case of anthem protest due to its basis in symbolic transgression. When an author criticizes the protests for being "clearer in the calculated offense it gave than in the specific cause it sought to further" (Ross Douthat, "Right battles for a culture war", The Bismarck Tribune, October 4,

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[38] Co-optation has been a point of contention in the anthem protest movement. During the 2017 NFL season two protesting players (Malcolm Jenkins and Anquan Boldin) formed a "Players Coalition" to negotiate with the league. They eventually struck a deal that will see team owners pay 89 million dollars to "aid causes important to the African American community" over a period of several years (the NFL, quoted by Zirin, 2017b). The offer came with several caveats, notably decision-making authority over the recipient organizations remaining with the ownership group and an expectation that the players would stop protesting. Several prominent figures in the movement, including Kaepernick's most vocal ally in the league, Eric Reid, took issue with the deal and publicly split with the Players Coalition. Reid told media that the NFL's offer was a "publicity stunt" and later called Malcolm Jenkins (who did stop protesting after the deal, while Reid and others did not) a "sellout" and "neo-colonialist" (Zirin, 2017b; Hoffman, 2018).

2017), he is likely right. Their power (to generate dialogue and strong emotional responses) primarily comes from their (narrative) performance of transgression against the state and dominant culture. A team of mostly black football players going down on one knee at the same moment that a sea of mostly white football fans ('America's people') rise and remove their hats is nothing if not dramatic. And it creates that drama in large part by crossing normative boundaries associated with appropriate workplace, protest, and patriotic behaviour, as well as the line between sports and progressive politics, that I have been discussing.

Beyond symbolic transgression, a range of practical suggestions also compile into the solution of continued struggle. These include the use of any and all platforms to remind others of America's disobedient past or draw attention to injustices, the defence of equal access to Constitutional rights (including the implementation of protective policies by organizations like the NFL), an increase in public dialogue around the issues raised by the protests, and the lending of one's support to protesting athletes and any others who seek to affect positive social change. The goal, of course, is to deliver America to a future of *true* freedom and equality, but the existence of such a future is not guaranteed. In a complex society (as all are), it can be assumed that there will always be some segment of the population who are downtrodden and require a hero to stand up and speak out on their behalf (even if the victim and hero roles are played by the same people). This is the moral of the story—fight for justice, fight for equality, because power will never be given freely and pushing for these ideals is the only genuine route to a better world.

Hegemonic strands are entangled with the For Protesting Athletes discourse, to be sure. For instance, the background narrative that American soldiers fight to defend the Constitution, or that all of the nation's 'enemies' wish to snatch or destroy the freedoms that its people hold so dear, neglects crucial factors such as America's ongoing practices of imperialism and capitalism's growth imperative, the two of which assuredly go hand in hand. The American exceptionalism and blind nationalism identifiable on both sides of the debate demonstrate a lack of critical engagement with the topic of power as it relates to the continuing mistreatment of racial minorities and displays of patriotism—particularly the question of whose interests are best served by these phenomena (the answer to which is likely the white majority and ruling elite). A hegemonic project with goals much broader than the specific issue of anthem protest can be observed in both sets of texts, however it is more apparent in the Against Protesting Athletes discourse. Americans (as well as those of other nationality) are kept focused on the past—being grateful, remembering the nation's great achievements—and focused outward—fearing external threats, comparing the privileges of their home country to a perceived lack without.[39] This appears to be an effective method for keeping citizens from focusing on what they can do in the here and now to bring about a better future by being transgressive—through civil disobedience and activism.

The moral core of the For Protesting Athletes discourse is counter-hegemonic precisely because it resists this project and others like it. By promoting continued struggle in the face of suffocating pressure from the dominant majority, it reveals the boundary-

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[39] One of President Trump's more memorable quips since taking office has been his reference to the source nations of incoming immigrants as "shithole countries" (Ibram X. Kendi, 2019).

stricken and ‘imperfect’ nature of American society. Instead of telling a story about protecting what ‘We’ have, it shatters the notion that a unified We existed in the first place. In the context of this discourse (and perhaps elsewhere), unity is a hegemonic construct; a misleading representation of a whole that is in fact fractured along lines of race, gender, class, and sexuality. It is a false destination—a mirage on the desert trail to liberation.

Part III – Conclusions

Chapter 6: Voice, Narrative Interaction, and Storytelling for Liberation

We need stories (and theories) just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connection – Donna Haraway, 2016, p. 101.

As with any disagreement over meaning, where one stands on the NFL anthem protests is a matter of perspective. That is to say, an individual's or group's evaluation of them will have much to do with their social location within the "contested and unequal social whole" (Cairns & Ferguson, 2012)—their race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, but also age, where they live, work, and so on[40]—and which other positions and experiences are within view or obscured from sight from that point. This dynamic of interpretation, understanding, and communication has much to do with stories. The stories one tells about the protests (to others but also to her or himself) depend on those she or he encounters—the narratives accessible from her or his social location, which furnish the narrative objects needed for the formation of a (more or less cohesive) personal perspective, as well as for the (re)assembly of stories meant for outward dissemination.

When it comes to the articles studied under this project, the social locations of their authors are almost entirely inaccessible. Determining how many people of colour

[40] The idea that overlapping categories of identity work together to dictate our relative marginalization and experience of oppression by interlocking forces of power is the basic premise of "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1989).

are Against Protesting Athletes, or some other such observation, has not been my goal. What the articles do illustrate is how stories are put together, both singularly and collectively, in ways that transgress or defend the boundaries that make up the unequal social whole. These boundaries, such as the symbolic racial boundary between whites and people of colour in the United States and elsewhere, contribute to the perpetuation of an established order that privileges and is governed by a select few (who are predominantly white, heterosexual, male, and capitalist) while exposing others to varying degrees of marginalization and oppression. Because this order depends on the compliance of the many who are not part of its ruling elite, storytelling that challenges or exposes these foundational boundaries represents an essential counterhegemonic force capable of dispelling the ideological premises of fairness, equality, freedom, common sense, and the natural way-of-things that hold the system in place.

As became clear early on in my analysis, the broader meaning of the NFL anthem protest controversy has a great dealt to do with the abstract notion of *voice*, which I understand as the capacity to represent one's own interests or those of others to a collective. The intersecting narratives that make up the controversy often revolve around who has voice and who doesn't, who uses theirs in the service of others, who silences the voice of others, and who those others are. In the character schemas of the two collective stories I have described, the selflessness of heroes and selfishness of villains only take shape in relation to victims' voicelessness.

In his first meeting with members of the media after his protest drew widespread attention, Kaepernick explained,

> This stand wasn't for me. This is because I'm seeing things happen to people that don't have a voice, people that don't have a platform to talk and have their voices heard, and effect change. So I'm in the position where I can do that and I'm going to do that for people that can't.
>
> (Sandritter, 2017)

By using his voice to speak for marginalized communities, Kaepernick tells a story that emplots subversive connections between particular instances of police brutality and the generalized symbols of American Freedom and Equality For All with which these instances conflict (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 219). The fact that he tells this story primarily without speaking, instead choosing symbolic gesture, makes it all the more evocative. This act, as well those such as filming and disseminating incidents of systemic violence or even simply posting the name of a victim and circumstances of their abuse on social media,[41] work to make these lives and injustices narratable, to use Frank's word (2010). This is true in a quite literal sense: stories can only be assembled from the narrative resources available; when a voice is cut out of a collective dialogue and no one takes action to address its absence there is no way to tell stories about the owner of such a voice, and thus no way to move towards a more inclusive future.

The very fact that speaking up for people of colour in a sports setting is deemed so transgressive demonstrates the structural exclusion of these groups from the national

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[41] The social media 'hashtag' #SayHerName, which begun circulating in 2015, provides a salient example of how using someone's name makes their life (and in this case, death) narratable and allows subversive connections to be drawn between the owner of the name and forces of power. This particular social media movement draws attention to the missing "story of the black women" from the current mass incarceration discourse in the U.S. (Hong, 2018, p. 620)—an oversight for which protesting athletes share some responsibility due to their exclusionary focus on young black men. This thesis, too, suffers from and is reflective of the unfortunate dearth of engagement with the gender dynamics of racial oppression.

dialogue and the dominant national/racial identity. Firstly (and perhaps obviously), if those with the power to improve their living conditions through top-down policy changes could hear the voices of the marginalized and valued them equally to the white majority, many athletes would not feel the need to risk their own employability by speaking on their behalf. Taking the unorthodox approach of appropriating the anthem space only appears necessary because the 'proper channels' for effecting change are themselves sites of the structural racism being protested. Re-obscuring the social boundary of racial exclusion in the face of the anthem protests requires the hegemonic background story of the Selfish Black Athlete (Leonard, 2017, p. 16), which here depicts anthem protest as an ego-driven cry for attention and works to discount clear and otherwise believable statements by Kaepernick and his allies that they are acting on the behalf of others (Kaepernick, in the quote above: "this protest wasn't for me").

Secondly (and perhaps equally apparently), if people of colour truly belonged to the national centre or American Self, athletes' displays of solidarity with these groups would likely be viewed as honouring them, not crossing sacred lines, as similar tributes to veterans, fallen soldiers, service people, and deceased athletes are.[42] The retort to this, of course, is that these other shows of respect and honour do not take an accusatory stance against the country, and this is precisely my point: the fact that concerned citizens and

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[42] A comparable example of the national/racial Self/Other divide can be found on the landscape of Canadian sports, where, in 2018, a bus carrying a high school hockey team was hit by a semi-truck leaving 16 dead and 13 injured (Kelly, 2019). While certainly a devastating tragedy, the event has elicited waves of symbolic tributes and shows of solidarity and compassion within professional hockey and broader Canadian society not often awarded to marginalized racial, class, and gender groups (hockey is well known for being the favourite pastime of Canada's majority and predominantly played by affluent white men and boys). A particular case that seems to have received far less public attention and outcry is that of Canada's missing and murdered indigenous women, which finally garnered a national inquiry (released in 2019) after decades of advocacy from female indigenous activists concerned with the vastly disproportionate dangers faced by those occupying this intersection of racial and gender identity (Murphy, 2019).

activists must resort to transgression against national symbols as a method of spurring change itself illustrates that the parameters of the society are not oriented towards sustaining the wellbeing of the groups they advocate for. In a truly liberated society, protesting athletes would be vaunted from above for their 'good intentions' instead of being castigated for their 'wrong approach'. Again, the moral that all Americans are 'in this together', and therefore the protests are inappropriate and unproductive, appears to cover up experiences of racial exclusion and suffering with a facile and hegemonic story of unity and the value of putting aside differences to 'just get along'.

These hegemonic positions fit together with other moral claims in the Against Protesting Athletes discourse, two of which bear highlighting once more. The first is the claim that the dramatized lifeworld of sports should be a refuge from politics in general, which obscures the fact that sports are already highly politicized by elaborate displays of nationalism and acquiescence to military/state power. It is only the politics of dissent, never consent, that are barred from entry.

The second pertains to claims that protesting athletes are 'on the clock' when at games and thus have no justifiable access to their human rights or constitutional freedoms. Comparisons between protesting athletes and misbehaving trash collectors, fast food workers, and the like oversimplify the situation and work to disguise the class and racial dynamics of the anthem protests, casting all workers as equally powerless and flattening social activism into the broader terrain of behaviour generally discouraged by employers. Lost in this storyline (which asserts that 'everyone works' and therefore 'no one has unlimited freedom') is the racial division of ownership and labour in the NFL, where 31 out of 32 owners are white (none are black) and roughly 75% of the players are

black, including those occupying most of the highest-skill positions (Luqman & Zirin, 2019). As Dave Zirin has noted, owners depend on the compliance of their black labour force, and therefore the calculus behind Kaepernick's exclusion from the league likely has more to do with the warning it sends to potentially dissenting players than with his 'distracting' politics or failure to represent the values of league or team[43] (Luqman & Zirin, 2019).[44]

By transgressing normative boundaries outlining condoned behaviour at work, during the anthem, and in the sports arena, protesting athletes perform connective work that makes these antagonising divisions more visible and narratable. The racial boundaries revealed include both those of a social nature (exclusion from safety and justice) and a symbolic one (exclusion from the national Self, which manifests in social exclusion). Exposing these fissures causes not just discomfort but even pain for those who view America as beautiful, unified, and noble, who identify with it on a deeply personal level, and who must then reckon with these divisions in some way—through anger, blame, denial, dialogue, empathy, or some other such response.

As became clear through my research, many Americans use the idea of America and its symbols—of which football is a powerful one—as vessels for their memories of family and hubs of imagined or material community. Objects like the flag and anthem, as well as the rituals of game-day, appear to be what Frank (2010, p. 193), borrowing the

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[43] The assumption that labourers don't just sell their labour power to capitalists but also give up any freedom to represent personally held views that might clash with the public image cultivated by their employers is itself a hegemonic perspective that tilts power in the direction of capital and away from labour.

[44] Expanding on this point, Zirin goes on to say, "[the NFL] need[s] Colin Kaepernick to be a ghost story instead of an animating spirit of resistance and rebellion inside the ranks of the NFL. They want him to be a ghost story that scares players to stay in line" (Luqman & Zirin, 2019).

term from Latour, calls *fabrication mechanisms*. These are objects that do the work of assembling groups, "figuratively knitting together [one's] disparate strands" while "mak[ing] it appear as if the group's existence was required by some immanent principle of resemblance." While Frank applies the term to stories themselves, America's national symbols work symbiotically (Frank, 2010, p. 61) with stories of sacrifice, honour, solidarity, and love for one's fellow countrymen and women to create the fabric of 'Americanness'—to make the entire country and its disparate peoples appear bounded and tangible in a given moment of reverie. Like and with the stories they are made of, they "connect people into collectives, and they coordinate actions among people who share the expectation that life will unfold according to certain plots" (Frank, 2010, p. 15).

However, for people of colour in America who have suffered broken promises and worse at the hands of a dominant white order, these life-plots are less certain and the symbols less effective at whitewashing internal boundaries with stories of a universal national identity that extends from border to border. This group-assembling composite-narrative of blanket Americanness clashes with a set of stories unheard or incomprehensible to those occupying more privileged social positions.[45] As mostly black men, many of whom come from the same communities as the Trayvon Martins and Michael Browns of the world, protesting athletes don't just have increased access to stories about the dangers of living on the wrong side of the black/white divide; they also have stories of their own, built from personal experience. Because of this, they hear these

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[45] Differential access to stories provides one explanation for the confusion and frustration of those authors who implore protesting athletes to "step back from the political/ideological brinksmanship" and recognize that "we're all in this together" (Steve Fillerup, "NFL players are wrong, Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City), October 10, 2017; Ross Kaminsky, "Football should be unifier, not a platform for dissent", The Denver Post, September 16, 2016).

stories differently than those with more distance from the issues and also integrate them into their worldviews differently.[46]

With this in mind, taking a knee during the national anthem appears to be an expression of the friction felt by athletes of colour who find themselves crosscut by contradictory stories—one of national pride, which they are expected to play a part in by standing misty-eyed and dutiful for the anthem before each game, and one of racial exclusion, marginalization, voicelessness, and systemic oppression. Neither is a single story; both are assemblages of many narrative strands working symbiotically with symbols, objects, people, places, and all the rest. From this point of narrative interaction, protesting athletes mobilize their own story—one that subverts the anthem space and its conventionally told narrative of unity and national pride and exposes the racial boundaries that are the source of their tension.

The newspaper articles studied here are narrative responses to the stories of protesting athletes, which are responses to the conflicting stories of national pride and racial exclusion they are confronted with, which respond in turn to stories of great deeds of America's past and differences between whites and people of colour, respectively (and among other things), and on and on. Responsiveness is the central dynamic of intertextuality, and stories, like texts, are always engaged in a dialogue with other stories, countering or reinforcing them, absorbing and being built out of them, and so on.[47] As

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[46] Relaying a concept devised by Pierre Bayard, Frank (2010, p. 54-55, emphasis in original) describes "the organization of all the stories one can be influenced by" as their *inner library*. Going on to explain how the same stories heard from different social locations can be understood quite differently, he says "readers-at-a-distance all too readily locate the story in *their* inner libraries, but the same story has significantly different meaning when located in different sections of different inner libraries."

[47] This is essentially Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, although he takes the single "utterance" as his central unit whereas I focus on stories.

Norman Fairclough posits (1992, p. 271), intertextual processes of contestation and restructuring (such as intertextual narrative assembly, as I have called it here) can also be understood as "processes of hegemonic struggle in the sphere of discourse which have effects upon as well as are affected by hegemonic struggle in the wider sense". As authors build stories for mobilization on the narrative battleground represented by the NFL anthem protests, they do so under the influence of and in contribution to a larger hegemonic struggle over the achievement of consent and the conditions for dissent; the solidification of *what is* and the imagination of *what could be*.

I have attempted to capture some small sense of this struggle in this project. Through observing the intertextual assembly of characters and character schemas, contextual backdrops, solutions, memories, and moral lessons, we have seen two collective stories take shape under separate demands for respect and justice. These stories respond both to the anthem protests and to one another, each oriented to provide answers to the primary elements of its ideological opposite (Bakhtin's notion of "counter words", Vološinov, 1986, p. 102). Where one obscures the other unveils, where one limits the other delimits, where one promotes stasis the other movement, and so forth.

These collective stories also intersect with, contain, or fit within others, such as Hochschild's (2016) deep story of the far right on the one hand, or the background story of continued struggle towards civil rights on the other. As I have described, the story assembled by those against the anthem protests is a predominantly past-facing narrative—it uses memory to locate the primary conflict of the story in American history, which leaves the country and its people in a state of happily-ever-after that is being disrupted and underappreciated by protesting athletes. Those who are in favour of the

protests tell a longer story of a drawn out conflict in which the nation and its people remain embroiled. This is a story of high stakes—it involves a battle for life, as indicated by the slogan Black Lives Matter—and suspense, with no certainty that a happily-ever-after will ever be reached. Later pages remain blank, awaiting those with the courage to imagine better futures and diverse destinations.

If I were to provide a moral of this story, perhaps it would be that we should all tell stories more like the latter. To that point, I end with reference to the Donna Haraway quote that begins this chapter, who says, "we need stories (and theories) just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections" (2016, p. 101). By telling big, complex tales that place us in the middle or even at the beginning of a struggle or journey, I believe that protesting athletes and other radical storytellers leave us more space to attach our own stories at the 'greedy edges' and more room to assemble a world we can all truly take pride in.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Convenience Sample of Online Articles

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Appendix B – Random Sample of NFL Anthem Protest Newspaper Articles

For Protesting Athletes

Allegiance?

Charleston Gazette-Mail, News, Pg. P4A, October 16, 2017 Monday, author unknown

And the banner yet waves

Sherbrooke Record (Quebec) September 25, 2017 Monday, 1126 words, Mike Mcdevitt

Do white NFL fans see players as mascots?

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution October 8, 2017 Sunday, 766 words, Gracie Bonds Staples

Former Oklahoma State lineman Russell Okung comes out in support of Kaepernick

The Daily Oklahoman (Oklahoma City, OK), September 2, 2016 Friday, 350 words, Adam Kemp

Kaepernick's political football

The New York Times September 1, 2016 Thursday, 859 words, Gerald Harris

Kaepernick's protest is patriotic

The Washington Post August 31, 2016 Wednesday, 895 pages, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

Letter protesting players are protected by the Constitution

The Salt Lake Tribune October 18, 2017 Wednesday, 246 words, K. Ellis Davis (The Public Forum)

Letter taking a stand -- or a kneel -- is crucial

The Salt Lake Tribune, November 18, 2017 Saturday 188 words, Abigayle Kendell (The Public Forum)

Letter Trump raises a smokescreen of patriotism

The Salt Lake Tribune October 11, 2017 Wednesday, 112 words, Richard D. Muranaka (The Public Forum)

NFL anthem controversy is troubling

Trail Daily Times October 13, 2017 Friday, 543 words, Louise McEwan

'Nobody getting fired here'; Raptors president Ujiri is '110 per cent' behind his players

Waterloo Region Record, September 26, 2017 Tuesday, 520 words, Neil Davidson (The Canadian Press)

Pat Tillman’s wife: We must unify, not divide, after Trump comments

The East Bay Times (California) September 26, 2017 Tuesday, 314 words, Daniel Mano

Pence makes mockery of anthem

Dayton Daily News (Ohio) October 9, 2017 Monday, 512 words, Nancy Armour

Protesters kneeling during anthem riles up some outside Vikings game

Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN) October 23, 2017 Monday, News; Pg. 7A, 334 words, Hannah Covington

Rally and a huddle: Midtown march backs Kaepernick as NAACP seeks to meet commish

Daily News (New York) August 24, 2017 Thursday, 420 words, Noah Goldberg, Denis Slattery and Nancy Dillon

Stars & gripes: Fans should celebrate right of players to protest anthem

The New York Post September 25, 2017 Monday, 682 words, Joel Sherman

Titans wideout Rishard Matthews: 'I plan to kneel until Trump apologizes'; Wide receiver says he will continue to kneel until Trump apologizes "I'm tired of hearing stick to sports," fifth-year NFL veteran says Matthews, who comes from military family, was initially conflicted

The Guardian (London) September 26, 2017 Tuesday, 351 words, author unknown

The athlete as agent of change

The Washington Post September 29, 2017 Friday, Editorial Copy, 787 words, Lonnie Bunch & David Skorton

The ultimate patriot

The Baltimore Sun September 7, 2016 Wednesday, 789 words, E. R. Shipp

Trump has no idea what true patriotism looks like

Chico Enterprise-Record (California) October 20, 2017 Friday, A,A; Pg. 7, 677 words, Cynthia Tucker

Trump's comments stir up sports leagues

The Baltimore Sun September 24, 2017 Sunday, 1025 words, Jim Puzzanghera

U.S. is their nation, too

Austin American-Statesman (Texas) September 26, 2017 Tuesday, 954 words, Kirk Bohls

What national anthem controversy can teach us

The Denver Post September 29, 2017 Friday, Opinion, 646 words, Krista Kafer

Why we all need to take a knee

Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City) October 4, 2017 Wednesday, 1262 words, Erin Stewart

1943 court ruling offers insight on national anthem controversy

New York Observer November 23, 2017 Thursday, 785 words, Donald Scarinci

#VeteransForKaepernick circulates on social media

The East Bay Times (California) August 31, 2016 Wednesday, 308 words, Compiled by Daniel Mano

Against Protesting Athletes

An NFL double standard on speech

The New York Post September 13, 2016 Tuesday, Editorial, 299 words, author unknown

Angered by protests, some area tavern owners dropping NFL football

The Tribune-Democrat (Johnstown, Pennsylvania) September 27, 2017 Wednesday, 719 words, Mark Pesto

Broncos Marshall pays for protest

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette September 10, 2016 Saturday, 478 words, from wire dispatches

Chico Enterprise-Record (California) October 1, 2017 Sunday, section: H,H; Pg. 6, 1407 words, author unknown

Don't forget the high price paid for freedom of expression - it is not free

Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City) July 4, 2017 Tuesday, 689 words, D Harmon

Editorial: National anthem protests have no place at CCGA game

The Brunswick News (Georgia), November 4, 2017 Saturday, COMMENTARY, 484 words, author unknown

Football should be a unifier, not a platform for dissent

The Denver Post, September 16, 2016 Friday, OPINION; Pg. 17A, 627 words, Ross Kaminsky

For McCoy, Kaepernick is too big of a distraction

The Washington Post August 25, 2017 Friday, 704 words, author unknown

Game day shunned

Tribune-Review (Greensburg, PA), November 13, 2017 Monday, 535 words, Paul Peirce & Mary Ann Thomas

Glasgow Daily Times, Ky., Daniel Suddeath column

Glasgow Daily Times (Kentucky) August 9, 2017 Wednesday, 666 words, Daniel Suddeath

Kaepernick shouldn't be focus on TV

Florida Times-Union (Jacksonville) September 22, 2016 Thursday, 569 pages, Terry Dickson

Kaepernick's disrespectful protest

Bangor Daily News (Maine) February 12, 2017 Sunday, 210 words, Peter Pinette

Letter: NFL players should protest on own time

Sentinel & Enterprise (Fitchburg, Massachusetts), October 4, 2017 Wednesday, 160 words, Jacqueline Bourgault

NFL players are wrong

Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City) October 10, 2017 Tuesday, 291 words, Steve Fillerup

NFL players' protests need to take a knee; counterpoint don't disrespect the anthem

Dayton Daily News (Ohio), September 17, 2017 Sunday, Pg. A26, 851 words, Patrice Lee Onwuka

No kneeling in golf: Prez Cup team backs Trump on anthem

Daily News (New York), September 27, 2017 Wednesday, SPORTS; Pg. 47, 639 words, Christian Red

Outraged by disrespect some NFL players showing during anthem

Bangor Daily News (Maine), August 21, 2017, Monday, 233 words, Peter Pinette

Protests? Not in college football

Tampa Bay Times September 26, 2017 Tuesday, 492 words, Joey Knight

Regulation is answer to kneeling issue

Chicago Daily Herald, December 3, 2017 Sunday, WEB Edition; MF12 Edition, Section: Foxlet; Pg. 0, 287 words, Clayton Tovo Wheaton

Respect for America is not a claim of perfection

Telegraph Herald (Dubuque, IA), November 5, 2017 Sunday, 604 words, Jim Guise

Sending the wrong message

Tribune-Review (Greensburg, PA), September 26, 2017 Tuesday, 299 words, author unknown

Some Broncos fans angrily abandon team over protests

The Denver Post September 26, 2017 Tuesday, 801 words, John Wenzel

Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2017: Don't turn back on refugees, Trump's financial conflicts, Kaepernick's disrespectful protest

Bangor Daily News (Maine) February 6, 2017 Monday, 1043 words, Peter Pinnette

Turnabout

The Augusta Chronicle (Georgia) August 14, 2017 Monday, Opinion, 515 words, author unknown

Washington: Remove tax-exempt status of professional sports leagues

US Official News, September 27, 2017 Wednesday, 515 words, Mr. Gaetz addressing The Library of Congress, author unknown (newswire)

Neutral

Anthem flap gives NFL sponsors headache; Companies silent or walk line between backing players, not antagonizing president

The Toronto Star September 26, 2017 Tuesday, 275 words, Jeff Green & Eben Novy-Williams Bloomberg

'Bigger than football'; Niners' QB refuses to stand for U.S. national anthem

Calgary Sun August 28, 2016 Sunday, News, 395 pages, author unknown

Bowles: Players have the freedom to protest

The New York Post August 17, 2017 Thursday, 406 words, Brian Costello

Bucs' evans met with backlash after protest

Tampa Bay Times November 15, 2016 Tuesday, 756 words, Steve Bousquet

Chance to visit white house a 'once in a lifetime' thing; But Senators goaltender stickhandles around political debate in his homeland

Ottawa Citizen September 28, 2017 Thursday, 608 words, Ken Warren

Companies controlling speech? Today's moderator: Ideas & voices editor

Dayton Daily News (Ohio), September 14, 2016 Wednesday, ; Pg. A11, 146 words, Ron Rollins

Controversial Kaepernick still without a job as NFL season nears

Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City), September 4, 2017 Monday, 1071 words, Randy Hollis

ECC panel: 'Good speech' can conquer hate speech

The Courier-News, Elgin, Ill., November 10, 2017 Friday, State and regional news, 458 words, Rafael Guerrero

Fans may not welcome debate on anthem, but many join in

The New York Times September 25, 2017 Monday, 1717 words, Katharine Q. Seelye & Bill Pennington

Free to show their views

Tampa Bay Times August 24, 2017 Thursday, 757 words, Rick Stroud

How N.F.L. sponsors have reacted to 'take a knee' protests

The New York Times September 28, 2017 Thursday, 488 words, Maggie Astor

Jags owner open to signing Kaepernick

National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post) (Canada) August 26, 2017 Saturday, 183 words, author unknown

Lebanon area residents offer opinions on patriotism, protests, free speech and NFL players taking a knee

The Lebanon Daily News (Pennsylvania) October 15, 2017 Sunday, NEWS; Pg. A2, 1305 words, Daniel Walmer

New laws may have chilling effect on dissent

The Washington Post September 25, 2017 Monday, 810 words, Margaret Sullivan

NFL players respond to trump; national anthem controversy: Gestures vary across country

Wisconsin State Journal (Madison, Wisconsin) September 25, 2017 Monday, 879 words, Arnie Stapleton

No need to chew up NFL

The Taber Times, September 27, 2017 Wednesday, OPINION; Pg. A4, 338 words

Pledge policy draws protest: Manatee district requires students to stand during anthem

Sarasota Herald Tribune (Florida), October 3, 2017 Tuesday, B; FL News; Pg. 1, 904 words, Zac Anderson

Public officials can't separate 'private' comments

Chicago Daily Herald, October 4, 2017 Wednesday, NEWS; Pg. 0, 496 words, The Daily Herald Editorial Board, Brian Hill

Right battles for a culture war

The Bismarck Tribune, October 4, 2017 Wednesday, A; Pg. 8, 851 words, Ross Douthat

Sound Off; Anthem protest riles many; others say it's right

Florida Times-Union (Jacksonville) September 18, 2016, Sunday, 1625 words, 15 authors

Sports, politics: A long and cozy but complicated relationship

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, September 26, 2017 Tuesday, 709 words, Stephen J. Nesbitt

Stop fighting and crank up AC/DC

The Denver Post September 14, 2016 Wednesday, 592 words, Mark Kiszla

To stand or not to stand

Chicago Daily Herald September 29, 2017 Friday, SECTION: MAR; Pg. 4, 502 words

Trump draws ire of US sports stars over call to boycott NFL

Irish Independent September 25, 2017 Monday, 595 words, Julie Allen

Trump's new ambassador to Canada: 'I'm a listener'

National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post) (Canada) September 28, 2017 Thursday, 425 words, Kelly Knight Craft