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## ¿Dios Bendiga Whose América? Resisting the Ritual Theologizing of Nation

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## ¿Dios Bendiga Whose América? Resisting the Ritual Theologizing of Nation

*Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández*  
*Catholic Theological Union*

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, baseball was intimately tied to U.S. neocolonial expansion with a decidedly Christian missionizing thrust. In this context, baseball assumed a role in Americanizing *the other* in their own land while traditioning patriotism at home. The singing of “The Star Spangled Banner” at professional sporting events has its origins in baseball, as do efforts to domesticate resistance to such public ritualization of national identity. My aim here is to expose embedded theologies of nationalism played out in the contested spaces of stadiums and fields of play, and I will do so from a distinctively Latin@ theological perspective. Such an exploration surfaces critical questions about the supposed liberating potential of professional sports, which some claim have become civil religion in the U.S..<sup>1</sup>

Ordinary living--*lo cotidiano*--concretely provides content, particularizes context, and marks the spaces and place(s) from which Latin@s do theology.<sup>2</sup> The representation of the daily, as imaged through professional sports, is not only reflective of life, but is active in the

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Thanks to my research assistant Alyssa Nanko, an undergraduate at the Savannah College of Art and Design, for checking the hyperlinks. All were accessed on March 25, 2020.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Joseph L. Price, *Rounding the Bases: Baseball and Religion in America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández, “Lo Cotidiano as Locus Theologicus,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Oxford, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 15-33. I identify as Hispan@ or Latin@ and created @, the ‘at’ symbol (el arroba) with an accent mark. I borrow the use of @ as a gender inclusive suffix, which at the same time I see as destabilizing gender polarities. I add the acute accent (@) to signify the fluidity of language, culture, and identity, and to emphasize the role of location and situatedness in theology done latinamente.

construction of communal identities, in the promulgation of particular ways of life, in cultivating expressions of resistance. Sports are intricately woven into the fabric of our daily living and as such may serve as *locus theologicus*. An example arises from a careful study of the parallels between two protests by Black athletes in professional sports: the response of biracial African American Colin Kaepernick to “The Star Spangled Banner” during the National Football League (NFL) 2016 season, and the opposition by Afro-Puerto Rican Carlos Delgado to *God Bless America* during the 2004 and 2005 Major League Baseball (MLB) seasons. A brief survey of the premier role of baseball in evangelizing patriotism and militarism provides context. While a growing body of scholarship has drawn attention to these connections, especially after the attacks of September 11, 2001,<sup>3</sup> few have explored the theological claims communicated through such ritual practices, which are experienced by some as coercive and religious. The fact that in both cases this resistance emerged from athletes from marginalized communities makes it all the more important to examine their protests as well as the contested theologies of nation that underlie rituals of patriotism performed at stadiums and evangelized through sports.

## RESISTANCE IN TWO MOVEMENTS

### Interpretations of a Genuflect Offense

In the context of the game of football, the genuflect offense can be interpreted as a form of nonviolent resistance. Whether a team is ahead, or in the case of a mercy rule, miserably behind or dangerously overmatched, the quarterback “takes a knee” to end the play, in effect

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<sup>3</sup> See Ron Briley, “‘God Bless America:’ An Anthem for American Exceptionalism and Empire,” in *Sport and Militarism: Contemporary Global Perspectives*, ed. Michael L. Butterworth (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 115-128; Michael L. Butterworth, *Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity: The National Pastime and American Identity During the War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2010); and Tricia Jenkins, “The Militarization of American Professional Sports: How the Sports-War Intertext Influences Athletic Ritual and Sports Media,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 37, no. 3 (2013): 1-16.

protecting a lead, running out the clock, preserving players from injury, or conceding in order to survive loss. The action interrupts the flow of the game and at times serves to minimize damage in what is undeniably a violent sport.

By early September 2016, a personal protest of sitting through the national anthem in the National Football League (NFL) shifted into a growing movement of various expressions of protest enacted by athletes and others to draw attention to social injustices in the U.S., primarily, though not exclusively, connected to race and police accountability.<sup>4</sup> After reflection, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick shifted tactics and opted to “take a knee” during the anthem as a symbolic call to action on the myriad ways the U.S. does not live up to the promises the anthem purports to represent. Kaepernick’s move from sitting to genuflection was intended as an effective offensive strategy to highlight the need for accountability in the presence of racial and social injustice. Yet some perceived it as an offense to the flag and disrespectful to those with military service.

#### *Anatomy of a Protest*

Kaepernick’s Twitter and Instagram posts for July 2016 provide context for the protest which began silently in the first week of the preseason but did not get noticed until Kaepernick was in uniform in the third week. The back-to-back police shootings of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Philando Castile in St. Paul, Minnesota evoked a social media response from the quarterback. On July 6 he tweeted, “This is what lynchings look like in 2016!”<sup>5</sup> with a

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Sandritter, “A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick’s National Anthem Protest and the Athletes Who Joined Him,” *SBNation*, November 6, 2016, <http://www.sbnation.com/2016/9/11/12869726/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest-seahawks-brandon-marshall-nfl>.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Kaepernick (@Kaepernick7), Twitter, July 6, 2016, 9:19 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Kaepernick7/status/750695632009134080>.

link to his longer Instagram post that attributed “another murder in the streets” to the “color of a man’s skin.”<sup>6</sup> He questioned when those who had the duty to protect would be held accountable for acts that violate their obligation.<sup>7</sup> A day later, following the Castile’s death, he tweeted “We are under attack! It’s clear as day! Less than 24 hrs later another body in the street!”<sup>8</sup> The end of July brought the news that charges were dropped against the last of the Baltimore police officers accused in the custody death of Freddie Gray in April 2015. Again Kaepernick responded concluding his Instagram post with “Apparently this is what our system calls justice.”<sup>9</sup> His responses were noteworthy as one among a small group of vocal athletes using their prominence and social media to speak out on an array of social issues.<sup>10</sup>

What started as a personal low key protest of sitting through the anthem exploded into public recognition via Twitter with a photo by *SB Nation* beat writer Jennifer Lee Chan.<sup>11</sup> Covering the San Francisco 49ers third preseason game, Kaepernick’s first in uniform, she

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<sup>6</sup> Colin Kaepernick (@kaepernick7), Instagram post, [https://www.instagram.com/p/BHhetl8g\\_EE/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BHhetl8g_EE/).

<sup>7</sup> Colin Kaepernick (@kaepernick7), Instagram post.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Kaepernick (@kaepernick7), Twitter, July 7, 2016, 11:11 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Kaepernick7/status/751086182814117888>.

<sup>9</sup> Colin Kaepernick (@Kaepernick7), Twitter, July 27, 2016, 10:16 p.m., <https://twitter.com/Kaepernick7/status/758497849915170816> and Colin Kaepernick (@kaepernick7), Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BHkQULXAvZu/>.

<sup>10</sup> For examples, see Marcus Gilmer, “Colin Kaepernick’s Protest Is the Latest from Athletes in the era of Black Lives Matter,” *Mashable*, August 31, 2016, <http://mashable.com/2016/08/31/sports-protests-black-lives-matter/#cZNwXZlVb5qA> and Jonathan Crowl, “As Athletes Find Their Political Voice, Sports World Flirts With Its Own Revolution,” *The PostGame*, July 29, 2016, <http://www.thepostgame.com/after-decades-silence-star-athletes-find-their-political-voice>.

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Lee Chan, “The original photo of Colin Kaepernick sitting during the National Anthem and subsequent usage,” 2016 stadium visits, Gallery-football, jenniferleechan.com website, <http://www.jenniferleechan.com/gallery---football.html>.

tweeted a photo of the field during the national anthem from the press booth high above the 49ers bench. The tag line referred to a haphazard formation of 49ers during the anthem: “This team formation for the National Anthem is not Jeff Fisher approved. #HardKnocks.”<sup>12</sup> The mention of Fisher, the coach of the Los Angeles Rams, alluded to an HBO program, *Hard Knocks*, a five episode documentary series that follows a different NFL team each year through training camp.<sup>13</sup> In episode two, which had aired ten days earlier on August 16th, Fisher provided detailed instructions to his players on their expected posture during the national anthem: defense left, offense right, helmets under left arm, all lined up on the white sideline marker.<sup>14</sup> He showed a video clip of the formation and framed the expectation in terms of respect: respect for self, teammates, the game, and the country. In her initial tweet, an attempt at humor, Lee Chan did not realize that Kaepernick was seated, barely visible between the Gatorade coolers. By the game’s end, Lee Chan tweeted the photo again with the claim: “Colin Kaepernick did not stand during the National Anthem - my picture provides proof.”<sup>15</sup> She surmised that this was possibly his statement on recent racial justice events in light of his postings on social media.<sup>16</sup> Lee Chan acknowledged that “until Kaepernick or his representation

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<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Lee Chan (@jenniferleechan), Twitter, August 26, 2017, 9:02 p.m. , <https://twitter.com/jenniferleechan/status/769354272735531009>.

<sup>13</sup> “*Hard Knocks: About the Show*,” HBO, <http://www.hbo.com/hard-knocks/about/index.html>.

<sup>14</sup> See the video clip of Fisher’s instruction to the team at *Brought Back the Los Angeles Rams* Facebook page, August 27, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/losangelesrams/videos/10153647947030981/> and “*Hard Knocks: Episode 2*,” August 16, 2016, <http://www.hbo.com/hard-knocks/episodes/los-angeles-rams/2-episode/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Lee Chan (@jenniferleechan), Twitter, August 27, 2016, 3:10 a.m., <https://twitter.com/jenniferleechan/status/769446898176495616>.

<sup>16</sup> Lee Chan, Twitter, August 27, 2016, 3:10 a.m.

makes a statement, we cannot be sure of the true reason for him not standing for the National Anthem. What we do know is that the NFL is a conservative organization down to its patriotic logo and it's an organization that is heavily intertwined with the military."<sup>17</sup>

*Genuflect Offense as Strategy for Moving Forward*

Kaepernick did speak. First, in a postgame interview, he explained, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color."<sup>18</sup> He reiterated sentiments already evident on his social media: "There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder."<sup>19</sup> On the Monday following the game,

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<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Lee Chan, "Colin Kaepernick did not stand during the National Anthem," photo, *Niners Nation* (blog), *SBNation*, August 27, 2016, 1:10 a.m., [https://www.ninersnation.com/2016/8/27/12669048/colin-kaepernick-did-not-stand-during-the-national-anthem?utm\\_campaign=jenniferleechan&utm\\_content=chorus&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter](https://www.ninersnation.com/2016/8/27/12669048/colin-kaepernick-did-not-stand-during-the-national-anthem?utm_campaign=jenniferleechan&utm_content=chorus&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter).

<sup>18</sup> Steve Wyche, "Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat during National Anthem," *NFL.com*, August 27, 2016, 10:04 a.m., <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000691077/article/colin-kaepernick-explains-protest-of-national-anthem>. In a series of tweets, Wyche, a reporter for *NFL.com*, broke the story of his postgame interview with Kaepernick, which included questions about Kaepernick's sitting through the anthem. The first tweet, "I spoke w/ Kaepernick about his refusal to stand for the Anthem. His unforgiving reasoning why coming soon on," includes a link to *nfl.com*, the platform for the upcoming story. Steve Wyche (@wyche89), Twitter, August 27, 2016, 8:54 a.m., <https://twitter.com/wyche89/status/769533470817132545>. The next tweet includes a link to the story: Steve Wyche (@wyche89), "Colin Kaepernick takes a stand knowing he has himself immersed in controversy," Twitter, August 27, 2016, 9:09 a.m., <https://twitter.com/wyche89/status/769537421394358272>. Wyche followed with another tweet linked to the story: Steve Wyche (@wyche89), "Kaepernick told me that he is fully aware that there will be backlash. He is willing to deal with it," Twitter, August 27, 2016, 9:17 a.m., <https://twitter.com/wyche89/status/769539379551285248>.

<sup>19</sup> Wyche, "Colin Kaepernick Explains."

and later that week after Thursday night's preseason finale, Kaepernick granted extensive press interviews, each slightly under twenty minutes.<sup>20</sup>

Kaepernick had been contemplating increased activism after being troubled by civil unrest, particularly in response to racial injustice, police brutality incidents, and the lack of accountability. He sought to become more educated on the issues and realized that his controversial stance could have repercussions. He clarified his evolving position, dispelled accusations of being anti-military, and insisted "I'm not anti-American. I love America. I love people. That's why I'm doing this. I want to help make America better."<sup>21</sup> The justice issues cited by Kaepernick ranged from the care of veterans to the disproportionate use of force by some police, particularly with regard to people from minoritized communities, and race-based oppression and inequalities impacting Black lives.<sup>22</sup> His protest was motivated not by police in general, as some were among his kin, but against the actions of rogues, with the additional worry that "cops that are murdering people and are racist are putting other cops in danger, like my family, like my friends."<sup>23</sup> He called for higher accountability standards and critiqued inadequate training, noting that a cosmetologist "holding a curling iron has more education and more

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<sup>20</sup> Chris Biderman, "Transcript: Colin Kaepernick Addresses Sitting During National Anthem," *Niners Wire*, *USA Today Sports Network*, August 28, 2016, <http://ninerswire.usatoday.com/2016/08/28/transcript-colin-kaepernick-addresses-sitting-during-national-anthem/>; Nick Wagoner, "Transcript of Colin Kaepernick's Comments after Preseason Finale," *ESPN*, September 2, 2016, [http://www.espn.com/blog/san-francisco-49ers/post/\\_id/19126/transcript-of-colin-kaepernicks-comments-after-preseason-finale](http://www.espn.com/blog/san-francisco-49ers/post/_id/19126/transcript-of-colin-kaepernicks-comments-after-preseason-finale) and "Colin Kaepernick Post-Game Interview in San Diego, California," September 1, 2016, <https://youtu.be/IIWw1Q8M94>.

<sup>21</sup> Wagoner, "Transcript of Colin Kaepernick's Comments after Preseason Finale."

<sup>22</sup> Biderman, "Transcript: Colin Kaepernick Addresses Sitting"; Nick Wagoner, "Transcript of Colin Kaepernick's Comments after Preseason Finale."

<sup>23</sup> Wagoner, "Transcript of Colin Kaepernick's Comments after Preseason Finale."

training than people that have a gun and are going out on the street to protect us.”<sup>24</sup> His hope was to inspire a national conversion because “the dream result would be equality, justice for everybody. This is really something about human rights, it’s about the people.”<sup>25</sup>

When asked explicitly about how he viewed the flag as a “symbol of the military,” Kaepernick affirmed his respect for those who have fought for the country, including members of his own family and friends. He decried the incongruity of those who fight for freedom for all, yet die “in vain because this country isn’t holding their end of the bargain up, as far as giving freedom and justice, liberty to everybody.”<sup>26</sup> He remarked that some, upon their return from military service, are “treated unjustly by the country they have fought for, and have been murdered by the country they fought for, on our land.”<sup>27</sup> In the second interview, Kaepernick cited concern for the rate of suicide among veterans and the willingness of the country to “let those vets go and fight the war for them, but when they come back, they won’t do anything to try to help them.”<sup>28</sup> In conversation with veteran Army Green Beret Nate Boyer, a former college football player with a brief NFL career, Kaepernick shifted from sitting in protest to taking a knee during the anthem.<sup>29</sup> The change was fostered by a desire to “get the message back on track

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<sup>24</sup> Biderman, “Transcript: Colin Kaepernick Addresses Sitting.”

<sup>25</sup> Wagoner, “Transcript of Colin Kaepernick's Comments after Preseason Finale.”

<sup>26</sup> Biderman, “Transcript: Colin Kaepernick Addresses Sitting.”

<sup>27</sup> Biderman, “Transcript: Colin Kaepernick Addresses Sitting.”

<sup>28</sup> Wagoner, “Transcript of Colin Kaepernick's Comments after Preseason Finale.”

<sup>29</sup> Wagoner, “Transcript of Colin Kaepernick's Comments after Preseason Finale.” Kaepernick invited Boyer to a conversation after reading his open letter. Nate Boyer, “An Open letter to Colin Kaepernick, from a Green Beret-turned-long snapper,” *Army Times*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.armytimes.com/articles/nate-boyer-colin-kaepernick-commentary-flag-national-anthem-protest-nfl>.

and not take away from the military, not take away from pride in our country, but keep the focus on what the issues really are.”<sup>30</sup>

Kaepernick placed his money behind his commitment to change and to encourage a national conversation. Through the mission of his foundation, he has vowed “to fight oppression of all kinds globally, through education and social activism.”<sup>31</sup> Among the foundation’s initiatives is the Know Your Rights Camp, “a free campaign for youth fully funded by Colin Kaepernick to raise awareness on higher education, self-empowerment, and instruction to properly interact with law enforcement in various scenarios.”<sup>32</sup> The first gatherings of the camp occurred in Oakland during the 49ers bye week in October 2016, with subsequent camps held in January 2017 in New York, and in May in Chicago.<sup>33</sup> Through the foundation and the camps, Kaepernick continues to seek transformation by empowering minoritized youth in particular. These are fruits from a protest initially prompted by the intersection of racism and police brutality. He framed his personal investment and risk within a context of blessing rooted in privilege:

I’ve been blessed to be able to get this far and have the privilege of being able to be in the NFL, making the kind of money I make and enjoy luxuries like that. I can’t look in the mirror and see people dying on the street that should have the

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<sup>30</sup> Wagoner, “Transcript of Colin Kaepernick's Comments after Preseason Finale.”

<sup>31</sup> “The Mission,” kaepernick7.com, Official Website for Colin Kaepernick, <http://kaepernick7.com/pages/mission>

<sup>32</sup> “Know Your Rights Camp,” kaepernick7.com, Official Website for Colin Kaepernick, <https://kaepernick7.com/pages/know-your-rights-camp> .

<sup>33</sup> See *Know Your Rights Camp*, <http://knowyourrightscamp.com/> and Colin Kaepernick (@kaepernick7), Instagram post, First Know Your Rights Camp, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BMRZfzzDUYf/>.

same opportunities that I've had. And say 'You know what? I can live with myself.' Because I can't if I just watch.<sup>34</sup>

*Genuflect Offense as Unforgivable Sin*

Through his media interviews, Kaepernick articulated the reasoning behind his protest, clarifying its objectives. These efforts did not stop detractors who insisted that his action was disrespectful to the U.S. flag and by extension to the military. The national conversation shifted away from Kaepernick's initial issue at the intersection of race and police brutality and toward competing interpretations of patriotism. Those who saw Kaepernick's actions as unpatriotic appealed to the memory of the men and women who had died "for the flag" and in effect for the freedoms and opportunities that Kaepernick enjoyed. Others disagreed with Kaepernick's method but acknowledged his right to freedom of expression. Kaepernick formulated his own actions in terms of patriotism: "I don't understand what's more American than fighting for liberty and justice for everybody, for the equality this country says it stands for. To me I see it as very patriotic and American to uphold the United States to the standards it says it lives by."<sup>35</sup> Even the hashtag activism of #VeteransForKaepernick,<sup>36</sup> created in late August to voice support from active military and veterans, did little to stem vitriolic messages and commentary asserting offense against the flag, nation, and military.

As the protest spread to other athletes at all levels of sports, so did the discourse about disrespecting the flag. In his op-ed column in the *New York Times*, David Brooks situated the

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<sup>34</sup> Biderman, "Transcript: Colin Kaepernick Addresses Sitting."

<sup>35</sup> Cam Inman, "Colin Kaepernick Postgame Transcript: 'Having the Opportunity Meant a Lot,'" *The Mercury News*, October 16, 2016, <http://www.mercurynews.com/2016/10/16/colin-kaepernick-postgame-transcript-having-the-opportunity-meant-a-lot/>.

<sup>36</sup> #VeteransForKaepernick, <https://twitter.com/hashtag/veteransforkaepernick>.

anthem within the context of U.S. civil religion, as one of the “shared moments of reverence” that strengthens and transmits the nation’s “foundational creed” and evangelizes patriotism.”<sup>37</sup>

To dissuade high school players from participating in such protest, he argued: “If these common rituals are insulted, other people won’t be motivated to right your injustices because they’ll be less likely to feel that you are part of their story.”<sup>38</sup> For Brooks, singing the anthem in unison was an act of solidarity, a hedge against “Donald Trump’s ethnic nationalism.”<sup>39</sup>

In March 2017, Kaepernick became a free agent, and allegedly, through sources, had indicated a cessation of his protest for the following season. Reportedly he is seeking to avoid diverting attention from the positive outcomes achieved as a result of his protest, namely, the ongoing work of his foundation, the support of other athletes, and the contribution the protest made to the national conversation on race and equality.<sup>40</sup> As of 2020, he remains unsigned by any NFL team, including some who would benefit from the presence of a veteran as a reserve quarterback. Through his genuflect offense, Kaepernick violated no enforceable rule of the NFL code of conduct or stipulation of the collective bargaining agreement. In a league where owners and fans have forgiven countless abuses in order to secure players that will help them win, alleged flag abuse appears to be the unpardonable sin, possibly with career-ending consequences

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<sup>37</sup> David Brooks, “The Uses of Patriotism,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/16/opinion/the-uses-of-patriotism.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Brooks, “Patriotism.”

<sup>39</sup> Brooks, “Patriotism.”

<sup>40</sup> To date, Kaepernick himself has not announced that he will cease his protest. Adam Schefter, “Colin Kaepernick to Stand during National Anthem Next Season,” *ESPN*, March 3, 2017, [http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_/id/18805744/colin-kaepernick-stand-national-anthem-next-season](http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/18805744/colin-kaepernick-stand-national-anthem-next-season).

exceeding those for domestic, sexual, animal, and substance abuses. The question remains: What is the connection between professional sports and the evangelization of patriotism in the U.S.?

### **Traditioning Patriotism through Baseball**

In the late nineteenth century, the U.S. moved from a nation divided by Civil War to a neocolonial power, and baseball was part of the construction of a new national identity. From Chicago, sporting goods entrepreneur, team owner, and former ball player Albert Goodwill Spalding attempted to establish baseball as the “American National Game,” creating a mythology that remains prevalent in the popular imagination to this day, though its historical accuracy has been discredited.<sup>41</sup> He connected the sport’s real and imaginary roots to a Union General in the Civil War, and made the military connection key to its promotion. Spalding claimed:

While the game did not originate in the Army or Navy, these important departments of our government were the media through which the sport, during the Civil War, was taken out of its local environments—New York and Brooklyn—and started upon its national career. The returning veterans, “when the

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<sup>41</sup> Albert Goodwill Spalding, *America's National Game: Historic Facts Concerning the Beginning, Evolution, Development and Popularity of Base Ball, with Personal Reminiscences of Its Vicissitudes, Its Victories and Its Votaries* (New York: American Sports Pub. Co., 1911), 18. In the course of his career, Spalding was a pitcher (1876-78), manager (1876-77), executive, and part owner of the Chicago White Stockings. In 1888-89 he took a group of U.S. National League players on a barnstorming tour of the world, visiting Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia, Ceylon, Egypt, Italy, France, England, Scotland, Ireland, and several cities in the United States before returning to Chicago. The point of the tour, during which over 50 games were played, was to promote baseball and Spalding’s sporting goods company. For a schedule of games and outcomes, see “Appendix II: Game Results of the Tour,” in Mark Lamster, *Spalding's World Tour: The Epic Adventure that Took Baseball around the Globe—And Made It America's Game* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), 287-292. Spalding’s creation narrative for baseball was discredited in particular in 1947 by Robert W. Henderson, *Ball, Bat and Bishop: The Origin of Ball Games* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

cruel war” was “over,” disseminated Base Ball throughout the country and then established it as the national game of America.<sup>42</sup>

As the U.S. expanded its military and commercial reach globally, at the turn of the twentieth century, so did baseball. Spalding audaciously proclaimed:

Ever since its establishment in the hearts of the people ... Base Ball has “followed the flag.” Base Ball has ‘followed the flag’ ... to Alaska ... to the Hawaiian Islands ... to the Philippines, to Porto Rico and to Cuba, and wherever a ship floating the Stars and Stripes finds anchorage today, somewhere on a nearby shore the American National Game is in progress.<sup>43</sup>

With such patriotic grounding, it should come as no surprise that sporting events, primarily professional baseball, “served as the prime incubator for flag and national anthem rituals.”<sup>44</sup> By the 1890s, “The Star Spangled Banner” was associated with baseball’s opening day,<sup>45</sup> and its appearance on a regular basis starts with the 1918 World Series between the Boston Red Sox and the Chicago Cubs. The *New York Times* article on the Red Sox victory in Comiskey Park in that series began not with the shutout pitched by Babe Ruth, but with the reporting of a startling occurrence at the seventh inning stretch. This extraordinary event, “far different from any incident that has ever occurred in the history of baseball,” was the band striking up “The Star

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<sup>42</sup> Spalding, *America's National Game*, 366.

<sup>43</sup> Spalding, *America's National Game*, 14, 371-375.

<sup>44</sup> Marc Ferris, *Star-Spangled Banner: The Unlikely Story of America's National Anthem* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 77.

<sup>45</sup> Ferris, *Star-Spangled Banner*, 77-78.

Spangled Banner.”<sup>46</sup> Players, following the example of teammates in military service, turned to face the flag, the war-weary crowd joined in singing, and the assembly concluded in patriotic gusto with “thunderous applause” that marked the crowd’s most enthusiastic response of the entire game.<sup>47</sup> Boston continued the practice when the series moved to Fenway, but shifted the anthem to pregame festivities and brought in “another delegation of wounded soldiers and sailors invalided home ... and their entrance on crutches supported by their comrades ... evoked louder cheers than anything the athletes did on the diamond.”<sup>48</sup>

Organized displays of patriotism at the ballpark were viewed by some as publicity stunts to counter charges that owners and athletes were shirking responsibilities while others went off to war.<sup>49</sup> This criticism, and the daily playing of the national anthem, reappeared during World War II. This time the U.S. President requested that baseball continue as part of the war effort, though athletes were not spared from the draft.

The connections between a nation at war, the anthem, and baseball continued through the Vietnam conflict. After World War II teams ceased the daily use of the anthem, relegating it to special occasions and opening day. Cubs owner Philip Wrigley opined that the “anthem shouldn’t be cheapened by routine renditions in athletic arenas before a game was started.”<sup>50</sup> By 1967, however, even Wrigley returned to the daily practice in light of the escalation of U.S.

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<sup>46</sup> “Red Sox Beat Cubs in Initial Battle of World’s Series,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1918, 14.

<sup>47</sup> “Red Sox Beat Cubs,” *New York Times*.

<sup>48</sup> “George Whiteman’s Great Catch Is Feature of Windup Struggle,” *Indianapolis News*, September 12, 1918, 12.

<sup>49</sup> Ferris, *Star-Spangled Banner*, 175.

<sup>50</sup> Ferris, *Star-Spangled Banner*, 223.

military involvement in Vietnam. Teams experimented with other songs like “God Bless America” or “America the Beautiful” because they were easier for fans to sing, but eventually the national anthem became a staple at most professional sports, a ritual particularized by local flourishes. In light of well over a century of traditioning patriotism in ballparks, with a narrowly focused connection to military service and war, is it any wonder that Kaepernick’s protest is repeatedly accused of being anti-military, and therefore anti-American?

### **¿Dios Bless Whose América?**

In the days following the tragedy of September 11, 2001, Major League Baseball recommended that, upon the resumption of play, teams sing “God Bless America” at the seventh-inning stretch, replacing, in some cases, “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.”<sup>51</sup> The seventh inning was proposed because there was concern that the attention span of fans would not sustain placement of another song immediately after the national anthem: “We don’t need people to stand for six minutes at a time.”<sup>52</sup> At the direction of the league, the guidelines for the 2002 season continued the practice on Opening Day, Sundays, the 9/11 anniversary, and certain holidays.<sup>53</sup> The New York Yankees were among the only teams that retained the practice on a daily basis at all home games. At Yankee Stadium, this Irving Berlin composition acquired a status equal to the national anthem as fans were, and still are, instructed to rise and remove their

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<sup>51</sup> Bill Ladson, “After 9/11, ‘God Bless America’ a Mainstay,” *MLB News*, September 10, 2011, <http://m.mlb.com/news/article/24486076/>. I initially explored baseball, 9/11, and the Carlos Delgado protest in “Ordinary Theologies, Extraordinary Circumstances: Baseball at the Intersections of Faith and Popular Culture” in *Recovering 9/11 in New York*, ed. Robert Fanuzzi and Michael Wolfe (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014), 68-87. Some of the material in the following sections reflects and builds upon my insights from that chapter.

<sup>52</sup> Ladson, “After 9/11.”

<sup>53</sup> Sheryl Kaskowitz, *God Bless America: The Surprising History of an Iconic Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 117, 180n5. The author attributes the information to a memorandum from the MLB president dated April 15, 2002.

caps. In March 2003, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a MLB directive ordered the playing “God Bless America” in the seventh inning break at all home openers “in tribute to America and those serving in the U.S. Armed Forces.”<sup>54</sup> Practice across teams suggests the existence of a MLB policy that includes specific instructions for visiting players to “assume their fielding positions” and directs that “all other field personnel should be on the field with caps removed.”<sup>55</sup> In 2005, however, a reporter noted that MLB “does not have any firm rules regarding players’ presence for ‘God Bless America’ and a spokesman for the league said there weren’t any firm rules requiring each player to stand for the pregame anthem.”<sup>56</sup>

### *Anatomy of a Protest*

In 2004, Puerto Rican ball player Carlos Delgado protested Operation Iraqi Freedom by refusing to stand during seventh-inning renditions of *God Bless America*; he typically remained in the dugout. His personal protest became public knowledge halfway through the season, when Delgado freely shared his stance in an interview with the *Toronto Star* published a day before

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<sup>54</sup> “MLB announces on-field initiatives to celebrate Opening Day,” MLB press release, March 28, 2003, [http://mlb.mlb.com/news/press\\_releases/press\\_release.jsp?ymd=20030328&content\\_id=246306&vkey=pr\\_mlb&fext=.jsp&c\\_id=mlb](http://mlb.mlb.com/news/press_releases/press_release.jsp?ymd=20030328&content_id=246306&vkey=pr_mlb&fext=.jsp&c_id=mlb). For a critical discussion of baseball and “God Bless America,” see Kaskowitz, *God Bless America*, 116-149.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Kaskowitz, *God Bless America*, 117; see also 180n6. Kaskowitz states in the text that a “slightly revised policy laid out in 2004” remains in place, and inserts the instruction in a block quote with endnote 6. The citation references transcripts of MLB memoranda the author received from the MLB corporate office in email correspondence. The memorandum cited, however, is dated April 6, 2002, not 2004. The rest of the citation discusses the policy in effect since 2006 for the postseason. Delgado’s action beginning in 2004 and not earlier suggests that a 2004 policy may well have been articulated.

<sup>56</sup> Sam Borden, “A Man of Principle: Delgado Makes Headlines Speaking His Mind,” *New York Daily News*, January 23, 2005, <http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/sports/man-principle-delgado-headlines-speaking-mind-article-1.651402>.

U.S. Independence Day.<sup>57</sup> As with Kaepernick, the reveal was unexpected. Years earlier, reporter Geoff Baker had covered Delgado's activism regarding the use of the Puerto Rican Island of Vieques as a live fire testing range. Baker recalled that in 2004,

the U.S. was fighting in Iraq, having used munitions in their "Shock and Awe" campaign that had been tested in Vieques. I suspected Delgado would have feelings about this. He knew I was going to visit Vieques and talk to the activists he'd been tied to. But when I interviewed him, a couple of days before flying to Vieques, I wasn't prepared for what he told me. He didn't hold back.<sup>58</sup>

At the time, Delgado's Toronto Blue Jays were visiting Puerto Rico to play the Montreal Expos.<sup>59</sup> The article framed Delgado's action and antiwar sentiment within the larger context of his activism, which centered on the liberation and the ongoing development of Vieques.

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<sup>57</sup> Geoff Baker, "Citizen Carlos: Jays' Delgado Fights for Justice for The People of a Small Puerto Rican Island Vieques Ravaged by Six Decades of U.S. Weapons Testing," *Toronto Star*, July 3, 2004, <http://www.puertorico-herald.org/issues/2004/vol8n28/CitizenCarlos.html>. In a 2016, article Baker wrote "I had written in 2001 about Delgado's work in Vieques and wanted to know his 2004 feelings about the Navy's pullout. That's when he told me about his protest silently waged for over a year." In "Carlos Delgado's 2004 Protest a Reminder that We Shouldn't Rush to Judge Colin Kaepernick," *Seattle Times*, September 9, 2016, <http://www.seattletimes.com/sports/seahawks/carlos-delgados-2004-sitdown-a-reminder-that-we-shouldnt-rush-to-judge-colin-kaepernick-protest/>.

<sup>58</sup> Geoff Baker, "Perspective: Seven Years Later," *Seattle Times*, September 11, 2008, <http://www.seattletimes.com/sports/mariners/perspective-seven-years-later/>.

<sup>59</sup> For two seasons, 2003 and 2004, Hiram Bithorn Stadium in San Juan served as the Expos field for select home stands as the team explored relocation options. The fact that the news broke in a Canadian paper during a Puerto Rican home stand featuring two Canadian teams may explain why Delgado's action went further unnoticed until the Blue Jays played the Yankees in New York on July 21, 2004. Solange Reyner, "Protesting 'God Bless America,'" *Newsday*, July 21, 2004, <http://www.newsday.com/sports/protesting-god-bless-america-1.732659>; William Rhoden, "Delgado Makes a Stand by Taking a Seat," *New York Times*, July 21, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/21/sports/baseball/21rhoden.html>; Mark Kreidler, "Delgado's Protest No Longer Unnoticed," *ESPN*, July 23, 2004, [http://www.espn.com/mlb/columns/story?columnist=kreidler\\_mark&id=1845388](http://www.espn.com/mlb/columns/story?columnist=kreidler_mark&id=1845388); Steve

Expropriated by the U.S. Navy before World War II, Vieques was for six decades used as a munitions depot and site for live training exercises and bombardments. During a training mission in 1999, a civilian employee was killed when a half ton of ordnance was dropped too close to his security post. The incident galvanized years of protest and anger into a larger movement that eventually resulted in the cessation of military activity in May 2003 and a return of the island to civilian use. Among the first professional athletes to agitate for the restoration of the island, Delgado affirmed his ongoing commitment to the cause by placing his celebrity status and finances in support of activists as well as of local youth and educational programs. He noted: “If someone was using your backyard as a practice range, dropping bombs, how would you feel ... Vieques has no economy and the highest cancer rate in Puerto Rico. It is wrong. In the States, people think it's not a big deal ... you're bombing a small island. I will be vocal about that.”<sup>60</sup>

In 2004, the promised clean-up by the Navy was slow and insufficient to address the toll of accumulated damage. As Delgado explained, "You're dealing with health, with poverty, with the roots of an entire community, both economically and environmentally.”<sup>61</sup> The ongoing frustration over Vieques coupled with Delgado’s opposition to U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq found expression in his demonstration against the imposition of “God Bless America” league-wide on select occasions, and, by some teams like the New York Yankees, on a daily basis. In 2005, as a free agent, Delgado indicated that that if the teams courting him had a

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Wilstein, “Patriotism, Protest at Yankee Stadium,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 2004, <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/jul/25/sports/sp-dogwilstein25>.

<sup>60</sup> Bruce Feldman, “How Cool is Carlos Delgado?” *ESPN Magazine*, July 9, 2001, vol 4, no.14, <http://www.espn.com/magazine/vol4no14delgado.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Baker, “Citizen Carlos.”

policy that he must participate in the seventh inning tribute, he would comply.<sup>62</sup> He signed with the Florida Marlins, who had no such policy, but a year later he signed with the New York Mets, whose ownership insisted upon compliance, and he did not wish the protest to be a distraction.<sup>63</sup> A few years later Delgado qualified that from his perspective he was no longer representing a minority position on the war in Iraq, “People got the point. The most important thing is that a lot of people kind of realized that I was right.”<sup>64</sup>

### *Bless Who?*

As a native-born and resident Puerto Rican playing with the Canada-based Toronto Blue Jays, Delgado had a broader perspective than many on what constitutes “America.” From his viewpoint, “God Bless America” and its performative context at ballgames, with explicit references to deployed U.S. military forces, was more accurately “*Dios bendiga a Estados Unidos.*” While he claimed to have no problems with President Bush or the people of the United States, he subtly alluded to the colonized status of the island of Puerto Rico by informing reporters that he did not even vote in the U.S.<sup>65</sup> He criticized those in the U.S. who considered

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<sup>62</sup> “First Baseman, Delgado, Fields Questions Regarding War Protest,” *Veterans Today*, January 28, 2005, <http://www.veteranstodayarchives.com/2005/01/28/first-baseman-delgado-fields-questions-regarding-war-protest/>. According to Delgado’s agent, David Sloane, “During negotiations with the free agent, teams raised the issue of Delgado’s stance regarding the Iraq war ... It wasn’t an obstacle to a deal with any club because Delgado was willing to follow team policy regarding God Bless America.”

<sup>63</sup> Ben Shpigel, “Delgado, Check. Next for Mets? Wagner, Check.” *New York Times*, November 29, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/29/sports/baseball/delgado-check-next-for-mets-wagner-check.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Griffin, “Popularity Will Not Extend to Politics,” *Toronto Star*, February 24, 2008, [https://www.thestar.com/sports/2008/02/24/popularity\\_will\\_not\\_extend\\_to\\_politics.html](https://www.thestar.com/sports/2008/02/24/popularity_will_not_extend_to_politics.html).

<sup>65</sup> “Pide Delgado se respete su libre expresión contra la guerra,” *Puerto Rico Herald*, July 23, 2004, <http://www.puertorico-herald.org/issues/2004/vol8n31/Media3-es.html>. Delgado was interviewed by *Primera Hora*, one of the local Puerto Rican papers. Other publications, like the

the nation to be “la madre de la democracia”; yet when they were confronted with dissent, he noted, chaos ensued: “el fanatismo cultural es mucho.”<sup>66</sup> He called for respect for his stance, noting that his protest had been respectful: after all, he was not standing on first base waving an antiwar banner.<sup>67</sup> Playing in Canada provided some protection, but Delgado was not immune from particularly virulent fan responses on the internet, in chatrooms, on sports radio, and, in person, especially at Yankee Stadium.

Delgado considered the war to be stupid and without good reason: “We have more people dead now, after the (official) war, than during the war. You’ve been looking for weapons of mass destruction. Where are they at? You’ve been looking for over a year. Can’t find them. I don’t support that.”<sup>68</sup> Delgado self-identified as pro-peace, empathized with those who had lost loved ones to the war on all sides, and realized the risk associated with his now public stance, “it takes a man to stand up for what he believes ... Especially in a society where everything is supposed to be politically correct.”<sup>69</sup> Through its ritual use of “God Bless America,” MLB had established that such pacifism was politically incorrect. In the public imagination, Ángel G. Flores-Rodríguez writes, “Delgado’s antiwar protest was also an attack against the victims of September 11. To protest ‘God Bless America’ during a baseball game was not antiwar, but anti-

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*Puerto Rico Herald*, picked up the story and provided some of Delgado’s responses. While Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, those living on the island are excluded from voting in national elections for president.

<sup>66</sup> “Pide Delgado.”

<sup>67</sup> “Pide Delgado.”

<sup>68</sup> Rhoden, “Delgado Makes a Stand.”

<sup>69</sup> Rhoden, “Delgado Makes a Stand.”

American.”<sup>70</sup> Delgado didn’t stand because he was opposed to the way MLB “tied God Bless America and 9/11 to the war in Iraq in baseball. I say God bless America, God bless Miami, God bless Puerto Rico and all countries until there is peace in the world.”<sup>71</sup>

*Employee Number 21*

Upon joining the New York Mets for the 2006 season, Delgado ended his protest. He told reporters that he “would follow orders” since the Mets have a policy that players should stand for “God Bless America.”<sup>72</sup> Curiously, a year earlier, a New York sportswriter noted that the Mets “do not have such a policy and several players frequently missed the playing of the song last season because they ran into the clubhouse for one reason or another—like changing into a fresh jersey.”<sup>73</sup> Ambiguity remained because no one in the Mets organization claimed responsibility for the unwritten policy.<sup>74</sup> Delgado referenced himself in terms of his new uniform: “Just call me Employee Number 21,”<sup>75</sup> the number he had been longing for years to wear again, the sacred

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<sup>70</sup> Ángel G. Flores-Rodríguez, “Baseball, 9/11, and Dissent: The Carlos Delgado Controversy,” *OAH Magazine of History* 25, no. 3 (July 2011): 55, DOI: 10.1093/oahmag/oar020.

<sup>71</sup> “First Baseman, Delgado, Fields Questions.”

<sup>72</sup> Dave Zirin, *Welcome to the Terrordome: The Pain, Politics, and Promise of Sports* (Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2007), 58. The section on Delgado in the book appeared in an earlier form as Dave Zirin, “The Silencing of Carlos Delgado,” *The Nation*, December 7, 2005, <http://www.thenation.com/article/silencing-carlos-delgado#>. The Mets brought up this issue when they were considering Delgado for the 2005 season: see Adam Rubin, “Delgado Meets the Mets in PR,” *New York Daily News*, January 14, 2005, <http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/sports/delgado-meets-mets-p-article-1.574701>.

<sup>73</sup> Borden, “A Man of Principle.”

<sup>74</sup> Ian O’Connor, “Keeping Score,” *U.S. Today*, November 28, 2005, [https://U.S.today30.U.S.today.com/sports/columnist/oconnor/2005-11-28-keepingscore-oconnor\\_x.htm](https://U.S.today30.U.S.today.com/sports/columnist/oconnor/2005-11-28-keepingscore-oconnor_x.htm).

<sup>75</sup> O’Connor, “Keeping Score”; Shpigel, “Delgado, Check”; Zirin, “The Silencing.”

number of his hero Roberto Clemente.<sup>76</sup> He knew the significance of the number: “you say No. 21, people, they kind of put two and two together and they know that this is a great player, and he was a better human being.”<sup>77</sup> His juxtaposition of Clemente and “following orders” was oxymoronic. During his career, the stellar Puerto Rican ball player had often agitated for racial and social justice, especially within baseball. Clemente died on a mission of mercy to earthquake-stricken Nicaragua on New Year’s Eve 1972, three months after reaching the 3,000-hit career milestone. Shortly after his death, Clemente was quickly voted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, the first Latin American inducted in the history of the sport. In 2006 Delgado received the Roberto Clemente Award, given annually by MLB to a “player who combines outstanding play on the field with devoted work in the community.”<sup>78</sup> In the award citation and press releases, Delgado’s many charitable and community-oriented works, particularly with youth, were recognized, yet no mention was made of his social activism or pacifism with regards to Vieques or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>79</sup> In a certain sense, his

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<sup>76</sup> ““Con ese número no se juega,”” *La Prensa*, July 1, 2006, <http://www.laprensa.com.ni/2006/01/07/deportes/966797-con-ese-nmero-no-se-juega> and Anthony McCarron, “Carlos Delgado will honor Roberto Clemente at the World Baseball Classic,” *New York Daily News*, January 16, 2009, <http://www.nydailynews.com/sports/baseball/mets/carlos-delgado-honor-roberto-clemente-world-baseball-classic-article-1.424501>.

<sup>77</sup> Carlos Delgado, acceptance remarks, Roberto Clemente Award 2006, transcript, “World Series: Cardinals v. Tigers,” *ASAP Sports*, October 24, 2006, [http://www.asapsports.com/show\\_interview.php?id=39774](http://www.asapsports.com/show_interview.php?id=39774).

<sup>78</sup> “Delgado Named Recipient of the Roberto Clemente Award,” press release, New York Mets, October 24, 2006, [http://newyork.mets.mlb.com/news/press\\_releases/press\\_release.jsp?ymd=20061024&content\\_id=1722353&vkey=pr\\_nym&fext=.jsp&c\\_id=nym](http://newyork.mets.mlb.com/news/press_releases/press_release.jsp?ymd=20061024&content_id=1722353&vkey=pr_nym&fext=.jsp&c_id=nym). See the foundation established by Delgado in 2001, Extra Bases Inc., website, <http://www.extrabases.org/en/index.php>.

resistance had been domesticated with an award that had itself, to a certain degree, domesticated his hero Clemente posthumously by focusing on charitable works instead of activism. In 2015, his first year of eligibility on the ballot for the Hall of Fame, Delgado fell beneath the five percent minimum of votes required to remain on the list for future consideration, which effectively shut him out of the Hall.<sup>80</sup> Some attributed this exclusion to a career spent primarily with a small market team in Canada; others compared his career statistics and accomplishments in relation to other players and found them lacking. A few alluded to Delgado's political stances, suggesting that "conscience and good numbers won't get you much closer to Cooperstown than good numbers alone will."<sup>81</sup> Delgado acknowledged his disappointment and observed that it is impossible to say if the protest impacted the results—"es bien difícil de probar."<sup>82</sup>

## THEOLOGIZING NATION

### Evangelization with Bats and Balls: Theological Claims

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<sup>79</sup> "2006 Winner: Carlos Delgado, New York Mets," *Roberto Clemente Award*, [http://m.mlb.com/awards/history-winners/?award\\_id=MLBRC&year=2015](http://m.mlb.com/awards/history-winners/?award_id=MLBRC&year=2015). This site also contains a link to the official MLB press release.

<sup>80</sup> Brendan Kennedy, "Carlos Delgado Shut Out of the Baseball Hall of Fame," *Toronto Star*, January 6, 2015, [https://www.thestar.com/sports/bluejays/2015/01/06/carlos\\_delgado\\_falls\\_off\\_baseball\\_hall\\_of\\_fame\\_ballot\\_in\\_first\\_year.html](https://www.thestar.com/sports/bluejays/2015/01/06/carlos_delgado_falls_off_baseball_hall_of_fame_ballot_in_first_year.html).

<sup>81</sup> Jay Jaffe, "JAWS and the 2015 Hall of Fame Ballot: Carlos Delgado," *Sports Illustrated*, December 15, 2014, <https://www.si.com/mlb/2014/12/15/jaws-2015-hall-of-fame-ballot-carlos-delgado>.

<sup>82</sup> Carlos Rosa, "No debe ser usual que en pleno año 2016 exista la segregación," *El Nuevo Día*, September 25, 2016, <https://www.elnuevodia.com/deportes/beisbol/nota/nodebeserusualqueenplenoano2016existalasegregacion-2244583>.

In a 2016 interview, Kaepernick denied that there were religious overtones to his taking a knee.<sup>83</sup> Implicit in the question was a reference to “tebowing,” the neologism created to describe the conspicuous display of religious faith adopted by college and NFL quarterback Tim Tebow. For Tebow, a minor league baseball player with the NY Mets, the practice of taking a knee, whether in victory or loss, “turned the attention off of me and pointed toward God.”<sup>84</sup> From late 2016 on, Tebow’s response to Kaepernick was both guarded and ambiguous: “When people have belief in something ... or conviction in something, trying to stand for that is a good thing, and it’s all about standing for it the right way.”<sup>85</sup>

Missed in most of the commentaries surrounding both protest actions are the theological assumptions embedded in the practices of singing both the national anthem and “God Bless America” in public communal settings as part of professional sports. Both songs are theistic hymns, assuming the existence of God, ironic in a nation that prides itself on the separation of church and state, an ever nebulous distinction. While the sacred dimension is easier to identify in “God Bless America,” it is less obvious in “The Star Spangled Banner.”

From the perspective of Irving Berlin as composer and as performer, “God Bless America” was a hymn, a prayer for peace in troubling times, introduced as such in the opening verse: “While the storm clouds gather far across the sea/ Let us swear allegiance to a land that's

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<sup>83</sup> Wagoner, “Transcript of Colin Kaepernick's Comments after Preseason Finale.”

<sup>84</sup> Tim Tebow, *Shaken* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: WaterBrook, 2016), 158.

<sup>85</sup> Bob Nightengale, “Tim Tebow on Colin Kaepernick: 'It's About Standing for It the Right Way,’” *USA Today*, September 21, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/mlb/2016/09/21/tim-tebow-colin-kaepernick-protest/90736682/>.

free/ Let us all be grateful for a land so fair/ As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer.”<sup>86</sup> The use of the hymn by MLB in the context of 9/11 functioned and was perceived as prayer. In Yankee Stadium the ritual playing of the hymn was explicitly connected to an act of prayer when fans were instructed at home games to rise for “God Bless America,” remove their caps, and “Please stand for a moment of silent prayer for men and women serving our country at home and around the world.”<sup>87</sup> Until a lawsuit ended the practice at Yankee Stadium, police, security, and ushers restricted fan motion during the silent prayer and hymn. The federal suit, filed in 2009 by a fan who was prevented from going to the restroom during “God Bless America,” requested relief from the Court that directed the NYPD and the Yankees from enforcing any policy that “compels spectators to participate in religious or political activities while attending games.”<sup>88</sup> The complaint affirmed that the seventh-inning ritual was experienced as religious by the fan: “Though he respects the religious activities of others, Mr. Campeau-Laurion does not participate in religious services and objects to being required to do so.”<sup>89</sup>

Religious connotations are evident at the league level as well. In a commemorative video produced by MLB on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11, “God Bless America” plays as

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<sup>86</sup> Irving Berlin, “God Bless America,” 1938, <https://www.scoutsongs.com/lyrics/godblessamerica.html>. At Yankee Stadium this little-known opening verse was used frequently in live performances of the hymn by tenor Ronan Tynan.

<sup>87</sup> The understanding by fans of “God Bless America” as prayer or as religious is evident in the surveys taken by Kaskowitz on the companion website to *God Bless America*, available on the Oxford University Press website, <http://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199919772/survey/>. See links for survey respondents' opinions of the song itself and of the song's inclusion in baseball games.

<sup>88</sup> *Campeau-Laurion v. Raymond Kelly, the City of New York, the New York Yankees Partnership, et al.*, “Complaint,” United States District Court, Southern District of New York, April 15, 2009, 15, no. 3, <https://www.nyclu.org/en/cases/campeau-laurion-v-raymond-kelly-new-york-yankees-partnership-et-al>. The links to PDFs of the court filings are at that site.

<sup>89</sup> *Campeau-Laurion v. Yankees*, “Complaint,” 5, no. 19.

images of players and teams are portrayed in reverent postures, some with hands or caps over their hearts. One of the early moments in the video captures Robinson Cano of the New York Yankees making the sign of the cross.<sup>90</sup> The practice of playing “God Bless America” every Sunday conveys a sense of the sacred, especially when coupled with a call for a posture reserved for public prayer or for the national anthem, but not ordinarily for a pop tune born in Tin Pan Alley.

Through what can appear to be compulsory prayer, are our ballparks participating in acts of outing and othering, acts that visually and aurally establish who is patriotic and who is not? Are critical questions discouraged by patriotic peer pressure? Are fans and players being proselytized by baseball to idolatrously “follow the flag” every Sunday by order of the MLB?<sup>91</sup> Both hymns and their performances elicit the questions: What are we praying for, and how do these prayers and rituals interpret the Divine? What are the salvific implications of non-innocent evangelizations with bats and balls? Do moments of resistance constitute alternate sites of liberation?

### **In Praise of a Warrior God**

The Francis Scott Key poem “The Defence of Fort McHenry,” put to the melody of a British drinking song and now known as “The Star Spangled Banner,” has four verses, though typically only one is sung. The invocation of the Divine in the forgotten fourth verse of “The Star Spangled Banner” situates the U.S. as “the heav'n-rescued land,” that, having been “blest with

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<sup>90</sup> MLB and the Players Association, “A Message from Major League Baseball and Its Players,” music video, 2:42, September 10, 2011,

[http://mediadownloads.mlb.com/mlbam/2011/09/10/mlbtv\\_19057371\\_1200K.mp4](http://mediadownloads.mlb.com/mlbam/2011/09/10/mlbtv_19057371_1200K.mp4).

“Major League Baseball and the Players Association remember September 11, 2001 and present God Bless America in honor of our nation.” The sign of the cross by Robinson Cano occurs from the 20-second mark to the 23-second mark, and again in the background from 1:39 to 1:41.

<sup>91</sup> Spalding, *America's National Game*, 14.

vict'ry and peace,” must in turn “Praise the Pow'r that hath made and preserv'd us a nation!”<sup>92</sup>

The anthem urges the nation on, “Then conquer we must, when our cause is just, And this be our motto: ‘In God is our trust.’” Is professional sport making a theological claim in the traditioning of the anthem through a narrow understanding of patriotism? Through coerced public rituals, are MLB and the NFL imaging God as a martial deity and grounding U.S. exceptionalism in a divine mandate of conquest?

Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” was composed in the midst of World War I but not released until 1938, as Europe moved to the verge of war again. It has a complicated history of use and interpretation. The popularized recorded version of the song, most often used at ballparks, was the performance by vocalist Kate Smith.<sup>93</sup> Berlin saw “God Bless America” not as “a patriotic song, but rather an expression of gratitude for what this country has done for its citizens, of what home really means.”<sup>94</sup> Initially intended by both Berlin and Smith as a peace song, “God Bless America”’s connections with wartime yielded performative interpretations that reshaped it into a martial hymn whose lyrics sustained U.S. exceptionalism while urging intervention.<sup>95</sup> This pattern of usage returned after September 11, 2001. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, the song became a prayer of mourning and an expression of unity born of tragedy.

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<sup>92</sup> Francis Scott Key, “The Star Spangled Banner” (1814), <http://www.scoutsongs.com/lyrics/starspangledbanner.html>.

<sup>93</sup> In April 2019, the Yankees ceased using the Smith rendition because they became aware of other recordings by the singer from the early 1930’s that contained racist content. See Anastasia Tsioulcas, “Kate Smith’s ‘God Bless America’ Dropped By Two Major Sports Teams,” National Public Radio, April 22, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/22/715918211/kate-smiths-god-bless-america-dropped-by-two-major-sports-teams>.

<sup>94</sup> S. J. Woolf, “What Makes a Song: A Talk with Irving Berlin,” *New York Times*, July 28, 1940, 9.

<sup>95</sup> Kaskowitz, *God Bless America*, 33-49.

A mournful wail beseeching a God of comfort to stand by a stunned nation mutated quickly into a hymn to an avenging deity in support of the war on terrorism. Ten years later, as news that Osama bin Laden had been killed reached a game in progress, Mets manager Terry Collins proclaimed, “You almost want to just stop the game and have that girl come and sing another beautiful rendition of ‘God Bless America.’”<sup>96</sup>

A God that sustains a consistent foreign policy of aggression is affirmed daily in rituals feting veterans and active duty military across MLB. Fans in Yankee Stadium and at home, via the YES network, are traditioned through a litany of U.S. wars. For each of their eighty-one home games, the Yankees honor a veteran prior to the seventh inning hymn, identifying them by branch of service and military operation.<sup>97</sup> In Detroit, at select Tigers home games, military currently serving a tour of duty or recently returned from deployment deliver the game ball to the pitcher's mound.<sup>98</sup> In Minnesota, veterans or active duty military receive recognition at all home games “for their accomplishments and sacrifices” through the opportunity “to raise the American Flag to the top of the flagpole during the singing of the National Anthem.”<sup>99</sup> The Los Angeles Dodgers and the Houston Astros salute military heroes at every home game. The expectation in

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<sup>96</sup> Terry Collins, cited in Todd Zolecki, “Philadelphia Freedom: Game Takes Backseat,” *MLB News*, May 2, 2011, [http://mlb.mlb.com/news/article.jsp?ymd=20110501&content\\_id=18479234&vkey=news\\_nym&c\\_id=nym](http://mlb.mlb.com/news/article.jsp?ymd=20110501&content_id=18479234&vkey=news_nym&c_id=nym).

<sup>97</sup> Unlike other broadcasts, the YES network does not break to commercial for the seventh inning stretch.

<sup>98</sup> “A Salute to Our Heroes,” Detroit Tigers website, <http://mlb.mlb.com/det/community/saluteheroes.jsp>.

<sup>99</sup> “Military Support,” Minnesota Twins website, <http://mlb.mlb.com/min/community/military-support/>.

Los Angeles is that the military honorees will be in uniform,<sup>100</sup> and in Houston that they will be greeted by “a crowd ready to show its appreciation with a standing ovation.”<sup>101</sup> In San Diego, the Padres wear a military-inspired camouflage uniform on special days and every Sunday, a tradition begun the year before the events of 9/11. The Padres, whose name and earliest logo recalled the Franciscan friars who founded the California missions, as of 1995 consider themselves “the Team for the Military,” an identity embraced with missionary zeal.<sup>102</sup> In this sampling are initiatives that exceed the already excessive patriotic and military oriented programs and tributes established by MLB for participation by all teams. The accretion of rituals that honor military service anoint the profession most directly tied to war and conquest.

The protests by Kaepernick and Delgado played out as resistance in these hyper-militarized contexts. However, only Delgado’s protest directly challenged the theological assumptions of the warrior God. In 2000, Delgado participated in an open letter to President George W. Bush, signed and paid for by eleven prominent Puerto Rican performers and athletes. Urging cessation of the bombing of Vieques, the letter, mindful of the sacrifices Puerto Ricans had made in military service, called the ongoing assault on the health of the people of Vieques

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<sup>100</sup> “Military Hero of the Game,” Los Angeles Dodgers website, [https://secure.mlb.com/la/fan\\_forum/veteranofthegame\\_form.jsp](https://secure.mlb.com/la/fan_forum/veteranofthegame_form.jsp).

<sup>101</sup> “Thank You Military,” Houston Astros website, [http://mlb.mlb.com/hou/community/military\\_appreciation.jsp](http://mlb.mlb.com/hou/community/military_appreciation.jsp).

<sup>102</sup> “Military Outreach,” San Diego Padres website, <http://sandiego.padres.mlb.com/sd/military/outreach.jsp>.

The Padres were the first team in professional sports to establish to establish a Military Affairs Department in 1995. The team name refers to Junipero Serra and the religious order of Spanish Franciscan friars who founded the mission at San Diego in 1769. From 1969 to 1984 the team logo was a cartoon friar with a bat. In 2010 the Padres introduced a “military logo based on the US military aircraft national identification roundel insignia.” Their camouflage uniforms for Sundays, special occasions, and the home opener are based on designs used by the U.S. Marine Corps and the U.S. Navy.

too much. They hoped that a shared “history of mutual respect and cooperation” between the U.S. and Puerto Rico “with the help of God, will continue to be the guiding light in this quest for peace and justice.”<sup>103</sup> In his 2004 protest, Delgado reframed the blessing of God in service to peace for all: “¿Por qué 'God Bless America'? Sí, que ‘God Bless America’ (Dios bendiga a Estados Unidos), pero que también lo haga con Puerto Rico, Canadá, África, Sudamérica, con todos los países.”<sup>104</sup> The redirection of the hymn from a 9/11 memorial, for a primarily civilian workforce, to an endorsement of a war that made no sense, was contrary to Delgado’s hope for God to bless “all countries until there is peace in the world.”<sup>105</sup> Delgado’s pacifism was also rooted in his family. His father, a self-avowed socialist and pro-independence Puerto Rican, was jailed “for his beliefs during the Vietnam War, protesting what he calls the U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico and demonstrating on behalf of friends who were conscripted to serve in the U.S. military.”<sup>106</sup> Through his refusal to participate in the seventh inning ritual, Delgado symbolically raised the question of whether the God invoked to bless the U.S. was the same one who blessed the peacetime bombing of his colonized people in order to practice for war.

### **“Conquer We Must, When Our Cause is Just”**

In the late nineteenth century, baseball too became entwined in the moves to national exceptionalism and imperial power, fueled by an eschatological vision that perceived expansion

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<sup>103</sup> Marc Anthony, Benicio del Toro, Ricky Martin, José Feliciano, Roberto Alomar, Carlos Delgado, Juan González, Iván Rodríguez, John Ruiz, Tito Trinidad, Chichi Rodríguez, “President Bush: We Ask You to Stop the Bombing of Vieques Now,” *New York Times*, April 26, 2001, A11.

<sup>104</sup> “Pide Delgado.”

<sup>105</sup> “First Baseman, Delgado, Fields Questions.”

<sup>106</sup> Karl Taro Greenfeld, “More Than a Big Stick,” *Sports Illustrated*, February 12, 2007, <https://www.si.com/vault/2007/02/12/8400327/more-than-a-big-stick>.

as a civilizing mission ordained by divine providence. In an 1899 speech justifying U.S. repossession of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, President William McKinley proclaimed that these lands “have come to us in the providence of God, and we must carry the burden ... in the interest of civilization, humanity, and liberty.”<sup>107</sup> Through baseball there was a traditioning into individualism, the Protestant work ethic, and U.S.-style racism. Those brought under the flag, from Guam to the Philippines, from Hawai’i to Puerto Rico, were from lands considered “backwards,” with peoples designated as too “dark” or too mixed for U.S. citizenship, and too heathen or too Catholic to be Christian. In these so-called exotic places, baseball was instrumental in controlling the population and acculturating it into a civilized Christian way of life culminating in the “American Dream.”<sup>108</sup> Color of skin, nation of origin, language, religion, and ethnicity, however, limited access to promised freedoms, and impaired the quality of one’s belonging. In the ambitious process of global Americanization, the baseball diamond brought the illusion of an egalitarianism grounded in meritocracy, governed by skill and fair play, yet for colonial subjects the playing field was never and has never been level. Subaltern agency was manifest through resistance, sometimes as subtle as teams of colonized others defeating allegedly superior U.S. white players, especially military teams.

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<sup>107</sup> William McKinley, *Speeches and Addresses of William McKinley: From March 1, 1897 to May 30, 1900* (New York: Doubleday & McClure Co., 1900), 317.

<sup>108</sup> Baseball as part of the U.S. imperial project is a subject of recent scholarship on the sport. See, for example: Adrian Burgos, Jr., *Playing America’s Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Robert Elias, *The Empire Strikes Out: How Baseball Sold U.S. Foreign Policy and Promoted the American Way Abroad* (New York: New Press, 2010); Gerald R. Gems, *The Athletic Crusade: Sport and American Cultural Imperialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Rob Ruck, *Raceball: How the Major Leagues Colonized the Black and Latin Games* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011); and Thomas W. Zeiler, *Ambassadors in Pinstripes: The Spalding World Baseball Tour and the Birth of the American Empire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

Carlos Delgado is a colonized citizen of a U.S. possession. Criticisms of his protest against “God Bless America” often revealed ignorance of the status of Puerto Ricans vis-à-vis the United States, as this representative internet comment illustrates: “I may be wrong, but Delgado isn't an American citizen. I think he's from Puerto Rico. Don't you just love these people that come here to take our money and then treat the country with such disrespect?”<sup>109</sup> Unlike Kaepernick, Delgado would be hard pressed to concede that his “freedom to take a seat or take a knee” exists because of military sacrifice.<sup>110</sup>

Scholars and commentators also demonstrated naïveté with respect to Delgado's actions. The impact of centuries of colonization that exploited the land, people, and resources of Puerto Rico failed to register in their critical assessments of the impact of Delgado's protest and his decision to cease the protest in 2006. “Timid,” “silent,” “passive,” and “invisible” were some of the adjectives used to describe Delgado's two-season protest, thus suggesting that it was “incapable of challenging the dominant narrative offered by the game.”<sup>111</sup> Overlooked was the lack of attention paid to an athlete marginalized because he played for a Canadian team, spoke Spanish, and made his home in Puerto Rico. His protest only became news when the Blue Jays were about to play the Yankees; unnoticed was the overwhelming support demonstrated by the major Puerto Rican newspapers, which published “editoriales en apoyo a Delgado, una de las figuras deportivas más respetadas en su isla natal.”<sup>112</sup> In Delgado's capitulation to the Mets

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<sup>109</sup> cricket24, comment on Free Republic Forum, January 27, 2005, <http://freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1330245/replies?c=17>.

<sup>110</sup> Wagoner, “Transcript of Colin Kaepernick's Comments after Preseason Finale.”

<sup>111</sup> Briley 126, Butterworth, *Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity*, 37-38.

policy, scholar Michael Butterworth found in him “a representative metaphor for how citizens were expected to behave during the ‘war on terror.’ In short, Americans were allowed to celebrate their rights to freedom of speech and expression; yet they were also expected to exercise those rights privately, thus eroding the legitimacy of and eliminating the need for public deliberation or dissent.”<sup>113</sup> What Butterworth failed to comprehend was that for Puerto Ricans residing on the island, this was the expectation and daily lived experience that defined the relationship of their territory with the U.S. As American citizens they could not vote in a presidential election or send voting representatives to Congress; this muted their dissent and eliminated their agency.

From this perspective, God was blessing the United States and not América. The message communicated to island-residing Puerto Ricans, and to international players constituting over twenty-five percent of MLB, was one of divine exclusion. A majority of the international players hailed from the American hemisphere, many from nations that had experienced the U.S. as an imperial power and even as an occupying military force in Latin America and the Caribbean. These ballplayers were seasonal migrant workers, dependent on visas, and often reminded in the workplace of the power of their host.

### **Salvation and Sacrifice**

At the turn of the twentieth century, baseball was a component of a larger “civilizing” project that functioned to refashion the colonized other into an Americanized Christian image, yet without the power, privilege, access, and even citizenship integral to such an image. The

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<sup>112</sup> “Delgado reclama respeto a fanáticos norteamericanos,” *Diario Libre*, July 24, 2004, <https://www.diariolibre.com/deportes/delgado-reclama-respeto-a-fanticos-norteamericanos-DBDL44894>.

<sup>113</sup> Butterworth, *Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity*, 38.

rhetoric of the white man's burden fueled expansion in the name of Manifest Destiny. Implicit in these burdens and guiding visions was a soteriological claim, which was a perversion of the patristic tenet "what is not assumed is not saved." The burden fell not on the savior but on the colonized other to assume alien ways of being, imposed through the instruments of conquest—in other words, capitalism, Protestant Christianity, the English language, and baseball. Christopher Evans suggests that baseball "symbolized an American faith that the world could be subjugated by the superior values of the United States," reinforcing both the conquerors' uniqueness and "the message that God was on our side."<sup>114</sup> Salvation was brought about through the ministry of military forces, whose sacrifice ensured the liberties enjoyed at home and the promise of an enlightened future for the liberated others. Within such a formative context, colonized others, including Puerto Ricans, "only become visibly legible for a mainstream audience when they can affirm narratives of U.S. exceptionalism as former colonial subjects or when they affirm narratives of U.S. multiculturalism as ethnic Americans."<sup>115</sup>

The resistance by Kaepernick and Delgado complicate and challenge these narratives. By privileging instead narratives from the complex perspectives of Black Americans and colonized citizens they push against the story the U.S. tells about itself, "a story of a reluctant, benevolent, global power and of a progressive, egalitarian, democratic society."<sup>116</sup> Kaepernick's protest also inadvertently drew attention to the forgotten third verse of "The Star Spangled Banner" which

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<sup>114</sup> Christopher H. Evans, "Baseball as Civil Religion: The Genesis of an American Creation Story," in *The Faith of Fifty Million: Baseball, Religion and American Culture*, ed. Christopher H. Evans and William R. Herzog II (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 30-31.

<sup>115</sup> Faye Caronan, *Legitimizing Empire: Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican Cultural Critique* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 143, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt155jmgb>.

<sup>116</sup> Caronan, *Legitimizing Empire*, 144.

gleefully proclaims, “No refuge could save the hireling and slave/ From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave.” This reference celebrated the destruction of those African Americans who sided with the British in hopes of gaining freedom and a better life.<sup>117</sup> The racist roots of the anthem and its slaveholding author raise concerns about unwitting complicity in a seemingly endless cycle of oppression that has disenfranchised people on the basis of race from “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” Delgado’s protest was situated within a matrix of resistance by Puerto Ricans, beginning with his own family. Vieques, Afghanistan, Iraq were symptoms of a greater exploitation of a colony whose citizens are subject to military conscription, occupation, and economic dependence, yet are denied meaningful voice and vote in the affairs of federal government, much less their own national destiny. Mirrored in the words of John Kasich, governor of Ohio and Republican presidential hopeful in 2016, is a persistent national ignorance regarding Puerto Rico vis-à-vis the U.S.: “Regrettably, Delgado’s position ran somewhat counter to his other claim, that he has no real stake in American affairs, and I think people responded to the hypocrisy.”<sup>118</sup> Lost on Kasich was the uneven power dynamic between the center and its marginalized territory of disenfranchised U.S. citizens.

Intimately tied to these constructs of salvation are multivalent interpretations and rituals of sacrifice. These patriotic rituals and subsequent performances of resistance epitomized contested notions of sacrifice *played* out on geographies made sacred by embedded theologies of nationalism.

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<sup>117</sup> Alan Taylor, “American Blacks in the War of 1812,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the War of 1812*, ed. Donald R. Hickey and Connie D. Clark (New York: Routledge, 2016), 193-207. See also Jason Johnson, “Star-Spangled Bigotry: The Hidden Racist History of the National Anthem,” *The Root*, July 4, 2016, <http://www.theroot.com/star-spangled-bigotry-the-hidden-racist-history-of-the-1790855893>.

<sup>118</sup> John Kasich, *Stand for Something: The Battle for America's Soul* (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2006), Kindle Edition.

*Thank You for Your Service and Sacrifice*

Since at least the 1918 World Series, the use of veterans, especially those who were wounded, has equated sacrifice with the military. Honoring them on the field of play in conjunction with a patriotic hymn further reinforced the notion that those who play the game and those who enjoy it as spectators are direct beneficiaries of the sacrifice of those in military service, whether conscripted or voluntary. While several scholars have illuminated these actions as functional endorsements of U.S. foreign policy, the intrinsic connection of the sacrificial to religious ritual suggests theologically significant underpinnings as well. For example, after the lawsuit, Yankee Stadium continued the practice of singing “God Bless America.” However, they shifted the content of the announcement. Fans are still directed to stand and remove their caps, but now the object of reverence is a veteran and the veteran’s family, located on the field. Following the introduction that includes the veteran’s branch of service and theater of military operation and appreciation for their service and sacrifice, all are asked to join in the singing of the hymn.<sup>119</sup> On one hand, it appears as if the religious dimension of the song-turned-hymn has been minimized or even removed, per the relief provided by the court. Closer examination reveals a far more subtle dynamic. It becomes increasingly problematic for the assembled to resist the request to sing given the focus on a veteran framed in the context of their sacrifice, situated in in the midst of their family. Any resistance is measured against possible peer-initiated consequences for an action perceived as disrespect for the individual celebrated on the field, especially a wounded veteran. The worship shifts from the warrior God to the one who bears the

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<sup>119</sup> For an example, see the video from Yankee Stadium, “‘God Bless America’ in the 7<sup>th</sup>,” New York Yankees website, April 15, 2017, [https://mediadownloads.mlb.com/mlbam/mp4/2017/04/15/1288702683/1492288760745/asset\\_1800K.mp4](https://mediadownloads.mlb.com/mlbam/mp4/2017/04/15/1288702683/1492288760745/asset_1800K.mp4).

image of that God in the accomplishment of military duty, and the hymn becomes a responsorial psalm commemorating the sacrifice that keeps “home sweet home” free.

Sacrifice, by order of the league, and in some ball parks more than others, is narrowly confined to military sacrifice. This singling out of one profession is challenged by small acts of resistance that occur in other stadiums, expanding the parameters of honorable service and sacrifice. The Baltimore Orioles celebrate “Birdland Americana Weekends” at Camden Yards by singing a different patriotic song in the seventh inning: “This Land Is Your Land” on Fridays, “America the Beautiful” on Saturdays, and in accordance with MLB policy, “God Bless America” on Sundays.<sup>120</sup> The choice of “This Land Is Your Land” reflects a historic note of sonic resistance to “God Bless America.” In 1940 Woody Guthrie penned “This Land” as a “Marxist response” to the ubiquitous Irving Berlin song as sung by Smith, in opposition to “another one of those songs that told people not to worry, that God was in the driver’s seat.”<sup>121</sup> This progressivist streak, as evident in the song’s lesser-known protest verses,<sup>122</sup> resonates with John Angelos, chief operating officer of the Orioles and son of the team owner.<sup>123</sup> In the seventh inning, at Camden Yards, Angelos said in a 2016 interview, the Orioles recognize “the heroism of members of our extended Orioles community from all walks of life, occupations, and diverse

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<sup>120</sup> “Birdland Community Heroes,” Baltimore Orioles website, <http://mlb.mlb.com/bal/community/birdland-heroes/>.

<sup>121</sup> Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York, NY: Delta, 1980), 140-141, 144-145, 454. Guthrie recorded the song in 1944.

<sup>122</sup> Woody Guthrie, *This Land Is Your Land*, [http://woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/This\\_Land.htm](http://woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/This_Land.htm). See verses 5, 6, and 7.

<sup>123</sup> Ben Strauss, “Orioles Deliver a Seventh-Inning Message: This Song Is Their Song,” *New York Times*, September 30, 2016, D3, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/01/sports/baseball/baltimore-orioles-woody-guthrie-this-land-is-your-land.html>.

backgrounds living in our region, our country, and abroad, who have distinguished themselves by selflessly working or volunteering in fields that care for, serve, teach, protect, and improve the lives of others, around the corner or around the globe, who are most in need.”<sup>124</sup> Angelos noted in the same interview, “We can honor a veteran, but we can also honor a veteran who is against a particular war.”<sup>125</sup> In California, the Los Angeles Angels celebrate monthly a Halo Hero, explaining that “Heroes come in many forms, and the Angels are excited to honor local individuals who have demonstrated a commitment to serving youth, performing acts of selflessness, and exhibiting exceptional character. All stories will be welcomed; no act of heroism is too big or too small.”<sup>126</sup> The Tampa Bay Rays designate teachers, along with first responders and the military, as eligible for complimentary tickets for select games throughout the season.<sup>127</sup>

### *Salvation through the Sacrifice of the Victimized*

Even resistance is evaluated in terms of sacrifice. Detractors, especially on social media, criticized both Kaepernick and Delgado, inferring that the privilege afforded them by their salaries negated their freedom to political expression, and implied that the players knew little of sacrifice in comparison to those in the military. Among the more high-profile responses from politicians, Sarah Palin, the former Alaska Governor and 2008 Vice Presidential candidate,

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<sup>124</sup> “Birdland Community Heroes.”

<sup>125</sup> Strauss, “Orioles Deliver.”

<sup>126</sup> “Halo Heroes,” Los Angeles Angels website, <https://msecurea.mlb.com/ana/bam-forms/halo-heroes>.

<sup>127</sup> “Salute to Service Monday,” Tampa Bay Rays website, <http://m.mlb.com/rays/tickets/info/tickets-for-teachers>.

shouted at Kaepernick on Facebook:<sup>128</sup> “Enjoying your \$114 million contract ... sucking up a life of luxury ... GOD AND COUNTRY GAVE YOU THIS OPPORTUNITY ... Then on behalf of every Vet I'm privileged to know: GET THE HELL OUT.”<sup>129</sup> John Kasich, reflecting on Delgado as an example of “churlish behavior” by overpaid athletes, identified him as someone “I want to run out of town.”<sup>130</sup>

Among those more sympathetic to the athletes, political sportswriter Dave Zirin and Jeremy Schaap of ESPN intimated that the level of sacrifice has an impact on broader perception of the protest.<sup>131</sup> From this perspective, Kaepernick would be seen as sacrificing more, especially because he remains unsigned, and Delgado less because, as Schaap claimed: “He didn't lose millions of dollars and wasn't banished from his sport.”<sup>132</sup> Schaap and Zirin did not foresee the loss of endorsements and the possible impact on Delgado's election into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

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<sup>128</sup> In online “netiquette,” upper-case words indicate shouting.

<sup>129</sup> Sarah Palin, Facebook post, August 29, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/sarahpalin/posts/10154493287563588>.

<sup>130</sup> Kasich, *Stand for Something*. Kasich compared Delgado's actions with the club house rules of manager Ozzie Guillen, namely that players be present for the national anthem. While Kasich explains Guillen's perspective as a manifestation of respect for the country, he neglects to mention its role as a minimal expectation of timeliness in relation to the start of the game, let alone Guillen's expletive-laced words.

<sup>131</sup> Michael Edison Hayden, “Ali, Smith and Carlos Protests Left Lasting Impressions. Will Kaepernick's?” *ABC News*, August 30, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/Sports/ali-smith-carlos-protests-left-lasting-impressions-kaepernicks/story?id=41750486>.

<sup>132</sup> Clark, “Ali, Smith and Carlos.”

Zirin asserted that Delgado “caved” and “allowed himself to be silenced.”<sup>133</sup> He hyperbolized that “Delgado could have been an important voice in the effort to end it once and for all.”<sup>134</sup> With these assessments, Zirin simultaneously blamed the colonized victim and overestimated a single Puerto Rican ballplayer’s influence in shaping U.S. foreign and domestic policies. Delgado was not joined in his protest as was the case when others joined with Kaepernick. During the last weeks of their 2016 season, baseball players were not among the athletes who took a knee in solidarity, even though there appeared to be no MLB rules dictating proper posture through the national anthem. The Orioles’ Adam Jones and the Yankees’ CC Sabathia pointed to the low percentage of African Americans in their sport, barely 8%, as a factor inhibiting protest in what Jones contended is “a white man’s sport.”<sup>135</sup> While Sabathia would not participate because his brother-in-law had served in Iraq, he admitted Kaepernick’s response was “a good, non-violent way to try to get some change.”<sup>136</sup> Delgado’s failure to make the Hall of Fame ballot in 2015 was not mentioned as a possible deterrent signaling the potential of long term consequences.

In his commentary on the suspension of the protest, Zirin implied that Delgado had somehow betrayed “those of us who amplified his views, and used his stance to speak not only

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<sup>133</sup> Zirin, *Welcome*, 58, 60.

<sup>134</sup> Zirin, *Welcome*, 60.

<sup>135</sup> Bob Nightengale, “Adam Jones on MLB’s Lack of Kaepernick Protest: ‘Baseball is a White Man’s Sport,’” *USA Today*, September 13, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/mlb/columnist/bob-nightengale/2016/09/12/adam-jones-orioles-colin-kaepernick-white-mans-sport/90260326/#>.

<sup>136</sup> Mark Feinstand, “CC Sabathia Says It’s ‘Tough’ for Black MLB Players to Take a Stand,” *New York Daily News*, September 14, 2016, <http://www.nydailynews.com/sports/baseball/yankees/cc-sabathia-tough-black-players-stand-anthem-article-1.2792809>.

about the war but also the plight of Vieques; his silence is bursting our eardrums.”<sup>137</sup> Zirin lamented, “Delgado could have been *our* Clemente. Instead, to use his own words, he is just Employee Number 21.”<sup>138</sup> To whom exactly is Zirin referring by “our”? Imperial citizens with white privilege? While Roberto Clemente certainly took on baseball’s racist practices, he also served as a U.S. Marine Corps reservist from 1958 to 1964<sup>139</sup> and took no public stance on issues of resistance during the Vietnam War, a military conflict that marked his career and sacrificed the lives of many a Puerto Rican. Zirin missed the pushback in Delgado’s reference to “employee number 21.” Delgado may have terminated this means of protest, but his commitments to Puerto Rico remained strong, as did those of his idol Clemente. Delgado identified himself as “un puertorriqueño de ‘clavo pasao,’” an idiom affirming his Puerto Ricanness as an ingrained part of his identity.<sup>140</sup> This was the larger movement to which Delgado, like Clemente, was long committed—alleviating suffering at home and contributing to the present and future of Puerto Rico.

### **Liturgy Interrupted**

For well over a century, professional baseball, with its quotidian rhythms, helped to cultivate particular ritual expressions of nationalism. The NFL reinforced the ties between patriotism and sport, and added a level of spectacle through memorable Super Bowl performances. In the twenty-first century the tragedy of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent

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<sup>137</sup> Zirin, “The Silencing.”

<sup>138</sup> Zirin, “The Silencing.” Italics are mine.

<sup>139</sup> As a male U.S. citizen, Clemente was subject to conscription by virtue of the Reserve Forces Act. He fulfilled his obligation by enlisting in the USMC for six years, serving the first six months on active-duty training. He entered Sept 12, 1958 and was honorably discharged on September 11, 1964. He served on active duty during the off-season of 1958-59, returning to the Pirates in time for spring training.

<sup>140</sup> Rosa, “No debe.” The Puerto Rican idiom “clavo pasao” is not easily translated into English.

global war on terrorism resulted in further accretions to rituals that, once codified, function as liturgical moments. In the simplest of terms, liturgy is what happens when ritual is prescribed, and, in the case of the NFL and MLB, made official and traditioned through a century of practices and policies. In his brief exploration of liturgies of church and state, William Cavanaugh noted that “We are accustomed to speaking of an American ‘civil religion,’ but less accustomed to speaking of a national ‘liturgy.’”<sup>141</sup> These moments of sanctioned ritual at ballparks compel participation from players and fans with various means of structuring compliance. Through hyper-militarized ceremonies, with specific instructions for embodied responses, professional sport narrates a particular story of national belonging with a soteriology grounded in military sacrifice that demands constant affirmation. This is consistent with Cavanaugh’s observation, “Here liturgical gesture is central, because gesture allows the flag to be treated as a sacred object, while language denies that such is the case. Everyone acknowledges verbally that the nation or the flag are not really gods, but the crucial test is what people do with their bodies, both in liturgy and in war.”<sup>142</sup> The national anthem focuses on the flag, which increasingly is so large that it appears to consume the field of play, reinforcing the notion that the game and livelihood of the athletes are dependent on the martial sacrifice it represents. “God Bless America,” particularly when connected to the feting of veterans and active military, uncritically raises up and ordains one profession in the image of the agonistic God, and at times extends that privilege to other uniformed personnel, especially police. Through the examples of Kaepernick and Delgado, I demonstrate that Cavanaugh does not go far enough.

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<sup>141</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, “The Liturgies of Church and State,” *Liturgy* 20, no.1 (2005): 25, DOI:10.1080/04580630590522876.

<sup>142</sup> Cavanaugh, “The Liturgies,” 27.

A crucial test is evident as well in what people do with their bodies in resistance, in responding not with assent but with embodied dissent.

Both Kaepernick and Delgado disrupted national liturgies. Kaepernick interrupted the status quo by introducing an alternate embodied response that gained traction and spread within and beyond the NFL. His message, calling the nation to accountability, primarily on matters of racial justice, was hijacked by detractors, and even by some supporters, who reframed it and then responded to their own reformulation. The reaction to the protest by NFL commissioner Roger Goodell exemplified this reinterpretation. Goodell acknowledged support for players seeking change in society. “On the other hand,” he added, “we believe very strongly in patriotism in the NFL. I personally believe very strongly in that. I think it's important to have respect for our country, for our flag, for the people who make our country better; for law enforcement, and for our military who are out fighting for our freedoms and our ideals.”<sup>143</sup>

Kaepernick was not the first or only professional athlete to publicly align with the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>144</sup> He probably could have professionally survived his protest had he chosen another form of resistance, one that did not focus on the national anthem. He accepted the underlying theological significance of the flag as symbol of military sacrifice and his action sought to refocus attention on that sacred symbol in order to redress broken promises. His disruption challenged the prevailing assumption that the anthem provided a liturgy of national unity and that all had equal rights protected under the law. It also threatened the longstanding

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<sup>143</sup> “Roger Goodell on Colin Kaepernick: ‘We Believe Very Strongly in Patriotism in the NFL,’” *U.S. Today*, September 7, 2016, <https://www.U.S.today.com/story/sports/nfl/2016/09/07/goodell-doesnt-agree-with-kaepernicks-actions/89958636/#>.

<sup>144</sup> Responses to Black Lives Matter by professional athletes prior to Kaepernick’s resistance included the 2014 “hands up don’t shoot” gesture by five NFL players on the St. Louis Rams in support of the Ferguson protests; sustained resistant actions in July 2016 by WNBA players, individually and collectively.

profitability of performed patriotism, cultivated for over half a century by the NFL, and that made him expendable as a lesson to others.<sup>145</sup>

Delgado disrupted a national liturgy by choosing to absent himself. As a citizen from the margin of empire, he was considered alien, yet bound by imposed obligations. The colonized subject, from whom gratitude was expected, instead spoke back through his activism in *Paz para Vieques* and by exercising his pacifism through his intentional and visible absence. His refusal to participate in the blessing of a war fraught with ambiguity and sustained on dubious grounds, needs to be situated in the context of another questionable U.S. aggression. In 1898 the Spanish-American war brought Puerto Rico not the liberation for which it hoped, but instead another colonial overlord. Failure to grasp the broader historical context of Delgado's resistance makes it easier to dismiss his protest as isolated and with little impact, a move that ignores the hemispheric reality of América.

Baseball's patriotism was also dictated by the demands of the market and the commercial interests of team owners. Displays of patriotism were part of a business plan to insure the sport's survival through times of war when national priorities conflicted with investments and profits. The global outreach of baseball was made possible by war, initially the Spanish-American War of 1898 that secured the sport in lands brought under the imperial banner of the Stars and Stripes. In part, baseball spread because of the presence of military and commercial occupation. Today

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<sup>145</sup> The scandal of "paid patriotism," disclosed in a report by senators John McCain and Jeff Flake, revealed that the Department of Defense spent millions of tax dollars on marketing contracts with professional sports franchises. According to the report, "these paid tributes included on-field color guard, enlistment and reenlistment ceremonies, performances of the national anthem, full-field flag details, ceremonial first pitches, puck drops," hometown hero celebrations, surprise welcome home promotions, and recognition of wounded warriors. Sen. John McCain and Sen. Jeff Flake, *Tackling Paid Patriotism: A Joint Oversight Report* (Washington, DC: 2015), [https://archive.org/stream/TacklingPaidPatriotismOversightReport/Tackling%20Paid%20Patriotism%20Oversight%20Report\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/TacklingPaidPatriotismOversightReport/Tackling%20Paid%20Patriotism%20Oversight%20Report_djvu.txt).

MLB profits from its merchandising of military-inspired gear, conflating acts of patriotic appreciation with revenue opportunities. Delgado's resistance strikes at the heart of theologies deployed in service to conquest.

The actions of Kaepernick and Delgado have been measured against the icons of resistance and sacrifice in professional sports, namely, Jackie Robinson and Roberto Clemente. Yet neither of these athletes used the field of play as a space to take what could be perceived as a blatant political stand. They fought in uniform to tackle injustices within their profession, and out of uniform to address the greater societal problems of their times. Kaepernick and Delgado enacted their resistance at their respective workplaces in uniform and on the field, pointing outward to address issues of social and national import. Whether intentionally or not, each exposed the complicity of professional sports in less than liberative behavior. By choosing to perform acts of resistance at moments of national liturgical significance permeated with theological assumptions, Delgado and Kaepernick faced criticism that their protests were not expressed in "the right way" or in a "respectful" manner. As one observer tweeted in the midst of Kaepernick's protest, "The liturgies of nationalism and its cathedrals (stadiums) tolerate no heretics."<sup>146</sup> The expectation that black, brown, and colonized bodies must sacrifice to pay for prophetic stances calling a nation to abide by its creed places an unreasonable burden on those most victimized by the objects of their resistance.

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<sup>146</sup> James K.A. Smith@james\_ka\_smith, Twitter post, August 30, 2016, [https://twitter.com/james\\_ka\\_smith/status/770812204933406720](https://twitter.com/james_ka_smith/status/770812204933406720). The tweet is attributed to a page no longer available. Smith identifies as a philosophy professor at Calvin College in Michigan.