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# Protest and Performance

BY MICHELLE MACARTHUR

"I see what he's done as art. I believe that art is seeing the world that doesn't exist. A lot of people excel at creativity—making TV, movies, painting, writing books—but you can be an artist in your own life. Civil rights activists are artists. Athletes are artists. People who imagine something that is not there."

— Filmmaker Ava DuVernay on NFL player and activist Colin Kaepernick in GQ

Football player Colin Kaepernick started his peaceful protest over a year ago, in the 2016 NFL pre-season, to draw attention to the systemic discrimination and violence enacted against black men and women in the US, and his decision to take a knee has subsequently grown into a hashtag, a movement, and a controversy. As I write this, the fervour surrounding Kaepernick and his fellow players' actions has slightly lessened, momentarily overshadowed by other stories taking centre stage in the 24-hour news cycle, but the issues at the core of Kaepernick's protest and his status in the NFL remain unresolved. In its November 2017 issue, GQ named Kaepernick "Citizen of the Year"; but three months into the current football season, he is still a free agent without a contract.

If, like me, you found yourself wading through news reports and social media posts to figure out where this all began and why the POTUS was targeting football players in both his political speeches and late-night Twitter rants, here is a quick recap. Kaepernick, a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers at the time, began sitting during the national anthem in the 2016 NFL pre-season as a gesture of protest against the

oppression endured by people of colour in the US. After consulting with former player and army veteran Nate Boyer, however, Kaepernick and those teammates joining him in his protest decided to kneel rather than sit, which they agreed was a more respectful option. As 49ers player Eric Reid recently described in an op-ed for *The New York Times*, "We chose to kneel because it's a respectful gesture. I remember thinking our posture was like a flag flown at half-mast to mark a tragedy." While Kaepernick's protest has been reframed in many ways—as I will discuss shortly—he was always careful to communicate his specific reasons for kneeling and to challenge the media's simplification or misinterpretation of the issues at hand.

Despite Kaepernick's openness and the growing solidarity shown by other NFL players, the backlash was fast and furious. Kaepernick and others who decided to take a knee were called unpatriotic and disrespectful of the flag, the military, and their country. By the end of 2016, 49ers jerseys were used as doormats and kindling for bonfires by disgruntled fans, and a poll showed Kaepernick to be "the most disliked player" in the NFL (Willingham). (However, the results of

the poll were divided along racial lines, with 42 percent of black respondents saying they liked Kaepernick "a lot.") Kaepernick's contract with the 49ers was not renewed after the end of the season, a move many see as an attempt to silence him rather than a reflection of his performance on the field.

The POTUS weighed in several times during Kaepernick's protest. As early as August 2016, during the NFL pre-season, Trump told a Seattle radio station, "I think it's a terrible thing. And, you know, maybe he should find a new country that works better for him. Let him try. It won't happen" (qtd. in Love). Trump's threats grew by the following March, when at a rally in Kentucky he gleefully made reference to a report that NFL owners were reticent to sign Kaepernick in fear of political backlash and a "nasty" tweet from the president. Trump's bullying continued this past September, when, at a rally for Alabama Republican Senate candidate Luther Strange, Trump encouraged team owners to fire players for taking a knee. His condemnation of the players' "unpatriotic" behaviour was particularly significant given his reaction to the recent events in Charlottesville and his reluctance to denounce the alt-right's involvement.

The POTUS's reaction was also a key factor in shifting the conversation about Kaepernick away from the issues at the centre of his protest. Trump's September 2017 remarks not only forced Trump himself into the centre of the issue, but forced NFL players, owners, and coaches to pick a side. Whereas earlier in the movement, many were hesitant to join Kaepernick (and this was also divided along racial lines), Trump's words had the opposite of their intended effect. Participation in the #takeaknee movement in the NFL and beyond grew exponentially, as many teams opted to challenge the POTUS's assumptions about patriotism and to assert their rights

to freely express themselves. Yet, this increased support did not translate into a new contract for Kaepernick, nor did it magnify issues of racial injustice and systemic discrimination. Instead, the majority of participants in the movement presented themselves as fighting for free speech and unity, and as Willingham points out, those who spoke out were also generally careful to frame their remarks by confirming their patriotism and "American-ness."

As these events unfolded, I was reminded of Donna-Michelle St. Bernard's final piece in her Principles Office series in *alt.theatre's* Volume 13. In "Being the Fifth Bear," St. Bernard points to the frequency with which marginalized bodies are asked (or forced) to move out of the way and give up space. She offers some examples from her own experience in which her presence was seen as burdening or causing discomfort to others, and examines the implications of her compliance or non-compliance in each situation when she was told to move. Her and Kaepernick's acts of protest claim a space for marginalized bodies that are seen as intrusive, threatening, or expendable. In their purposeful and defiant stillness, they stand in for others before them who were forced to move and imagine a different future for those coming after them. St. Bernard concludes by stressing how current acts of agency and resistance are connected to "proximate and progenitorial" communities and social movements (34). Reflecting on her past experiences, she writes, "I see my then-self's narrow shoulders and I urge them to become broad and strong, so that someone might someday hope to stand on them. I urge myself to keep standing still, if only to offer a steady platform to others. I try to remember that standing still is also moving, when done with purpose" (35). By taking a knee, Kaepernick provides such a platform for others, but also stands on the shoulders of those who came before, both outside of the sports arena and within, where his actions are preceded by those of Jackie Robinson, John Carlos and Tommie Smith, and Mohammad Ali, to name just a few. (Incidentally, when we were preparing to publish her piece, D-M sent us several photo suggestions, including one of Kaepernick kneeling, for which we unfortunately could not obtain the rights.)

In these ways, gestures of protest, whether moving or standing still (or both), are performative in that they invoke performance strategies and in that they *do* something. Dance scholar Anusha Kedhar reminds us of this fact in

two 2014 articles about the centrality of choreography, movement, and gesture in the politics of protest. Illustrating her discussion with the "Hands-up! Don't shoot!" and "I can't breathe" slogans of protest and their respective gestures and choreography, Kedhar underlines the power of performance as a way to draw attention to the impact of state violence on black bodies. The lifting of activists' hands in solidarity in "Hands-up! Don't shoot!" in response to the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, writes Kedhar, "takes those same bodies that are surveilled, disciplined, controlled, and killed and infuses them with power and a voice. It resurrects those dead bodies left lying in the street, and asks us, compels us to confront the alive-ness of the black body as a force of power and resistance" ("Hands-up!"). "I can't breathe," which references Eric Garner's last words but also the broader suffocation of black lives by systematic oppression, is accompanied by a staged "die-in" that points to the ultimate power of the state over black bodies. Implied in Kedhar's argument is the second meaning of performativity—to effect an action—wherein careful staging and choreography do something: they empower participants, remember bodies, and confront audiences. In Ava DuVernay's words that preface this editorial, protests and activists are art because they "see the world that doesn't exist." They are performative because they also make that world.

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Kedhar argues that performative strategies are key components of protest because they impact audience understandings of the issues at its centre. To develop the theatre and performance analogy further, the evolution of the #takeaknee movement prompts us to ask what happens when the communication between performers/protesters and audiences/witnesses are intercepted. What does spectatorship entail in this instance? What does it mean to be a witness or an ally to performative protests? If theatre and performance are continually shaped by internal and external factors that influence the meanings produced, then those who join the protest, watch it, or talk about it bear responsibility in how

it takes shape and its ultimate impact. Participating in the #takeaknee movement at this moment means educating ourselves about its beginnings as well as "proximate and progenitorial" movements; it also means doing the work to ensure its message about systematic oppression remains centre stage.

This issue of *alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage* features several articles that look at the power enacted by the state on marginalized bodies, and how performance offers spaces to resist and challenge these systemic acts of oppression. Lina de Guevara reflects on a community-arts project addressing the fraught relationship between police and immigrant communities. Preeti Dhaliwal meditates on how law lives in the body and how we embody law; her use of poetry to develop her discussion reflects a focus on performance in both content and form, and we are excited to host an audio-recording of Preeti reading her piece on our website. Our new series for Volume 14, "A Return to Place—Embodied Story Practice," curated by Mariel Belanger, unpacks the theories and practices underlying the 2017 UBC–Okanagan Indigenous Art Intensive. Running across all three issues of the volume, "A Return to Place" begins with two pieces by Mariel on how cultural identity connects to oral history and performance practice. As we publish this, our last issue of 2017, we also look forward to *alt.theatre's* twentieth anniversary next year. We have some plans in store to mark the magazine's role in providing a unique space for artists, scholars, and activists to create dialogue about the many intersections of diversity and the stage. We are also excited to usher in this new era with a new look, and welcome Kinnon Elliott, our new designer, whose work illuminates the words on the pages that follow. We hope you enjoy!

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