



## SSSP: Racial and Ethnic Minorities Summer 2018 Newsletter

### Colin Kaepernick's De-mystifying Protest

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Why does raising a fist in the air or kneeling during the US national anthem become so controversial that the leader of “the free world” publicly calls protestors names? [The irony about the claim of freedom starts right here.] Why is kneeling framed as anti-American while carrying torch by violent white nationalists is protected as a constitutional right? In this brief piece, I answer these questions by elaborating on the recent debates about the US flag and NFL players. The aim is to show why kneeling in front of the US flag and during the US national anthem, has caused a strong backlash from US nationalists, chiefly comprised of white Americans across the republican and liberal spectrums. By drawing on Roland Barthes’s notion of mythology, I argue that these protests shake the foundations of the myth of US nationalism as inclusive and civic, they bring to the fore the historical and ongoing oppression of black bodies while US institutions and a vast majority of its public have tried so hard to deny its existence in the “post-racial” America.



Let's imagine the bourgeoisie's desired mythical scene. The US flag is raised high and the US national anthem is playing. Everybody in the stadium is standing. By everybody, I mean, people of all different identities, backgrounds, and politics. It is a moment of collective solidarity, pride, and euphoria. The moment induces a feeling of unity, regardless of the differences and histories, when everybody pays respect to this great nation and its symbols. The "we" at this moment is not about the individuals and who they are, rather about what they represent. They are the representation of a glorious united nation which has gone past its past and present divisions under the banner of the United States of America. In this moment of purported equality and unison, however, power and pride are not equally distributed. People who are privileged find this ritual as the natural extension, perpetuation, and expansion of their access to sources of power and national pride. Those who are not privileged, however, are devoured, on the margins, by a myth of unity and equality, a myth of "however it is, whatever it is, it is *our* country: The great United States of America."

In proportion to this unequal distribution of belonging, privilege, and pride, different people have different tasks. People who are privileged, which in the US context are the white folks, don't have much to do. They have nothing to lose but gain. In this space and moment, they simply accrue more power and recognition. This ritual is the coherent extension of their existence. People of color, however, have more responsibility. They are expected to genuinely believe in the myth of the great America and to responsibly put aside their history of enslavement, lynching and rape, segregation, mass incarceration, and institutional violence to keep the representation unblemished. This myth needs to be confirmed and upheld by them.

*I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way.*  
*Colin Kaepernick*

But what is myth? Myth, in Barthes's theory of semiology, is a second order semiological system. At the first level of the system which Barthes borrowing from Louis Hjelmslev calls denotation, we have the US flag and the anthem and a standing crowd. The second order of signification, called connotation, delivers another message: The message of greatness of America whose children, regardless of color and background, faithfully belong and equally pay respect to.

According to Barthes in *Myth Today*, myth does not hide or flaunt. It simply distorts. It presents a historically contingent and specific ideology as natural and eternal. It transforms meaning into a form. In this process content is removed and individuals lose their significance. What is of significance here is not individuals' origins, beliefs, or biographies but what they represent. The objects of myth are deprived of history and what is left is a signification whose origins are unknown. Myth produces a feeling of eternity. And in our case, we have the representation of a united people and an eternally great country, respected beyond and above individual or group differences. This de-historization, this deliberate erasure of certain historical elements, leaves a void which provides enough space for a fabricated history to be injected into the phenomenon in order to create a new sign. This new history, despite its political nature, needs to be de-politicized to be imagined as national and all-encompassing. And this de-politicization, according to Barthes, happens through giving an ideological historical intention a natural, universal, and eternal appearance.

*Kaepernick's black body, raised fist, hair, and intellect contradicts the historical construction of black athletes. His image is an image that resists appropriation and colonization. It presents a counter-affect, a counter-narrative, and a counter-act.*

Debates around the apoliticality of sports, national anthem, and the flag which arose in the aftermath of protests were attempts to maintain this depoliticized and sacralized façade of US nationalism intact. Colin Kaepernick's protest however was a counteract, a wake-up call which aimed for the very political heart of a depoliticized myth, portrayed and protected as

apolitical. It brought to the surface the historical reality and tensions within and around the US nationhood. Kaepernick's fist created a crack in the picture of one of the most popular national spectacles in the US: Masculine sportsmanship. His kneeling brought up discussions which scarred decades of struggle by US institutions and politics to depoliticize decades of socio-political and legal oppression. Colin questioned the impersonalized representation of the myth of US nationalism by bringing his personhood, as a black person and as an athlete, to the fore. It was a personal demonstration of protest against a coercive and illusive collective performance of unity. It gave rise to the historical fear of white folks from consciousness and awakening which was protected in depoliticization and naturalization of patriotism and Americanness. He showed that the US flag and the anthem are not reminders of a unifying history of progress, but an evidence of collective subjugation of ethnic and racial minorities.

Politics, as Walter Benjamin writes, is emotional energy guided by the will to expression. This expression necessarily takes the form of collective expression. I am sure that the nationalists who are offended by the display of protest in a public arena do not stand up with their hand on their heart when the anthem is played on TV, and do not take offense when they find a ripped flag covered in dust in a closet. Offense comes from any action or ideation which obstructs or disrupts this collective emotional flow, this moment of collective performance and identification with a divinely framed cause. In this public arena politics and affect, superiority and nationalism, come together to confirm and reinforce each other. It is where the subjective assumption of being the selected victorious nation avoids its impending collapse through a fatalistic notion of heroic depersonalized fate and faith. In this collective experience of transcendence, each individual matter because the representation needs to be fascistically uniform. Each individual in this experience becomes an actant, is acted upon and turned into the terrain mythical accomplishment. This collectivity, momentarily, compensate for a historical moral defeat through a euphoric sense of political superiority and victory.



Kaepernick played with members of the Ravens after a preseason game in Baltimore in 2014.  
Rob Curry/Getty Images

The flag and the national anthem, experienced en masse, become the image and sound of an affective abstraction of a collective which transcends and impedes, at least momentarily, the daily possibility of reflection upon lack of purpose, the harsh reality of constant politico-legal institutional betrayal, and

consistent lack of meaning. The myth becomes a sacred public property whose preservation guarantees living in the bliss of ignorance. It is an ostensibly peaceful demonstration of historical loyalty to a fragile idea of America which in the face of historical reality needs denial of reality so then it can maintain its alienated consumer. The spectacle becomes the display of a sacred ritual of a collective amnesia in which citizens of the capitalist risk society, can, for a moment, feel something meaningful, something which lives on the myth of us with a shared history and destiny versus those who are not one of us: the other. Therefore, in this fragile ritual, violence is exerted through othering and exclusion. This violence, glorified and sacralized, denied hypocritically on the surface but felt and cherished joyously inside, requires the categorical figure of other. The pleasure of holding onto an inspiring imagination, the craving for some meaning created through inclusion into a homogenous idea, turns into a desperate cling to the idea of “us” that any disruption of its aesthetics, any doubt in its sanctity, or any disharmony in its consumption warrants punishment.

Myth is a depoliticized speech, as Barthes writes. And Colin’s move brings politics back into the picture, and consequently, the political history of oppression and its continuity at the present moment. Trump, right wing politicians, and liberals who cannot go past their nationalism by claiming that sport is not and should not get political or that national anthem is and should remain beyond political disputes are struggling to fearfully employ the very same depoliticizing technique by which the myth was fabricated. This fabricated artifact is used in public gatherings to awaken the myth of inclusive America, summon emotions of unity, and silence the voice of the oppressed populations, here specifically black folks. It is an attempt to further oppress people of color by labeling them as problems, by framing them as those who by talking about race make it real, as those who do not get over it.

While Colin’s origins, beliefs, and biography is supposed to serve and perpetuate the ahistorical image of inclusion and equality, his protest brings to the fore a history of oppression, lack of inclusion and unity. It highlights a history that demystifies the myth of equal access and recognition. It distorts the bourgeois picture of a desired order. It disrupts a monologue by an uninvited and unwelcome interjection. It is a speech of a different order. It questions the order, the status quo, and disturbs the white slumber of the ruling class, it brings the history to the fore to diminish the paranoid foundations of the American myth and question decades of ideological labor for its construction and preservation in the “post-racial” America. It inverts the pervasive ideological perversion of a history of oppression whose tentacles firmly hold minorities down when they struggle to breathe. It is a forceful reminder of a right long denied. Kaepernick’s black body, raised fist, hair, and intellect contradicts the historical construction of black bodies. His image is an image that resists appropriation and colonization. It presents a counter-affect, a counter-narrative, and a counter-act. Kaepernick’s protest to the flag and the anthem disarms the ruling class, resists functioning as an agent of the myth, and disrupts the system’s process of violent deception, denial, and erasure. The myth however is evasive and rooted. It is internalized and protected. To dismantle it, we need disperse but consistent, unexpected but planned attempts aimed at its deconstruction.