



University
of Victoria

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

JASON MILLER

BA (Hons) (University of Victoria, 2017)

“Narrative Assembly and the NFL Anthem Protest Controversy”

Department of Sociology

Monday, January 6, 2020
2:30 P.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B007

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. William Carroll, Department of Sociology, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. William Little, Department of Sociology, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Neilesh Bose, Department of History, UVic

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Graham Voss, Department of Economics, UVic

Abstract

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

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

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

Findings indicate that by transgressing several normative boundaries related to work, sports, protest, and signalling patriotism, anthem protest subverts a hegemonic tale of national unity and exposes the racial stratification and symbolic/social exclusion that continue to produce experiences of oppression for people of colour in the United States. By attending to their assembly of settings, characters, plotlines, memories, solutions, and moral lessons, authors that support the protests are shown forming an intertextual or collective narrative around a

central demand for justice that challenges the American status quo and projects a preferred future of enhanced racial equality yet to be achieved by the nation. Alternatively, authors who oppose the protests are observed assembling a collective narrative around a demand for respect that defends boundaries essential to the maintenance of the status quo and expresses a desire to return to a past America of uninterrupted white dominance.

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