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Michael L. Forst

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, mlforst@siu.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

This paper was previously presented at the 2017 National Communication Association convention, Dallas, TX. The author would like to thank Shelley Rawlins, Sarah Hollingsworth, and the reviewers for their careful critiques and recommendations. Also, a thank you to Dr. Nilanjana Bardhan for her help in shaping this project.

Kneeling AND Still Singing: Threshold Identity, Disidentification, and Invitation in U.S. American National Anthem Protest

Michael Forst, M.A.

Driven by a desire to transcend current divisive political and social discourse, this article analyzes Denasia Lawrence's 2016 U.S. national anthem performance and Black Lives Matter protest. Lawrence knelt while performing the anthem to protest biased policing practices in the U.S. In engaging Lawrence's actions and statements about this event through rhetorical criticism, I employ theories of intercultural hybridity (threshold identity and disidentification) and invitational rhetoric to demonstrate the inherent potentials for political activism in her act. I assert that Lawrence's embodied performance invites viewers to re/consider the multilayered implications of her protest, and to hopefully engage with differences more openly. Lawrence's choice to actively engage in a non-violent protest of pervasive racial injustices in the United States, while simultaneously singing the national anthem, is representative of new potentials for other activists who seek to authentically perform hybrid identities.

Keywords: threshold identity, disidentification, protest, intercultural bridgework, invitational rhetoric

Learning Active and Appropriate Participation

"In Texas, we stand for *both* pledges," Mrs. Wesley said quietly, stopping me in midair as I attempted to sit down following the Pledge of Allegiance. Her emphasis on the word "both" was unmistakable and her quick correction clearly implied that these *two* pledges were equally important for the start of the day. I was familiar with the daily ritual of standing for the U.S. Pledge – we had done that in my first-grade classroom in Wisconsin; however, I had never heard of collectively reciting a pledge to a state flag.

"Um, ok," I responded. Looking around the classroom, I noticed my new classmates shift their focus from the U.S. flag hanging on the left side of the chalkboard, to the Texas flag posted on the right. They stood silently with elbows tucked at their sides, right forearms bent upward at forty-five-degree angles, with hands extended forward, parallel to the floor. After a brief pause, they recited the pledge in unison:

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“Honor the Texas flag; I pledge allegiance to thee, Texas,
one and indivisible.”

Once again, in scripted unison, everyone sat down at their desks to listen to the morning announcements that pumped through the intercom speakers overhead. My first exposure to the Texas state pledge startled me. I couldn't comprehend the importance of collectively professing allegiance to a state's flag, and didn't possess the cultural scripts to understand appropriate behavior for this situation. However, this performance would soon become normalized and experienced as a taken-for-granted embodied profession of statehood. I quickly came to understand the Texas state pledge as an important collective affirmation of cultural identity. Active and *appropriate* participation during the pledge marked someone as a group insider. On the other hand, failure to perform this act appropriately left the transgressor open to official reprimands from teachers and principals, social othering, and (perhaps most importantly) intrapersonal discord due to this identity instability. Thus, as a child I was taught the *proper* way to “honor the Texas flag.” Violating this expectation, especially as a form of protest, was unthinkable.

Introducing National Anthem Protests

Marginalized communities and their supporters have engaged in non-violent protest throughout U.S. history, and recently so to voice opposition to racial injustices and implicit bias against Black and Brown people in policing practices. Large-scale protests are often successful in marshaling change and remain at the forefront of public memory as symbols of progressive societal transition.¹ While valued in public memory, non-violent (and violent) protests are often un(der)appreciated by non-marginalized people in their contemporary context because such protests intrinsically disregard expectations of public decorum (Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009). Unfavorable discourse produced by White U.S. Americans surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement is evidence of this claim. According to Horowitz and Livingston (2016), 28 percent of White Americans opposed Black Lives Matter, and 32 percent claimed to not know about the movement in 2016. Recently, discussions of professional athletes of color kneeling during the singing of the national anthem has re-focused national attention on the Black Lives Matter campaign for racial equality. Colin Kaepernick, the San Francisco 49ers' former quarterback, sparked this movement among athletes during the 2016 NFL season. Protesting like this at sporting events asserts a Black presence in these semi-public spaces of privileged consumption, and centers the struggle for racial equality firmly in the cultural imaginary (Vargas, 2016).

1 The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom stands as an example of enduring and meaningful memory cultivation. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech during this protest, which is often considered to be a pivotal moment in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.

In this article I analyze one instance of kneeling during the national anthem and highlight the transformative potential introduced by this specific transgressive act. On October 21, 2016, Denasia Lawrence was invited to sing the national anthem prior to the tip-off at an NBA preseason game in Miami between the hometown Heat and Philadelphia 76ers. Lawrence, a Black woman in her mid-twenties, is a social worker from New York, and was a student at Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida, at the time of her performance. A part-time employee of the Heat, she did not notify the organization of her intentions to kneel while performing beforehand, although she planned the act prior to the event. Lawrence said, “When I took the opportunity to sing the national anthem at the Heat game, it was bigger than me” (Ansari, 2016). Sports venues have long been sites for cultural formation and social engagement and have increasingly served as platforms for professional athletes’ political speech. Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s 1968 Olympics Black Power salute stands out as one iconic historical example of such activism. More recently, the (formerly) St. Louis Rams demonstrated support for protesters in Ferguson, Missouri following Michael Brown’s death, by walking onto the football field with hands held in the air, reflecting the protesters’ “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” chants (Fantz, 2014). Similarly, WNBA players protested police shootings of people of color by wearing all black during pre-game warm-ups (Bonesteel, 2016).

Lawrence’s protest is unique, however, as she is not an athlete and was the first anthem performer to kneel *while* singing. Lawrence chose to protest while still fully engaging the nationalistic tradition of pre-sporting event national anthem performances. Analyzing Lawrence’s actions and her subsequent statements about the event brings light to the potential for political activism, represented by her disidentificatory act (Muñoz, 1999). In kneeling while singing, Lawrence is synchronizing both her statuses as a Black woman protester *and* a tradition-abiding U.S. American citizen. Lawrence simultaneously embodies and performs both identities (among several others) and invites viewers to consider the multilayered implications of her protest.

In this analysis I contribute to existing intercultural communication scholarship related to identity, culture, and social activism. This paper draws from theories of hybridity and demonstrates the social activism potential of hybrid cultural identity performances. I specifically use concepts such as threshold identity (Keating, 2012) and disidentification (Muñoz, 1999) as theoretical frames to guide my understanding of Lawrence’s identity and rhetorical choices. This analysis ultimately aims to contribute to discussions about racial in/justice in the United States in offering a potential strategic method for engaging hybrid identities during activism work.

I am interested in the ways difference is performed differently (Warren, 2008), and how these acts can be engaged openly in efforts to transcend divisive political and social discourses. Rhetorical attempts to overcome

divisive discourses can be critically examined to glean potential means for productive intercultural bridge-building (Bardhan, 2016). As demonstrated in this paper's autoethnographic opening, participation in collective affirmations of nationalist (and state) identity are taught to children in the United States at an early age; and participation in these rituals is encouraged through both structural and social disciplining. Fully participating in the Pledge of Allegiance, or the national anthem, is an act of hegemonic civility – acts that become normalized and naturalized as “appropriate” behavior and are expected during such social engagements (Patton, 2004; Rudick, 2015). Enacted as a mode of social discrimination, hegemonic civility “is predicated on making distinctions that support accepted practices and values” (Mayo, 2002, p. 82) of historically dominant groups. Outright performative violations of hegemonic, nationalist civility can immediately mark transgressors as cultural Others and thus prevent opportunities for dialoguing from emerging across differences. However, some less oppositional performances have the potential to spark dialogue and create new alliances for social justice. Such bridge-building is not guaranteed, however, nor is it painless to attempt (Bardhan, 2016; Keating, 2012); but, it does represent a potential tactic for social change.

It should be acknowledged that those enacting White patriarchy have consistently silenced women of color through the norms of hegemonic civility, and have often disregarded Black women when they publicly express anger or advocate for social change (Anzaldúa, 1999; Griffin, 2012; hooks, 1989; Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009). In addition, people of color in the West experience state-sanctioned violence as an ontological fact of life (Vagaras, 2016). As such, I do not frame Lawrence's performance as more desirable than other forms of protest that cause greater disruption or discomfort for dominant-culturally-identified audience members. Instead, I engage her protest as an available option (in some situations), in order to demonstrate the unique potential for embodied social activism, as exemplified through Lawrence's public performance of disidentification.

I engage Lawrence's performance from an explicitly critical-cultural perspective. Strong critical work is value-driven and political in nature, but is also guided by situational understandings unique to the communicative context. While I make efforts to describe and interpret Lawrence's actions, I also analyze the influence of social power and hegemonic expectations on the singer's protest. I hope to enter into dialogue with Lawrence's words and join her in the desire to “work as [an] active agent of reform” (Miller, 2005, p. 66). Throughout my work, I maintain a commitment to the axiological importance of non-hegemonic sources of knowledge in utilizing theories developed by and specific to members of marginalized groups. As a White man analyzing a Black woman's protest, it is especially important that I prioritize non-hegemonic sources of knowledge in an effort to not colonize Lawrence's performance. This approach hopes to demonstrate my efforts

to democratize knowledge (Morrow & Brown, 1994), which is a necessary commitment of critical research – but it also intends to connect me with Lawrence across our lines of difference.

Border-Thinking, Disidentification, and Invitational Rhetoric

Cultural binaries are problematic for identity theorizing as they fix meanings in an equation of inequality. However, hybrid identities can potentially be freed from their strict oppressor/oppressed, us/them dichotomies as one shifts their points of identification to enable more meaningful, nuanced understandings of difference. As such, hybridity can be strategically engaged toward social justice purposes and deployed by marginalized individuals to gain greater agency in unsupportive cultural contexts (Kraidy, 2005). Intentionally disturbing fixed, or well-established, oppositional cultural binaries challenges modernity's sense of stable identities (Tlostanova et al., 2016), and creates space for multiple points of identification – thus increasing the potential for the performative disturbance of hegemonic master narratives.

Threshold identity (Keating, 2012) is the iteration of border theorizing that is perhaps most appropriate for understanding Lawrence's national anthem protest. Threshold identities describe those with the transformative potential to seek commonality through, across, and between differences – since they often occupy and blend elements of competing identity facets. Keating argues for the heuristic value inherent in threshold identities, encouraging scholars to interrogate the performances of people who “refuse to be contained within any single group or location” (p. 1), and instead, move between distinct yet overlapping worlds. Threshold people use their movements through, across, and between differences to create new connections among seemingly divergent groups of people, and prevent the distortion and simplification of these complex identities (Tlostanova et al., p. 217). That is to say, threshold identities have the potential to serve as bridges between disparate groups of people, who when working collectively toward social justice goals, can potentially render minority experiences intelligible to both dominant and marginalized audience members. In other words, they embody and offer-up multiple points of identification.

While many athletes, beginning with Colin Kaepernick, have justifiably chosen to kneel during the national anthem in direct protest of (and opposition to) racial inequality in the United States, Lawrence engages in a less directly oppositional performance by kneeling while singing the anthem. She challenges binary expectations and performatively engages her threshold identity through this active disidentification (Muñoz, 1999). Performances of disidentification push back against oppressive hegemonic cultural forces in nuanced non-oppositional ways by attempting to “transform a cultural logic from within” (Muñoz, p. 12). Disidentification is an important concept to employ when analyzing hybrid identity performance in public

spaces, as it implies an incomplete identification with the dominant script, while still expressing a partial connection to it. As such, individuals can construct “counterpublic spheres” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 7) – or, spaces capable of transformative interactions across difference.

Muñoz (1999) describes the potential usefulness of disidentification for social justice work, saying, “disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (p. 11). Disidentification allows people in marginalized communities to engage the codes, tools, and scripts of dominant culture groups in the service of the marginalized positionality (Eguchi & Asante, 2016). As a response to marginalization, disidentification opens possibilities for coalition-building through manifold appeals across identity thresholds (Chávez, 2009; Muñoz, 1999), and also features examinations of “intersectional border contestations” (Eguchi & Asante, 2016, p. 176). Certainly, disidentification is not always a preferable or possible method of resistance for marginalized communities, but it can be theorized as one potential response to oppressive societal forces.

Lawrence’s marginalized hybrid identity and disidentificatory performance likely prevents her from exercising substantive persuasive influence over the basketball game’s largely White and male audience – necessitating non-traditional rhetorical tools. A feminist invitational approach is key for this research because, as Foss and Griffin (1995) contend, traditional concepts of rhetoric are based in “efforts to change others and thus to gain control over them” (p. 4). In short, they describe traditional rhetoric as “a rhetoric of patriarchy” (p. 4) intended, in many circumstances, to persuade and control receivers of rhetorical messages. In contrast, Foss and Griffin define invitational rhetoric as

an invitation to understand as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination. Invitational rhetoric constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor’s world and to see it as the rhetor does.... Ideally, audience members accept the invitation offered by the rhetor by listening to and trying to understand the rhetor’s perspective and then presenting their own. (1995, p. 5)

Conducting a rhetorical analysis through an invitational frame displaces the typical rhetorical focus on persuasion in public address, and instead focuses on the rhetor’s attempt to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with their audience.

Persuasion is not entirely eschewed through an invitational approach however, but it is strategically deployed alongside listening, inviting, and reciprocal engagement when each pose is deemed most effective (Bone et al., 2008; DeLaure, 2008). Since outright “persuasion” is not always the

choice that will result in success for the rhetor, invitational rhetoric may actually be the most viable option. I specifically consider the following invitational communicative choices, as outlined by Foss and Griffin (1995), in Lawrence's protest: advocating for equality, stressing the immanent value of all people, and inviting audience members to view the world from the rhetor's perspective. Consequently, interaction across difference is done differently (Warren, 2008) through this rhetorical paradigm. As such, invitational rhetoric speaks to disidentification's embrace of complexly nuanced identities, and moves toward alternate spaces of intercultural interaction and connection.

Rhetorical Analysis in this Study

Denasia Lawrence's national anthem protest stimulated complex discussion among both critics and supporters of her performance. Videos of the protest quickly circulated across social media outlets, and the story ultimately received homepage placement on both ESPN and CNN's websites. My research is comparatively narrow in scope because it specifically analyzes two interrelated texts: 1) the video of Lawrence's original performance, and 2) her personal Facebook post about the event. Taken together, the video and Facebook post provide a comprehensive catalogue of Lawrence's rhetorical choices concerning her embodied protest during the national anthem performance. Lawrence's post about the event can be accessed through her Facebook page (Lawrence, 2016), which publicly displays both her post and the associated video. Also, CNN.com (Ansari, 2016) has cited Lawrence's Facebook post, rendering her words available to audiences outside of the social media site. I describe both texts in greater detail throughout my analysis.

Both Lawrence's written post introducing the video, and the video itself, can be analyzed through a rhetorical framework. Foss (2009) defines rhetorical criticism as "a qualitative method that is designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes" (p. 6). In my analysis of the Facebook post, I first considered the entire text as a historically situated rhetorical act, thus allowing consideration of the sociohistorical influences on her message. I then systematically considered smaller units of analysis – words, phrases, and paragraphs – to better understand Lawrence's specific rhetorical choices. I approached the video of her performance in this same way. Lawrence's highlighting of her threshold identity, performance of disidentification, and invitational approach are all inherently rhetorical and well positioned for a rhetorical critique.

Engaging in historically situated rhetorical criticism allowed me to consider the past events that shape the context of Lawrence's performance, and also to evaluate how audience members in the contemporary situation (potentially) interpreted her actions. Lawrence's protest must be evaluated within the context of the Black Lives Matter movement (as she wore a Black Lives Matter t-shirt), and in relation to the recent visibility of athletes

kneeling during the national anthem at sporting events. Evaluated within this sociohistorical frame, Lawrence's protest can be viewed as a rhetorical text born from (but not confined to) a particularly hybridized social movement with the potential to create a lasting impact on public discourse.

Kneeling and Singing

Watching Lawrence walk to center court on October 21, 2016, then stop in the middle of the Miami Heat logo, pause for a half-second, before kneeling and then singing the national anthem is quite a striking image. The game was the last of the 2016 preseason and, based on the number of empty chairs visible in the video, appears to have been attended by a relatively small crowd. As an announcer introduces the national anthem, Lawrence centers herself and a staff member hands her a microphone. She is dressed in tailored black pants and a vibrant turquoise sports coat, which serves as a visual foil for the red, white, and black Heat iconography in the background. Just before singing, Lawrence unbuttons her jacket and straightens out the t-shirt underneath to reveal the words "Black Lives Matter," written in bold white block letters. Lawrence takes a step forward with her right foot and then drops her left foot backwards into a kneeling position. She takes a single breath and begins the anthem, all-the-while ensuring that her t-shirt is visible to the audience.

Before Lawrence begins, an announcer's masculinized booming voice fills the arena as he instructs the audience, saying, "Please rise and remove your hats for the singing of the National Anthem." In this utterance, the announcer uses polite language to instruct audience members as to their appropriate audience performance. The repetition of expected anthem protocol before each game contributes to audience members' social disciplining and civility is clearly engaged to enforce hegemonic cultural expectations (Mayo, 2002; Patton, 2004). The announcer continues, "And give a warm welcome to Denasia Lawrence." At this time, Lawrence's Black Lives Matter t-shirt is visible. There is audible confusion in the arena and it sounds as though very few people clap their hands in applause.

Lawrence's wardrobe choices and the ways in which she manipulates her clothing speak to her specific protest performance. First, Lawrence kept her t-shirt covered prior to the protest, demonstrating the political nature of her performance and knowledge that the Heat's management would likely disapprove. After unbuttoning the turquoise jacket, Lawrence quickly straightens the t-shirt to reveal the lettering, kneels, and begins singing. Audience members are given little time to react before the national anthem begins. Lawrence's clothing manifests her desire to concurrently support the Black Lives Matter movement (by wearing the t-shirt) and still appear credible to viewers in the audience (by wearing a professional jacket). In fact, Lawrence's turquoise blazer is visually striking, especially when compared to the black of her shirt, and works as a "symbolic prism" (Eguchi & Asante,

2016) – in calling attention to her disidentification. Disidentifications draw attention to the conflicting dynamic nature of threshold identities and highlights the inherent complexity of border performances/protest. If Lawrence’s kneel symbolizes her choice not to assimilate with nationalistic anthem performances, then her turquoise jacket possibly symbolizes a desire to also not completely separate from civil/professional expectations. Her jacket could be construed as an embodiment of Muñoz’s (1999) “third mode” of dealing with dominant ideology – as an alternative to both complete identification and absolute rejection.

Through this third mode (Muñoz, 1999), Lawrence adopts an invitational stance toward her audience. Lozano-Reich and Cloud (2009) remind us that “invitational discourse... risks profound elitism” (p. 222) when we assume all public performers can employ an invitational stance. Lozano-Reich and Cloud are correct to encourage reflexive considerations of the ways class and other social markers impact actor’s access to invitational rhetoric. Lawrence was granted the initial access necessitated to perform at the Heat game likely because of her employment status with the organization; which also likely reflects her education and socioeconomic class. Again, Lawrence’s turquoise blazer becomes symbolically important as it perhaps conveys her socioeconomic class, further nuancing her hybrid identity performance.

Twenty feet behind Lawrence, a row of referees wearing official NBA warm-up jackets (White men and men of color) stand at attention with hands over their hearts as she sings the anthem. A uniformed, saluting police officer stands next to the referees. It is visually striking to see this juxtaposition of a group of men who occupy authority positions in basketball and legal contexts participating in “proper” national anthem protocol in the background of Lawrence’s protest. These men’s placement immediately behind her on the video reminds viewers of the omnipresence of dominant-institutional agents and state ideologies placed alongside emergent minority politics in the United States. Although the referees and officers do not outwardly respond to Lawrence’s protest directly, they visually loom behind her and remind onlookers of the appropriate anthem performance protocol, as well as display the institutional benefits of performative assimilation.

It is clear that Lawrence’s performance of disidentification impacts the audience, as several audience members stand with shocked expressions on their faces and their hands placed either atop their heads or on their hips during the anthem. Several of these people point and motion to Lawrence while talking with those standing near them. While Lawrence may not directly interact with audience members at American Airlines Arena, she indeed offers space for them to dialogue intra/interpersonally about typically avoided topics (not just race and Black Lives Matter, but also nationalistic civility and public discomfort). Her hybrid, disidentificatory performance nudges audience members to “grapple with their own views and feelings surrounding these topics” (Bone et al., 2008, p. 451).

Observing Lawrence's disidentificatory act is a powerful experience. As a White man whose personal ideology aligns with Black Lives Matter politically and in practice, I felt a mix of emotions while watching the anthem protest for the first time. My first response, as Lawrence straightened out her t-shirt, was concern that her protest would be met with hostility and/or counter-protest. Further, I became worried that she would not perform well, which might overshadow her protest and the message of Black Lives Matter. But, 45 seconds into the performance it became clear how powerfully she could sing. Lawrence's talent left me in awe by the end of the video. She sang beautifully while kneeling in front of the crowd, and after the song, a majority of the audience appeared to cheer for her as they would any other pre-sporting event national anthem. The apparent shift in the audience's reception from Lawrence's first note to her last may be due to her talent and confident performance.

While working on this project, I have gradually processed my initial response to Lawrence's protest. I now realize the concerns I experienced at the beginning of her performance are not only reflective of my political desire for her success, but are also selfishly linked to my own positionality and desire to not be embarrassed by other White men who share my raced and gendered identities. Realizing how entrenched these concerns are in my own positionality has allowed me to reposition my gaze while viewing the video, in order to more directly engage with Lawrence's performance. To be clear, perhaps my focusing on White audience members' responses instead of Lawrence's protest is an enactment of my racial privilege and may reflect racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1974). My choice in prioritizing the reactions of White onlookers over the performance of a woman of color implies that there is greater academic and social value in their responses to the protest, than in Lawrence's protest itself. After re-watching her performance with this in mind, I was better able to appreciate the bravery and vulnerability Lawrence embodied as she engaged her threshold identity in a potentially hostile environment.

“It Was Bigger Than Me”

Lawrence's Facebook post is 166 words in length. In two relatively brief paragraphs, she conveys a great deal of meaning to readers – both explicitly in her diction and implicitly through cultural references. It is important to read Lawrence's Facebook post in full to better understand the ways in which she frames the video of her performance. Lawrence writes:

When I took the opportunity to sing the national anthem at the Heat game, it was bigger than me. Right now, we're seeing a war on Black & Brown bodies – we're being unjustly killed and overly criminalized. I took the opportunity to sing AND kneel; to show that we belong in this country AND that we have the right to respectfully protest injustices against us. I took the opportunity to sing

AND kneel to show that, I too, am America. As a social worker, I've worked with youth, families and veterans, and everyday [sic] they all teach me the value of fighting against injustice – that all are treated equally no matter their race, gender, sexual orientation, or physical abilities. I didn't get paid to sing the national anthem; nor was this moment about any sort of fame. Black Lives Matter is far larger than a hashtag, it's a rallying cry. And until our cry is rightfully heard, protests will still happen and demands will still be made! (Lawrence, 2016)

Although we cannot assume all viewers will read her post prior to watching the video, it clearly represents Lawrence's ontological orientation as a rhetor and further alludes to the intentional and strategic choices she made. I separate Lawrence's comments into three distinct categories, with each being demonstrative of unique invitational rhetorical strategies. The three categories are Lawrence's use of collectivist language, assertion of hybrid identity, and appeals to equality.

In the opening sentence of her post, Lawrence clearly articulates the social and political contexts of her performance: "When I took the opportunity to sing the national anthem at the Heat game, it was bigger than me" (para. 1). Lawrence understands her platform as providing the opportunity to speak for others in the Black Lives Matter movement. Throughout her Facebook post, Lawrence uses the collective pronouns "we" and "our" to speak on behalf of the Black Lives Matter movement, and also to allude to the broader systemic contexts of her protest. Lawrence's decision to use collectivist language is significant since it invites similarly marginalized readers to align themselves with the meaning of her performance. People of color in the United States (and throughout the West) must constantly spend time navigating racial misandry, microaggressions, and outright macroaggressions – which can create a feeling of "racial battle fatigue" (Smith et al., 2016). Lawrence speaks to this sense of futility that people of color may experience. Additionally, her choice in language reminds readers of the United States' "war on Black & Brown bodies" (para. 1), thus heightening the urgency of her claims.

Lawrence makes an especially interesting grammatical and rhetorical choice in the second sentence of her Facebook post when she says, "Right now, we're seeing a war on Black & Brown bodies – we're being unjustly killed and overly criminalized" (para. 1). Lawrence uses the collective conjunction "we're" twice in this sentence; however, she seems to be speaking to/for multiple audiences. By using collectivist language, she invites all readers to see themselves reflected in the first portion of the sentence. In this context, "we're" stands for all people in the United States. Subsequently, the second portion of her sentence shifts its audience and speaks directly to/for people of color. By using the same collective pronoun twice in this sentence, Lawrence affirms her protest is enacted for/with people of color

who are the primary recipients of biased and violent policing practices in the United States. Secondly, Lawrence encourages White readers to pause and reflect upon the intentional audience shift as she invites White people to potentially see themselves as an important part of the cultural and political context for Black Lives Matter.

Lawrence explicitly articulates her threshold identity in saying, I took the opportunity to sing AND kneel; to show that we belong in this country AND that we have the right to respectfully protest injustices against us. I took the opportunity to sing AND kneel to show that, I too, am America. (para. 1)

In each of these dynamic pairings (i.e., singing and kneeling, belonging and protesting), Lawrence highlights the nuances of her identity by simultaneously engaging in aspects of the culturally imposed dichotomy between nationalism and anthem protest. Further, in writing “AND” in all capital letters, Lawrence presses readers to focus on this conjunction – a word that is oftentimes overlooked in many English sentences (in other words, “and’s” meaning/s is frequently taken for granted). Lawrence’s threshold identity is fully engaged as she highlights the multiplicity of performing aspects of her identity as a Black woman professional in the United States.

Lawrence rhetorically (and quite literally via her performance and clothing) embodies a bridge between seemingly contradictory identity groups. Bardhan (2016) describes bridgework as “a specific approach to belonging that is not about clinging to cultural centers” (p. 61); instead, it is about leaning toward the “edge of one’s self” (Carrillo Rowe, 2005, p. 17). Lawrence’s threshold-spanning identities clearly push her message beyond herself in her embodied attempt to invite more thoughtful and nuanced engagements with and across difference. Bridgework inherently relies on invitational rhetoric since in order to effectively connect across differences, cultural others must reciprocate this movement away from their own cultural centers, and towards the other person. Initiating connections is a necessary first step for successful bridgework, and invitational rhetoric is likely more effective than some more traditional persuasive tactics for encouraging “movement in the direction of the other” (Carrillo Rowe, 2005, p. 27).

Lawrence’s post is successful in encouraging collaborative efforts toward social justice – a cornerstone of invitational rhetoric. Lawrence claims she understands the “value of fighting against injustice” and advocates for a world in which “all are treated equally no matter their race, gender, sexual orientation, or physical abilities” (para. 1). I am particularly interested in Lawrence’s inclusion of the types of people she serves as a social worker: “I’ve worked with youth, families and veterans, and everyday [sic] they all teach me” (para. 1). This sentence demonstrates the collaborative nature of education for social justice by explaining the important role others in her community have played in educating her about social injustices in the United States. In turn, Lawrence brings an awareness to these issues through her

Facebook post and also through the accompanying video of her protest. Thus she encourages readers and viewers alike to join her in imagining a more just world. The social and racial justice impetuses for Lawrence's invitational rhetorical choices are clearly stated.

Bone et al. (2008) argue that invitational rhetoric can lead to civility, by hopefully increasing the likelihood of productive dialogue. They "suggest that invitational rhetoric and civility are a means to create ethical exchanges in difficult situations" (Bone et al., 2008, p. 435). However, Bone et al.'s articulation of invitational rhetoric's potential is flawed because they presume a shared interest in equality among all parties engaging in communication, and also posit civility as a shared desirable outcome (Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009). At the outset of her protest, Lawrence and the audience members likely hold discrepant orientations toward civility due to their racial (and gendered) differences. Civility (which is always already a hegemonic construct) need not be heightened to substantiate the usefulness of invitational rhetoric. Ultimately, Lawrence's protest is a contemporary example of invitational rhetoric as practiced by Black women advocating for racial (and gender) equality throughout the history of civil rights struggles in the United States. Civil rights activist and community organizer Ella Baker stands out as one such woman from whom Lawrence possibly inherits her tools for practicing this form of invitational rhetoric (DeLaure, 2008). Baker, Lawrence, and other Black women often practice what Berlant (1997) calls "Diva Citizenship" – that is, moments in which civility and nationalism are engaged to disrupt "a public sphere in which [they do] not have privilege" (p. 223). Lawrence strategically embodies U.S. American nationalism to disrupt expectations of culturally appropriate national anthem performances and invites consideration of social injustices in the United States. Lawrence's invitational rhetoric in the context of her threshold identity charts a third space – a counter-public sphere (Muñoz, 1999) – between civil assimilation and outright separation.

Activist Potential and Disidentification

Since Colin Kaepernick's initial protests of kneeling during the singing of the national anthem in the NFL, several other athletes of color at all levels of sport have similarly kneeled during the national anthem (Gibbs, 2016). This sight of professional athletes taking a knee during this song became a relatively familiar spectacle during the fall of 2016. However, Lawrence's choice to actively engage in non-violent protest of racial injustices in the United States *while* singing the national anthem is quite different, and represents powerful activist potential through this threshold identity performance. Contemporary political engagements (such as President Trump's damning rhetoric concerning minorities) imply that hostility and overt conflict are becoming the most common ways to communicate disagreement. In these political spaces, the binary of for-or-against dispositions threaten to prevail (Bone et al., 2008). Lawrence's disidentificatory act directly challenges

this hegemonic ideology. Lawrence opens an avenue for dialogue in her enactment of invitational rhetoric through disidentification as she charts a third approach between civil (Bone et al., 2008) and uncivil (Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009) communication.

Thresholds such as Lawrence's hybridized positionality can be dangerous and unsettling precisely because they mark potential sites of conflict between dissimilar identity groups' values and beliefs. Lawrence's threshold identity effectively embodies this potential for conflict. Black women, and especially activists, have been and still are targets of violence and discrimination in the U. S. (Berlant, 1997; Smith et al., 2016; Vargas, 2016). Despite this troubling legacy, Lawrence bravely and boldly claims her space as both a proud Black woman *and* an observer of U.S. American traditions of nationalism. The potential for conflict among marginalized identities is precisely why thresholds should be celebrated as sites for alliance building in social justice work. Such thresholds unsettle modern notions of compartmentalized exclusionary identity categories and force us to confront difference in complex, non-reductive, and non-binariied ways.

Additionally, disidentification and embodied hybridity may work to prevent marginalized individuals from being silenced by dominant oppressive scripts – those always operating in the service of hegemonic norms. Lawrence ensures that her body and voice are both rhetorically present in her consideration of racial equality in the United States. Her performance of the national anthem claimed space for empowerment, while simultaneously disrupting assumptions about what makes actions “appropriate” during political engagements in a falsely imagined “post-racial” era (Vargas, 2016). Lawrence's protest at the Heat game successfully deployed the non-violent protest tactics of the Black Lives Matter movement as she performed in a public, capitalistic, patriarchal venue. Lawrence forced viewers to wrestle with her nuanced and intentionally displayed hybrid identity in ways that create new potential for connections across difference in the name of racial justice. Perhaps the audience members who critique athletes of color who kneel during the national anthem will feel differently about Lawrence as she knelt *while* singing. Perhaps White audience members will come to value her Black Lives Matter t-shirt when it is symbolically paired with a well-tailored turquoise blazer. Connections across difference are never guaranteed, but hopefully some aspects of identity differences may be bridged through performances such as Lawrence's highlighting of her threshold identity.

While infuriating, it is nonetheless true that in the United States, “non-Black protestors incite empathy in ways Black bodies... are intrinsically unable to produce” (Vargas, 2016, p. 558). This racist tendency speaks to the backlash Lawrence experienced (demonstrated by comments on her Facebook post) following her protest; but this dissention also likely informed her decision to adopt a performative third mode of engagement (in kneeling and singing in a BLM t-shirt). Lawrence's choice to disidentify by kneeling

in the face of nationalistic assimilation is certainly not the only option for Black women when protesting inequality, but is one of many choices that, in this case, showcased Lawrence's agency at the Heat game.

Final Thoughts

Lawrence illustrates that any gesture or event – at a minimum, being present in spaces of dominant discourse – can encourage radically unpredictable personal and political change (Berlant, 1997). In the Heat arena, Lawrence joined a long legacy of Black women activists working to inspire change in their audiences in multiple ways – and this effort includes changing their “minds, hearts, bodies, and the state” (King, 2015, p. 133). While revising “the state’s” racist history that informs many practices may take years of concentrated effort, Lawrence invites her audience to consider altering their “minds, hearts, and bodies” through her embodied song. In concluding this work, I identify four key takeaways from my analysis that aspire to contribute to the field of intercultural communication. In doing so, I also highlight future potentials for social activism.

First, this paper emphasized the transformative potential of Lawrence's national anthem protest. By kneeling *while* singing, she engaged her threshold identity (Keating, 2012) as performatively moved through, across, and between cultural differences based in race, gender, and embodied nationalism (among other identity markers). Lawrence's disidentification (Muñoz, 1999) from normatively patriarchal and white supremacist nationalistic scripts hopefully opens-up new possibilities for realizing greater intercultural understanding.

Second, Lawrence's Facebook post demonstrated the potential for invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995) to explicitly encourage thoughtful engagements from the dominant cultural bodies populating her audience. Lawrence invited the onlookers to enter her world and learn from her experiences, which ideally results in self-reflection and achieves some semblance rhetorical persuasion. It is possible that some audience members rejected her offer to engage in dialogue across difference or to work toward mutually beneficial social change. However, other audience members were surely moved to consider an ideological transformation by her invitational choices.

Third, this research demonstrates that performances of disidentification are especially threatening to hegemonic norms, as those in positions of privilege cannot wholly ignore her disidentificatory acts. Lawrence successfully challenged notions of appropriate nationalism and certainly unsettled some expectations of normative (White) civility, even as she still participated in some respects with the normative nationalistic ritual of singing the national anthem. Her action carries heuristic potential for better understanding the systemic power of Whiteness in U.S. society, as enacted through civility. Lawrence's ability to challenge hegemonic civility (Mayo, 2002; Patton, 2004; Rudick, 2015) and expectations of nationalism merits continued consideration.

Finally, it is important to note that successful bridge-building does not guarantee the implementation of intercultural bridgework (Bardhan, 2016), but theorizing hybridity through threshold identities highlights these potential sites (e.g., Denasia Lawrence) as ripe for intercultural connection and social progress. Anzaldúa (1997) reminds marginalized people that in order “to survive the borderlands one must live *sin fronteras*, be a crossroads” (p. 217). Lawrence performatively embodies Anzaldúa’s crossroads during her disidentificatory protest and makes an effort to engage in intercultural bridgework. While we do not know her protest’s level of success, we should acknowledge and celebrate her brave performance act as exhibiting the potential for connection across difference.

Lawrence’s protest is unique because she was the first anthem performer to kneel *while* singing. She was the first to protest in this way while still engaging in a ritualized national anthem performance. While Lawrence’s mode of protest is certainly not the only option for working toward social and racial justice in the United States, her resistance is significant in that it exemplifies a less oppositional way for engaging difference. Muñoz (1999) writes:

The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its working to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. (p. 3)

Lawrence certainly reconstructed the meanings assigned to pre-sporting event national anthem performance and, through her protest, empowered racially marginalized U.S. Americans to reconfigure privileged spaces to reflect their own identities and experiences. Just as I was taught how to *appropriately* participate in the Pledge of Allegiance as a first-grade student in Mrs. Wesley’s Texas classroom, Lawrence was likely similarly disciplined by compulsory nationalism as a child. Lawrence’s willingness to performatively engage hybridity through disidentification is a powerful, resonant, bold, and brave act. Denasia Lawrence challenged U.S. Americans to rethink the meaning ascribed to the obligatory singing of the national anthem and further laid the foundation for constructing intercultural bridges in the name of social and racial justice, and equality.

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